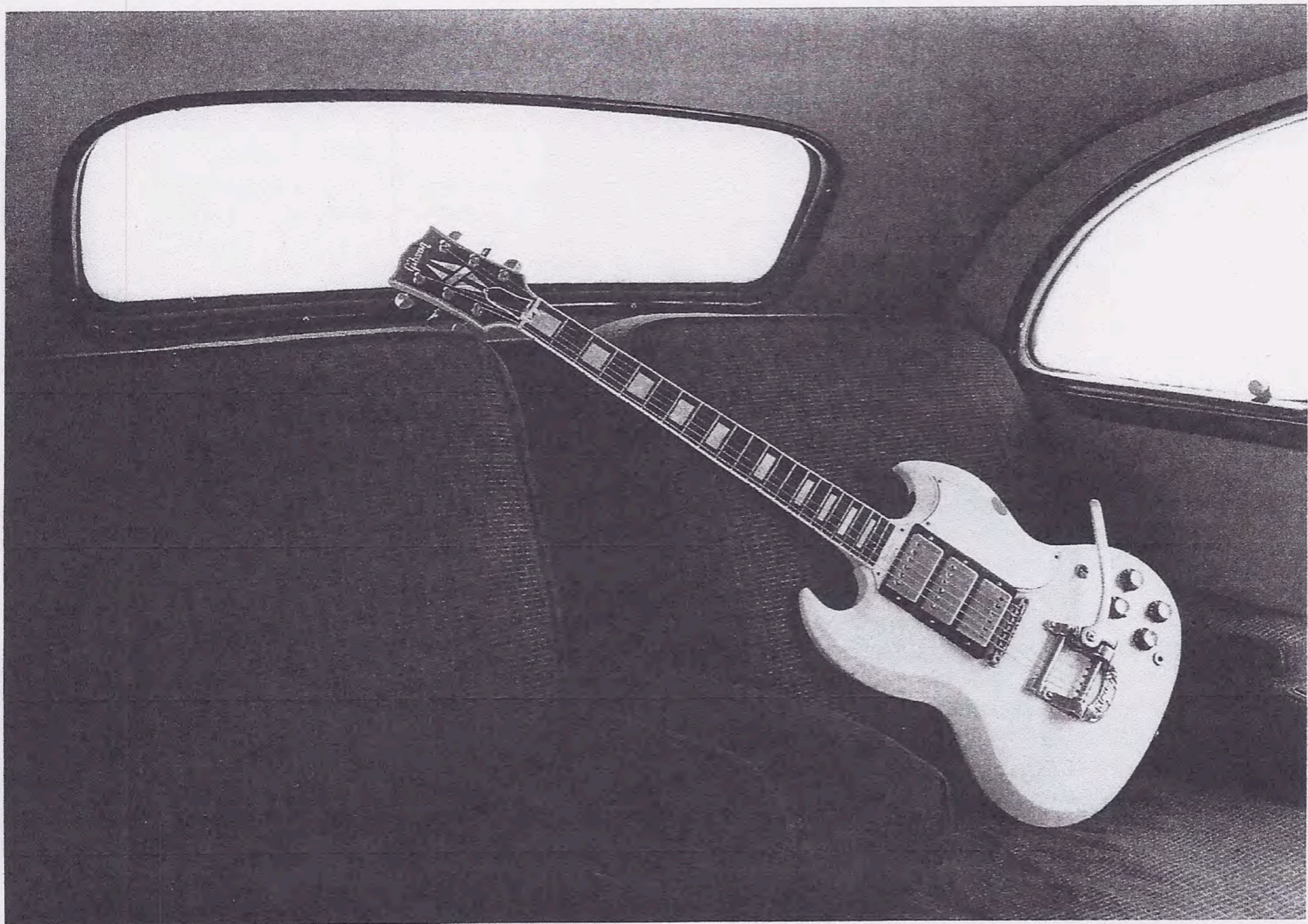




SONGS OF  
EXPERIENCE

PATTI SMITH'S  
JOURNEY FROM ROCK SINGER  
TO MOTHER TO RADICAL ICON

GREG KING



DOUG C. RHINEHEART

**T**he first words of the first song on Patti Smith's first album are "Jesus died for somebody's sins but not mine." That was thirty years ago, the rallying cry of a brash renegade poet from working-class south Jersey who was about to pick up where the protest rock of the sixties had left off. Smith's band wrapped high-definition rock-and-roll tightly around her startling and seductive poetry. Listeners sat rapt or appalled. There was little middle ground. Smith saw to that personally.

In 1967 Smith moved to Manhattan, an obvious territorial upgrade over south Jersey for an emergent radical poet of her nature. There she sought the Lower East Side, wielding her poetry to no small amount of notoriety, publishing two books, and attracting the attention of such Beat luminaries as Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs. Soon Smith sought music for her words. In 1974 guitarist Lenny Kaye (who still plays with Smith) and pianist Richard Sohl (who died of heart failure in 1990) backed her first recorded poem, "Piss Factory," a soliloquy damning the drudgery of assembly-line work. Legendary music producer Clive Davis (who discovered Janis Joplin, Carlos Santana, and Bruce Springsteen, among others) soon caught on and released Smith's first full-length album, *Horses*, in 1975. It still sells about two hundred copies a week.

*Horses* established Smith as a revolutionary voice at a

time when disco oiled the dance floors. *The New York Times Magazine* embraced the album as "the most literate magic in rock-and-roll." The next year Smith released *Radio Ethiopia*, a raucous combination of danceable rock, provocative poetry, and evolved psychedelia that, among other impacts, served to erode much of her mainstream support. Songs like "Ain't It Strange," "Pissing in a River," "Poppies," and the ten-minute-long, brilliantly indecipherable title cut offered thrilling and idiosyncratic alternatives to the audio pabulum that fattened the airwaves in the post-Nixon era.

Smith's journey then waxed epic. Over the next three years her songs and interviews were banned from the radio, frenzied fans ripped her clothing and hair, she broke her neck falling from a stage in Florida, and her third album, *Easter*, scored a Top-Twenty hit, "Because the Night," co-written with Bruce Springsteen. Then, in 1979, after she made the cover of *Rolling Stone* and released her fourth album, *Wave*, Smith abruptly quit the music scene to start a family with influential rock guitarist Fred "Sonic" Smith, formerly of the MC5.

The sudden departure of Patti Smith left a vacuum. Her sound and originality would spawn dozens of imitators, few of whom would approach the level of craftsmanship that rendered Smith's songs timeless. In 1988 Fred and Patti Smith (who

coincidentally shared the surname) released an album together, the sensual *Dream of Life*, but they remained private figures for the next seven years.

In November 1994 Fred Smith died of heart failure. Patti Smith's brother Todd died exactly one month later. Shortly thereafter Smith returned to the stage, ending a seventeen-year performing hiatus. Celebrating her resurrection, Los Angeles Times music critic Robert Hilburn proclaimed Smith "the most important female rock artist since Janis Joplin." In 2000 Rolling Stone anointed Smith "rock's leading revolutionary."

Last year Smith released *Trampin'*, her ninth studio album and her fourth since coming out of retirement. The album is at once familial and global, celebrating Smith's mother, Rose, and her daughter, Jesse, but also Mahatma Gandhi and the painter-poet William Blake. The album's penultimate song, "Radio Baghdad," is a twelve-minute indictment of the Bush administration's attack on Mesopotamia, written from the perspective of an Iraqi mother and recited over an extended rock score developed by Smith's thirty-three-year-old guitarist and partner, Oliver Ray. Before recording the song, Smith studied the history of Baghdad and followed the Bush administration's case for war in the news. She entered the recording studio with nothing written down, and the song emerged spontaneously.

"Radio Baghdad" evolved organically," Smith told me last fall in her Greenwich Village art studio. "When you're doing an improvisation, you don't know what's going to spew out." What "spewed out" is historically accurate and maternally angry, arguably the essence of American protest rock at the millennium.

Patti Smith is many things — mother, writer, spiritualist, patriot, visual artist (her drawings hang in New York's Museum of Modern Art and several other galleries) — but her legacy is that of a daughter of the American rock revolution who continues to form, and inform, its evolution. The woman who in 1976 wrote, "i haven't fucked much with the past but i've fucked plenty with the future," was also prescient, as popular music during the past three decades would have been much different without her.

On the day I interviewed Smith, now fifty-eight years old, the United States was bombing the Iraqi city of Samarra, killing 150 people, including dozens of women and children. She had just ended a three-month concert tour with a show at New York's Roseland Ballroom on October 2. Though weary from a performance regimen that would have wilted a singer half her age, she was gracious and clearheaded. As we talked, it occurred to me that sitting demurely across from me on a ratty old couch was one of America's most important living artists.

**King:** During your career you have offered listeners a strong mix of art and politics. In "Radio Baghdad" the two seem inseparable. As you portray an Iraqi mother trying to protect her children, the love and fear are authentic. What was it like for you to write this song?



**PATTI SMITH**

**Smith:** Being a mother myself, I was able to project how I would feel trying to protect and shepherd my children while planes and tanks were moving in on my city. The song itself evolved in the studio. I went into the practice room one day, and Oliver Ray was playing some new music he had written. The band was jamming, and when I heard it, the concept of "Radio Baghdad" came to me immediately. We were all thinking about the war in Iraq, so it was embedded in the music. As I was listening to the band, I said, "We're going to call this 'Radio Baghdad.'" I wanted us to transmit our feelings about the war through this music. I waited until we were in the studio to write the lyrics, so it would be fresh. In the meantime I continued to study. I watched the

news. I read everything I could about the history of Baghdad. I read parts of the Koran. Then we went in one night, toward the end of work on the record, and I said, "I guess it's time."

We played it three times. It was very exhausting. I could see after the first take that the song was much different than I'd thought it would be. Though the process was painful, I was satisfied that the song was evolving into a very humanist statement, instead of being overtly political or preachy. After the third take, I just couldn't do it anymore. It was a very emotional experience. We let it sit for a couple of weeks, and when I went back and listened to it, I felt that it was right.

There are a lot of family references on the record. My mother had just died, and I was thinking about the role of the mother, and I thought I should write what I know best. It's a viewpoint that no one can dispute: a mother trying to protect her children. I'm not an Iraqi mother, but I am a mother. Once you become a mother, every child becomes your concern. A child blown apart by a suicide bomber or an American missile becomes yours. It is no longer an abstract principle. So I find myself responding to issues such as disease, starvation, and war in a very personal manner.

**King:** You rarely perform "Radio Baghdad" live. Why is that?

**Smith:** Because it's difficult to do. Sometimes it actually gives me a headache. I've gotten migraines doing it because I have to draw on and spill all of my feelings about the present situation in Iraq. The other night, while I was performing it, I couldn't stop thinking of the thirty-five children who'd just been killed. There was an image in the newspaper of a father holding his little boy wrapped in a bloody piece of cloth. How could that man possibly protect his children?

My late husband, Fred, was so protective toward our children. One day we were in a big toy store, and our son, Jackson, who was about three years old, disappeared. He had crawled into one of those little playhouses and hid. We ran all over the store looking for him. I'll never forget the look on my husband's face, the fear that something had happened to his son. When I saw the photo of that man in Iraq, I considered what it would have done to Fred to have had the experience that father had, and it was so painful.

I think it's important for these things to be painful. We should never be numb. That's one thing I find so offensive about George W. Bush: the cavalier way that he discusses human loss as the "price of freedom." And I think of the 1,500 American soldiers who are dead, a lot of them the same age as my son, and there are 1,500 families feeling sorrow and horror every day for the loss of those boys and girls. Then I consider the Iraqi people, their incredible horror. It's important that we feel each tragedy emotionally, viscerally, feel it in our chest. It's not abstract; it's not just news; it's not something on TV.

**King:** How are you handling President Bush's reelection?

**Smith:** I conduct myself in the same manner no matter who is president, but those who oppose the policies of the Bush administration need to be more vocal now than ever. We must work harder to protect our environment and to develop a strong and visible antiwar movement. The way to handle Bush's reelection is not to be defeated by it. The Declaration of Independence, our great organic law, calls for us to speak out against our government if we do not feel it represents our ideals.

**King:** You sound patriotic. Are you?

**Smith:** I consider Ralph Nader the greatest of patriots, because he lives by our organic law and has spent his life serving the people. I would hope that I share some of his kind of patriotism. It is important to distinguish between patriotism and nationalism. The Bush administration has done much to blur the meanings of these two words.

I was sick over the strike on Iraq. I watched as Congress was voting whether to allow it, and I was begging the TV, "Don't do it. Don't do it." Senator Robert Byrd's speech was beautiful. It started out, "I weep for my country," and he implored Congress not to do this, not to give Bush this power. I was heartbroken when they did. I felt devastated as the planes and troops were moving in.

It hasn't always been this bad in Washington. I remember that when Jimmy Carter was president, he actually inspired me. He asked the American people to sacrifice. He asked us to bring down our thermostats, to use less energy, to buy fewer material things. He asked us to strip away a lot of what we didn't need and in that way to help our environment. He also asked us to develop ourselves spiritually and mentally.

But what happened is that people found his requests offensive; they didn't want to sacrifice. Then Ronald Reagan said to the people — and I'll never forget this — he said that American children deserve a bicycle in every garage. He wasn't talking about a chicken in every pot, or an education for every child. He was saying that we deserve certain material possessions. That made a big impression on me. All the way through the Clinton era, people embraced this idea that we deserve certain material things, that our children have to have them, and if they don't have them, then they're deprived. This has really hurt our country, the fabric of ourselves, our network as human beings.

**King:** After 9/11, George W. Bush told Americans to go to Disney World, to keep buying things.

**Smith:** It's like a husband telling his depressed wife to go shopping. There's not any real communication there. We aren't confronting our feelings or communicating with each other.

**King:** Around the time that Reagan came into office, you retired to raise a family. Was that a sacrifice for you?

**Smith:** No, it wasn't a sacrifice at all, because it was something that I wanted to do. I thought of my involvement in rock-and-roll as a mission. When I started out, I didn't have any dreams or illusions or expectations of being a star, making records, any of that. Since I was a small child, I'd always wanted to be a writer, and when I was a teenager, I wanted to be a painter. Later I realized that, like William Blake, I could do both. When I came to New York in 1967, that was my trajectory. I met photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, and we worked together. I worked on my poetry, I studied, I painted. I had no thoughts of being involved in public life. I'm ashamed to say that, during the Vietnam era, I never took part in any protests or marches. I said prayers, I cried, I felt guilty. I'd lost a lot of

## **ONCE YOU BECOME A MOTHER, EVERY CHILD BECOMES YOUR CONCERN. A CHILD BLOWN APART BY A SUICIDE BOMBER OR AN AMERICAN MISSILE BE- COMES YOURS. IT IS NO LONGER AN ABSTRACT PRINCIPLE.**

schoolmates in Vietnam. But I never was an activist. I never went out and protested.

**King:** And you're ashamed of that.

**Smith:** Well, not really ashamed. I would be proud to be able to say that I had marched against the war; I was completely opposed to it. But I was just disconnected from that world. I worked all day in a bookstore, and in the evenings I worked on my art.

**King:** How did you end up in rock-and-roll?

**Smith:** I had always loved rock-and-roll; I mean deeply, deeply loved it. I was one of those skinny, pimply, wallflower kids, and rock-and-roll saved my life. It was my sport. It was my voice. It gave me something I could identify with, from the Shirelles and the Marvelettes to Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones.

But then Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix and Jim Morrison died, and Bob Dylan had his motorcycle accident, and the whole complexion of rock-and-roll started shifting. By the early seventies it seemed very materialistic, glamorous, stadiumized, and pyrotechnical, and I was concerned about that. At that time I was performing poetry, but performing poetry had become a dead game, really boring to me. There were a few performance poets I loved: Jim Carroll, Gregory Corso, Steve William, Allen

Ginsberg. But it was lacking in new blood. I wanted to infuse a little energy into that circuit, and I thought, *It needs to be electrified*. So I asked Lenny Kaye to play electric guitar while I was reading poetry, to make it more present.

As we kept working together I became more conscious of what we were doing musically. I didn't know anything about the music business. I wasn't a musician. I wasn't a singer. So I had no expectations of doing anything but shaking things up. I was trying to do a Paul Revere kind of thing and wake people up to the fact that we were losing a cultural voice. I didn't feel that we had been given rock-and-roll just to make money and be glamorous and hip. Rock-and-roll was a revolutionary political, sexual, and poetic force. That's what I was trying to do: reestablish that voice. By the end of the seventies, I felt that other people were taking the same stance and doing good work, so I had no problem with moving on.

**King:** Wasn't it frustrating to be away from music?

## A WORK SUCH AS PICASSO'S *GUERNICA*, FOR INSTANCE, THOUGH IT DEALS WITH THE HORROR OF WAR, INSTRUCTS US. AN ENTIRE ANTIWAR MOVEMENT COULD FLOWER FROM ONE SUCH WORK OF ART.

**Smith:** I was not at all frustrated. I felt clear and happy and ready to evolve as a human being. Because, believe me, if you stay too long in the arena of rock-and-roll, especially on the road, there's not a whole lot of evolution going on.

It was not easy to be away from the East Coast, to make a new life in Michigan. Fred and I did everything ourselves. We didn't have baby-sitters, nannies, or housekeepers. We lived on very little money. We had our kids, and our kids knew us as Mom and Dad. My kids didn't even know I made records until we moved back to New York after Fred died. Well, they knew Fred and I made *Dream of Life* in 1988, but otherwise it didn't really invade their territory. We played music around the house sometimes. But there's no distance between my kids and me, so it wasn't a sacrifice at all. My sacrifice was that I couldn't get a cup of coffee on every corner. I love New York for that. And I missed my family in south Jersey, and my bandmates and my friends.

**King:** But you didn't have to miss your kids.

**Smith:** No, I never missed my kids. In sixteen years Fred and I were apart for only two nights, and that's when I was having our children in the hospital. And Fred was never away from his kids for one night until the end of his life. So the kids knew exactly who he was.

**King:** That's a level of togetherness that few parents achieve,

or even desire. When you left music to become a mom, did you think you would ever go back?

**Smith:** No. I sing and play clarinet, but I wouldn't say I'm a real musician. Fred was a real musician. Making music was part of his daily thought process. The album *Dream of Life* was his gift to me, an opportunity for us to do something together. He wrote all the music on that record for me. But once the album was done, I didn't expect that I would ever perform or record again. It wasn't a sacrifice for me, because there are other ways that I express myself creatively. I wrote more during that period than I ever had in my life. I haven't published any of it yet, but I wrote. And I learned about so many things, like politics and sports. I learned, of course, what it's like to raise a family. I learned a lot about myself.

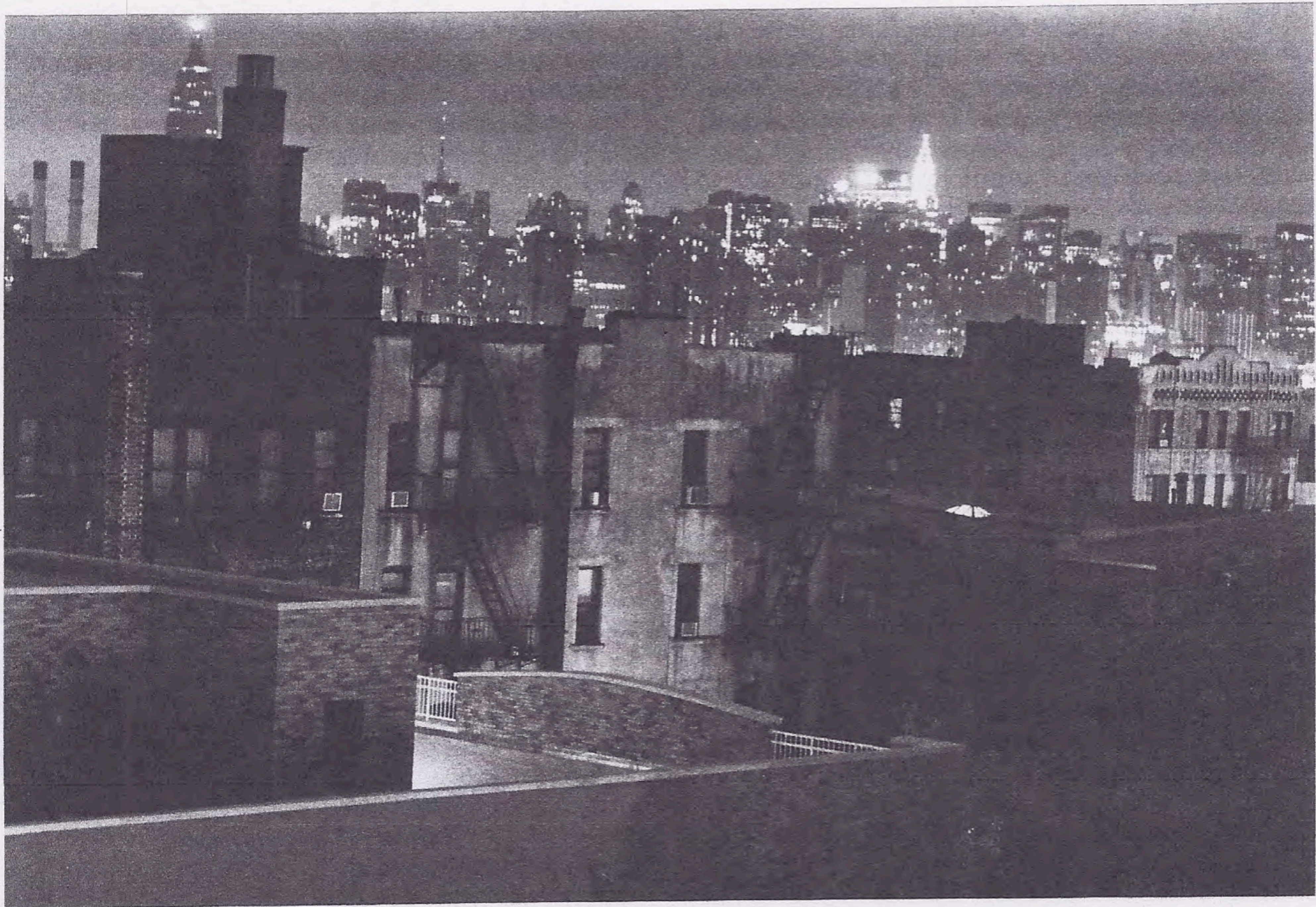
When it comes down to it, my personal identity, how I perceive myself as a human being, doesn't have anything to do with how other people view me. I hope I'm seen as a good person, but I'm not like Judy Garland: I don't need the applause. When I perform and the people are happy to see me, it's a moving experience. Performing is a privilege. I always try to give it my all, no matter what the situation, no matter what kind of shit-hole I'm playing in. But I don't count on it to reaffirm who I am. I don't feel lost if I don't have it.

**King:** You have lost many friends and family members over the past two decades: your husband and brother within a month of each other; your close friend Robert Mapplethorpe; your bandmate Richard Sohl; friends Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs; both of your parents. Yet, in your recordings and onstage, you project a feeling of rejuvenation, of joy. How have you managed this?

**Smith:** My mother was a great inspiration. I was always amazed, even as a little kid, at my mom's strength. She went to her dad's funeral, came back, and cooked dinner for us as if nothing had happened. When her brother died, it was the same. After she had her gallbladder removed, she was in bed for two days, then came home and did the laundry. So I have her as an example of resilience, of duty, of being able to feel loss deeply but still feel joy. She knew how to laugh and have fun and find things to interest her. I think her example is embedded in me.

I would be lying if I said, about any of my losses, "You get over it." You never get over it, really. Loss is a strange thing. You might go a year and not think about it, and then, all of a sudden, it's totally present, as if it just happened. You have to be able to live through those moments. Sometimes I'll be walking down the street when, all of a sudden, the fact that I've lost my brother, that I'll never see him again, hits me so profoundly that I can hardly put one foot in front of the other. I just wait, take a deep breath, and think about him until I know he's within me, and then I feel OK. We have to have faith, and we have to remain in touch with the people we've lost.

You can have an ongoing dialogue with someone who's died. All you have to do is listen. I talk to my mom. I ask for advice or inspiration, and I get it. When I'm developing a photograph, I ask Robert about cropping, and something he told me twenty years ago comes to mind. I never receive words from



AARON HEWITT

my dad, but I receive feelings. He and I don't have to converse. I can feel his love. My mom will chat for hours. I get counsel from her, sometimes solicited, sometimes unsolicited. With each person it's different.

I think that we have to accept, joyfully, that this is what we have, and it's real, as real as a mathematical equation that contains an infinite number. We don't have to endlessly work out the problem to infinity to know that the answer exists.

People come up to me and say, "So many bad things have happened to you," but I remind them that they didn't happen to me. These things happened to people I loved. I'm blessed with good health, opportunities, great children.

**King:** And you remain quite youthful.

**Smith:** I had youthful parents. My mom and dad seemed the same as they always had until the end of their lives. My mother didn't necessarily look youthful, but her spirit was the same at seventy as it had been at forty. If I stayed over at my parents' house, I'd wake up at four in the morning, and my mother would be defrosting the refrigerator and watching Bette Davis movies.

**King:** As an artist, you have always embraced a strong work ethic, something that seems to be waning in our society. What is the value of having a work ethic?

**Smith:** I value work because I love the work of others. I love going to a library and seeing all the books that people wrote, or

going to a museum and seeing all the sculptures Brancusi or Michelangelo made. I'm so happy that people have this work. When I was a kid, reading a book I loved made me feel that I should contribute something too. I still feel that way. To me what's important is to add to the pantheon of good work in the world.

The creative process is hard, but I thrive on it. I am always working on something. Sometimes it involves a course of study, and sometimes just hours of contemplation. Art is labor-intensive. I was a poor student and did not develop strong grammatical or technical skills, but I love to write and accept the amount of concentration and sacrifice it requires.

**King:** What about people who work hard just to keep their jobs and aren't able to exercise their creativity?

**Smith:** Well, that's their choice. There's a parable in the Bible in which Jesus meets two women and begins talking to them. One of the women sits at his feet and listens. The other woman goes into the kitchen and starts making food and cleaning. At the end, the second woman complains to Jesus, saying, "Lord, it's not fair. My sister got to sit at your feet and listen, and I had to do all the work." And Jesus says, "No one asked anyone to do anything. Your sister chose to listen, and you chose to go into the kitchen. If you don't do it joyfully, then don't do it."

**King:** What about the person who works two fast-food jobs?

**Smith:** If you're talking about an artist who has to have two jobs to buy oil paint and stretchers and canvas, good for him. If you're talking about a guy who has a wife and three kids and he's trying to make ends meet, I would say, God bless him. But artists who whine because they need a grant and the government doesn't help them — well, tough shit. I had the same problem. I worked in a bookstore for seven years to make money to buy art supplies. And that was fine. I don't think artists should ever expect anything from anybody. For the artist, sacrifice and hardship are a part of the process. You might not even be able to call it sacrifice. Having three kids and working an extra job to pay the bills: that's sacrifice.

**King:** Raising a family might itself be called an art.

**Smith:** Yeah, my parents had that talent. They had four kids and worked night and day. My mom waitressed and took in ironing; my dad worked in a factory. When I got older, I baby-sat to supplement our income. We all pitched in, and we had a happy life. We didn't have a lot of material things, but we had real communication. We had a creative household. We all loved each other, and we knew each other.

**King:** You were also loyal to each other, and, by extension, to your community. We don't see as much community, or even family, loyalty these days. Why is that?

**Smith:** I think it has a lot to do with the rampant materialism in our country. Just look at sports. My brother and my father loved sports, but I never liked sports when I was younger. When I moved to Michigan in 1979, I was in a climate of sports

obsession, so I decided to try to understand why sports were so important to people. And I saw that people who work hard at a job that maybe isn't their thing attach themselves to a team for identity. I came to the conclusion that maybe sports is the only proper place for nationalism: that desire to have a team, to have a flag, to identify with something. With sports that desire isn't harmful. It's a release. It's entertaining. And you can witness the grace and beauty of a great athlete.

But I was naive and thought that when you joined a sports team, it was *your* team. Like, the Rolling Stones didn't trade Bill Wyman for Jack Bruce. So I would become attached to a team's players, and the next year they'd trade Jack Morris to Toronto, and I'd say, "What do you mean? He's *our* guy."

Throughout the 1980s I saw more and more materialism and a lack of loyalty by athletes and team owners; more athletes moving from team to team in search of higher salaries. This mercenary attitude in sports is an indication of what's going on in our country, and in families. Couples get divorced because marriage isn't fun, or having kids is too stressful. People bail out. They don't respect the institution of marriage. They don't understand that children aren't puppies: you don't drop them off at the grandparents' and not come back for two years. And everybody's working so they can buy their kids more things. Kids have plenty of material possessions but no spiritual guidance, no real communication with their mother and father. The result is a lack of loyalty and cohesiveness within the family and the community. And it's reflected in the culture.



MARIE HUART

I remember when I was young, if you liked a rock-and-roll band or a sports team, you were going to like them for life. Or if you got married, you were wed for life, unless something terrible happened or you were in a really abusive situation. Today we live in a disposable world. I see teenagers get mad and throw cellphones on the ground, or leave them somewhere and say, "I'll just get another one." Kids have credit cards. People think they need two or three cars. Everyone — not just people in the upper and middle classes, but supposedly struggling people, artists — everyone seems to feel that they need material possessions to express their identity. When we toured Japan, I learned that some young girls there are going into prostitution not because they're starving, but because they want a Louis Vuitton bag, an expensive status symbol. Rather than feeling pride in their good deeds, or their creativity, or their imagination, or how they carry themselves, they connect their identity to what they own. To me it's tragic. This materialism not only separates us from each other; it's also destroying our environment.

**King:** In last month's *Los Angeles Times*, singer Joni Mitchell said, "I believe a total unwillingness to cooperate is necessary to be an artist." Your songs are frequently uncooperative, which in the 1970s led to radio censorship, but it also gave you a certain legitimacy: rebel poets are often censored. Is it possible, in these days of self-censorship, for a musician to have high record sales *and* a revolutionary message?

**Smith:** Well, I don't know anything about high record sales, because I've never had them. Even with "Because the Night," I still didn't have high record sales. I don't care about making lots of money. More sales for me would represent only one thing: that more people were hearing my work. But I don't worry about sales when I make records. I've always been forthright with the companies that I've worked with. I was with Arista for twenty-seven years. They told me that if I didn't cooperate and help "design" my career, I wouldn't sell many records. I also was told that, cooperate or not, I could still do the work that I wanted to do. Clive Davis believed in me. I was a frustration for him, because he felt he could have molded me into a big star. But he let me go my own way, make my own decisions. My records are all untainted. I enjoyed artistic freedom, but I also endured marginalization and bans, which I expected.

Now I've signed with Columbia Records. Again I have complete artistic freedom with no real promise of success. I still don't get played on the radio. But I don't feel censored or frustrated at all. I never have. I think that's a state of mind. If artists feel stifled in our country, it's probably because they have expectations of fame and fortune. There are times when I would like to communicate to a larger audience — for instance, when I was speaking out against the U.S. strike on Iraq. Because I am more of a maverick artist, I wasn't able to have much impact, but I said what I had to say. I protested; my bandmates and I marched. We went to Washington, D.C.; we worked with Jesse Jackson and Ramsey Clark; we wrote "Radio Baghdad"; and we continue to speak out against the war.

Actually I'm grateful to still be able to record. I was grateful to Arista, even though we didn't see eye to eye, and I'm grate-

ful to Columbia. Because they've given me the opportunity to record, the records are out there for people to find.

**King:** But would you agree that speaking out against the establishment in the U.S. today can cause the speaker some harm?

**Smith:** It depends on one's definition of *harm*. If one is willing to accept certain degrees of harassment and censorship, one should proceed. This does not seem too great a price to pay in order to be upright and speak one's mind.

## I DIDN'T FEEL THAT WE HAD BEEN GIVEN ROCK-AND-ROLL JUST TO MAKE MONEY AND BE GLAMOROUS AND HIP. ROCK-AND-ROLL WAS A REVOLUTIONARY POLITICAL, SEXUAL, AND POETIC FORCE.

**King:** You routinely make references to other artists in your work. What is the value in this?

**Smith:** Studying the work of others — the ideas of man, the imagination of man, the ideology of man — has always been very exciting to me. Even when I was a kid, I tried to share my own areas of study with other people. On our website ([www.PattiSmith.net](http://www.PattiSmith.net)) there's this little section called *souvenance*, where I like to note who was born or passed away on that date and write something about that person in order to introduce an important but otherwise obscure artist to my audience. It might lead them to H.P. Lovecraft or Arthur Rimbaud.

I try to expose people to new artists because I was exposed to William Blake's work when I was a child, and it had a profound effect on me. He was creative in many ways: he painted and drew, he wrote poetry, he developed his own private theology, he was a political activist, he championed children. In his time, poor children were sold into slavery and forced to become chimney sweeps. Little children, two, three, and four years old, were shoved naked up chimneys to clean them. Most of them died by the time they were twelve or so, of different cancers. They led wretched lives. Blake not only immortalized these children in his poems, but he made people aware of the horrible, shameful exploitation of children. So I learned at an early age that a human being can be an artist but also politically active.

**King:** In 1998 you said, "Art is by nature optimistic." How so?

**Smith:** In order to create art, one must be alive and focused and envision the future. We create work not only to experience the process, but also to inspire and incite our fellow man. A work such as Picasso's *Guernica*, for instance, though it deals with the horror of war, instructs us. An entire antiwar movement could flower from one such work of art. Art is optimistic because it is alive. ■