

Patti Smith puts the poetry in Rock: Swing from the hip, sing from the gut

By
Glen Gibbons

Horses
Patti Smith
AL-4066
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Do I know nature yet? Do I
know myself?
No more words. I will bury the
dead in my belly.
Yells, drum, dance, dance,
dance, dance!
Rimbaud from
A Season in Hell

It's difficult to talk and listen closely to this record at the same time.

At several points, the intensity with which the words are sung (shouted? howled? wailed?) has unfortunately wrenched entire passages of Patti Smith's poetry into near-incomprehensibility. Symbolizations, which thrive in her work, often crush scarcely established conceptual associations beneath a deluge of new images hurled out of the speakers toward the listener. This virulent seduction of memory is multiplied until knowledge eludes thought.

Already bemused by the exhortation of "Go Rimbaud!" shouted in one poem-song, I've still to sort out the context of the phrase "pituitary gland" repeated distinctly in another. And, while irresistibly moved by the title cut, "Horses," I was completely destroyed by "Birdland." I've never heard a woman create out of her voice the molten, plastic contortions rendered by Smith which intermittently drove verbal content out of her words altogether so that the emotion twisted on unencumbered by language.

Smith is a poetess (three books published) raised out of the perverse social forge of industrial New Jersey through a drama of experiences such as a modern Dickens might write. (I'll avoid expanding the popular references to Smith's variable physical appearance, sometimes mocking, sometimes mimicking Mick Jagger or Keith Richards.) Regardless of consciousness or coincidence of sexually ambiguous form, she reveals an overt androgynous attitude in her music, such as her raw-edged assumption of the male role in a piercing version of "Gloria."

If voice is an instrument, hers has the form of an electrified scimitar. The violence in her music, like certain beatings in junta cells, leaves no visible marks. She stands, sweating and shouting, at the back door of personal nihil.

Some attention must be paid to Smith's claim of Arthur Rimbaud (a volcanic 19th century French poet who had furiously scribbled himself out of visions by the age of

20) and Jim Morrison as personal muses. (Lou Reed must at least qualify as some kinky lars familiaris—a low-life household god whose unfettered vocals find peculiar resonance in Smith's style.)

Smith pursues an unusual blending of her poems with well-known rock classics to create arcane medleys whose sinister configurations and occasional impenetrability threaten to sink the very vessel of her music. Thus, the classic Them rocker, "Gloria," is paired with Smith's own "Gloria: in excelsis deo" to forge a vignette of desire and forceful sexual conquest that exceeds Van Morrison's lustiest intentions. "Land" combines shadows of the old Chris Kenner/Antoine Dominoe number, "Land of a Thousand Dances," with two Smith song-poems, "Horses" and "La Mer(de)" (a multiple-meaning French neologism referring simultaneously to "the sea" and "shit"). The torturous and tormenting result tempts one (as do all the cuts on this album) toward efforts of description filled with hyperbole and absolutes.

At times, the power in the songs threatens to overcome an apparent frailness in her voice. The latter, however, is only illusory fragility cloaking a resilient metal of sound that lends itself to deft modulation and unexpected permutations.

But the tension of half-expected self-destruction of that keen vocal edge keeps the listener irresistibly involved. After multiple playings of this album, I found myself for a time impatient and unmoved

by the more restrained performance of other musicians who had previously appealed to me.

Despite the street-wise, urban/industrial, subcultural vortex that serves as origin to Smith, her music should not be lost on our ostensibly laid-back West Coast sensibilities. If only as a froth-filled, manic, yet often ethereal image of "the dark night of the soul" that festers in the most docile and moderate of us, *Horses* succeeds where more timorous artists tremble to enter.

Although all of the compositions included in this album struggle for particular recognition, "Birdland" escapes as my favorite, if one can use such a pallid standard of measurement. A disturbing tale of longing for extra-terrestrial transcendence, "Birdland" operates as half metaphor, half existential wail at loss and subsequent metamorphosis.

Beyond that reference, the song-poem is so richly imaged and dependent on oral presentation for its force that a written attempt to explain the piece always fails. Print shrivels its message. However, the Jan. 1 issue of *Rolling Stone*, which included a lengthy article on Patti Smith's labored rise to semi-prominence, quoted a prose poem written by her around an early, unwanted pregnancy:

*bloated. pregnant. I crawl thru
the sand.
like a lame dog. like a crab. pull
my fat
baby belly to the sea. pure
edge. pull my
hair out by the roots. roll and
drag and
claw like a bitch. like a bitch.
like a bitch.*



Patti Smith and Horses

The sentiments are raw and unadulterated, but Patti Smith's prose-poems/rock songs on her first album have made an impression.

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