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Patti Smith in the changing culture from the 1960s to the 1970s

Jay H. Bernstein

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Patti Smith's memoir *Just Kids* (2010) recounts her part in one of the great transformations in American cultural history, the change from the 1960s to the 1970s. In cultural stereotypes, those decades have very different associations, and Smith has an undeniable and well-earned place as an icon of the seventies, not the sixties. Her book helps us see how she came up through the sixties to become an accomplished singer and songwriter in the seventies.

In his highly regarded book, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, Todd Gitlin (1993, 427-429) analyzes the changing mood at the end of the sixties and the lead-up to the seventies as captured in the music of the times by noticing that the rage of the Rolling Stones as heard on *Let it Bleed* and the shrillness of Jefferson Airplane as heard on *Volunteers* were no longer in vogue. Heretofore amplified, electrified, and distorted, popular music had taken an acoustic turn. James Taylor made the cover of *Time* magazine in 1971 under the headline, "The New Rock: Bittersweet and Low." The airwaves in the early 1970s were dominated by the likes of Carly Simon, Elton John, Seals & Crofts, and Cat Stevens, who played soft, mellow music under the expanded banner of rock 'n' roll. Perhaps the biggest musical act as the sixties led into seventies was Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young, who were adept at both electric and acoustic music, and had connections to hard rockers like Jefferson Airplane and folk musicians like Joni Mitchell. They had played at Woodstock, and strikingly, had turned Joni Mitchell's melancholy ballad about Woodstock, on which she had accompanied herself on a piano, into a rock 'n' roll, almost bubblegum version of the song that became a hit single. The music of Patti Smith came several years later, but her approach was incubated during this same time.

Patti Smith came from a completely different part of the musical universe. As part of the first cohort of baby boomers, Smith of course was exposed to all the popular music of the times, but her background was not mainstream pop but the bohemian art scene focused in New York around the Chelsea

Hotel, where she lived for a while, and Max's Kansas City, where she hung out. As a young girl with a few years of college, she had escaped her upbringing in a working class Catholic family to live in New York where she soon found her way into the bohemian underground branch of the counterculture, represented in music by groups like the Fugs and the Holy Modal Rounders (Smith 2010, 197). Those groups used humor, absurdity, dissonance, and noise in a way similar to what we later heard in punk and grunge music, which can be considered their spiritual descendants. These New York bohemians were kindred spirits to the earlier beat movement, and Smith refers to her friendships with key beat generation writers Allen Ginsburg and William S. Burroughs, as well as with Gregory Corso, another member of their group.

But younger, trendier bohemians were also connected to the scene surrounding the artist Andy Warhol. Warhol's own aesthetic was very different from that of the beats in that his art was not at all about authenticity and a rejection of materialism but just the opposite. By using corporate emblems and images of celebrities as source material for art Warhol's work not only reflected on the culture of the times but celebrated artifice and gloried in the banality of popular imagery. If that was the case, one might conclude that his art was the antithesis of the work of the authentic and sensitive artist that someone like Patti Smith strived to be. The cognoscenti including art snobs and underground bohemians embraced Warhol on the theory that his art was a sardonic and ironic commentary on the uniformity, repetitiveness, and shallowness of American culture. But one never could be sure whether Warhol and those who admired and collected his works supported the bohemian view or the bourgeois view, whether he was joking, and whether they got the joke.

Warhol attracted an eclectic group of weirdoes and exhibitionists, and held court in the back room of Max's Kansas City on Park Avenue South near Gramercy Park (see Sewell-Ruskin 1998). Smith aptly describes it as "the social hub of the subterranean universe" (Smith 2010, 117). These people, whom Smith got to know well, did not necessarily have talent, but they craved attention, and Warhol rewarded them by putting them in his films and calling them superstars. Their names, such as Viva, Ultra Violet, and Holly Woodlawn, may have been the most interesting things about them. Warhol popularized the

word “superstar,” but if the names of these superstars still ring a bell it is only because of their association with him.

Though Warhol’s group was based at his Factory on Union Square West and hung out at nearby Max’s for recreation, Smith’s own base of operation, the Chelsea Hotel in a different neighborhood on West 23rd Street, was also part of his stomping ground. He had even produced and directed a legendary, though little seen, three and a half-hour long film, *The Chelsea Girls* (1966).

Why did Smith seek to gain admittance into the back room at Max’s? Not necessarily because of her own interest in Warhol’s universe or the underground scene, according to her narrative, but for the sake of her friend and lover Robert Mapplethorpe, who, like Smith, also yearned for fame and would later achieve it. Like Smith, he influenced the culture in his own way, but unfortunately he did not get to fully savor his success. An early victim of the AIDS epidemic, he posthumously became a flashpoint in a culture war about censorship and government funding for controversial art, the moving line between art and pornography, and even issues of decency.

Beyond Smith’s hope to further Mapplethorpe’s career, she was savvy in finding (or being found by) key people who would open doors for her. She was given a chance to break into the inner circle of the Warhol group by gaining the sympathy of Danny Fields, a Warhol confidante who served as a crucial link between musicians ranging from Jim Morrison to the Ramones (Seabrook 2010).

Part of the Warhol entourage was the Velvet Underground, headed by Lou Reed. Warhol’s imprimatur helped launch them as the ultimate underground rock band not just of the 1960s but probably of all time. He had used them as the stage band for his 1966 multimedia happening, *The Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, held at the Dom, later known as the Electric Circus, on St. Mark’s Place (Henry 1989, 19-29). The cover of their first album, featuring a banana that could be unpeeled, prominently featured his name and remains one of his more memorable works. Smith encountered the Velvet Underground at their reunion concerts in 1970, which were later released as the double album, *Live at Max’s Kansas City*. Hearing and watching Lou Reed, she recognized that his lyrics contained lyrically strong poetry (see Reed 2000).

Reed of course is a fascinating analogue to Smith. He had studied poetry with Delmore Schwartz as a student at Syracuse University and he later worked hard to create an aesthetic both visually and musically that became a brand and a calling card. John Cale, the second most important member of the Velvet Underground, later produced her first album, *Horses*. But between Max's Kansas City and the Chelsea Hotel, Smith also was exposed to and became close to singers who had broken through the barrier between bohemian subculture and popular culture, such as Bob Dylan, Tim Buckley, and Janis Joplin. Dylan and Buckley were neo-folk singers and troubadours, while Joplin was a blues-based rocker. They represented more commercial popular music for the mass national radio and TV audience rather than the avant garde or underground.

The underground arts scene in downtown New York in which Smith developed as an artist was characterized by significant cross-pollination between music, visual art, theater, and film, according to the sociologist Judith Halasz (2006). The artists crossed boundaries by moving easily into other art forms. Happenings, performance art, and related multimedia events made conceptual statements by creatively combining different modes of performing, plastic, and visual arts (Sandler 1998, 461ff).

Trying to find a place for herself in this scene, Smith tried her hand at writing for rock magazines but found that her opportunities were such that she didn't have to settle for a career in journalism. Although she presents a modest and down to earth view of herself in her memoir, from other sources we know that she considered herself equal to the rock stars she interviewed. As early as 1972 she was quoted as saying that "because of my ego and my faith in my work, I don't like meeting people on unequal terms" (Paytress 2006, 27). As a journalist she would have had to grovel in front of rock stars and ask them questions as a subservient life form. She knew that was not for her even if she didn't already plan on becoming a rock star herself. Even at this early stage, long before her career took off and before punk rock coalesced as a phenomenon, she commanded attention in the downtown musical and art underground (McNeil and McCain 1996, Sewell-Ruskin 1998).

In addition to writing, she had attempted to become an actress but found that was not a good fit either. She was more of a performance artist, even a stand-up comedian, than a standard actress. There

was a space in the underground culture for such a role. In this, her relationship with Mapplethorpe, who was also very savvy about imagery, was crucial.

She was interested in poetry and idolized French symbolist poets as well as rock singers who laced a poetic sensibility into their lyrics, most notably Bob Dylan and Jim Morrison. She modeled herself after all these icons. She cut her teeth “performing poetry night after night to an unreceptive and unruly crowd who were primed to see the New York Dolls” (Smith 2010, 218). She wanted to make it in the world of poetry but decided she could not fit into New York’s poetry scene, which she considered incestuous (214). Bobby Newirth, a contact of hers through the Chelsea Hotel, was a key gatekeeper connected to many of her social networks, and he encouraged her to try her hand at songwriting. This allowed her to find her voice as a poetic, lyrical songstress. In her songwriting, she followed the tradition of long balladic oral poems inspired by storytellers like Blind Willie McTell and Hank Williams (157).

Smith was conscious of her image and sought to cultivate a look drawing on her knowledge of art and film as well as her own bohemian sensibilities. A thin girl, she favored a waif look à la Audrey Hepburn in *Funny Face* or Yves Montand in *Wages of Fear*. An offhand comment made in an elevator by a Warhol associate provoked Smith to alter her image by cutting her hair. Till now an homage to Joan Baez, her new hairstyle honored Keith Richards. She describes her action as “machete-ing my way out of the folk era” (140). The new hairstyle received attention and praise at Max’s Kansas City. In cutting her hair, Smith, like many of the new guard, marked her distance from the slightly older generation of 1960s hippies that let it all hang out, hairwise.

She also changed the clothes she wore from average women’s attire into a retro man’s suit with a white button-down shirt and skinny tie. Her signature look, as captured on film by Mapplethorpe, became her enduring image. Mapplethorpe’s famous photographs show her wearing a plain white button-down blouse and slim black trousers held up by suspenders and slinging a jacket over her shoulder. Photographs from the series are on the covers of her premier album *Horses* and of her first book of poetry, as well as being in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art. Smith’s image completely remade the persona of the female rocker. It should be noted that the white shirt and skinny tie

were a common part of the uniform of the early male punk rockers, but Smith was the only woman to make use of men's attire and accessories. Just as punk rock music went back to basics for its energy and focus, Smith took parts of the male rock star's image and integrated them into her own look which is only slightly feminine but tomboyish and gamine in just the right way.

Smith's image remains as an enduring legacy of the 1970s, summing up her unique contribution to the zeitgeist. In creating this image she brought in elements from several time periods. The clothing and hair were those of 1960s British male rockers. Her hair was not combed, brushed, sprayed, moussed, or slicked, but tousled to give it a look that was somewhat wild and confrontational, though it was not outlandish. It was part of the juxtaposition of shabby and chic that soon became the cutting edge of fashion. With Mapplethorpe's help, she created the self in which she performed. Most particularly, she did not doll herself up to be more feminine to fit a male fantasy of what was expected from a female performer. The image she gave herself enabled her to become the personality she presented on stage, and for that style, there were no female predecessors.

The punk movement in which Smith's music is categorized, like pop art, was a snide, ironic commentary on the banality and inauthenticity of popular culture (see Henry 1989, O'Hara 1995, McNeil & McCain 1996). The punks, like the other bohemians, including their immediate predecessors, the hippies, and before them the beats, rejected the uptightness, materialism, and hypocrisy of bourgeois American culture. In Halasz's (2006, 166) words, "punk emerged as a manifestation of the bohemian search for authenticity." The sound of punk rock music was noisy and electrified, having roots in the earlier garage rock of the late 1960s. It was often characterized by anger, rage, and cynicism, traits one finds in Smith's musical output along with the seemingly opposite characteristics of lyricism and authenticity. The clearest musical influences on Smith were the Rolling Stones and the Velvet Underground. But she did not significantly pick up on the theme of decadence so salient in their lyrics or vocal tone. That strain was worked to perfection by David Bowie, an even more important artist than Smith who also burst into the limelight in the 1970s a few years before Smith did. What struck critics listening to her onstage and her album was the intensity of her performance. In reflecting on the musical

lineage of Smith's sound, the critic Mark Paytress (2006, 13) draws an analogy to the Who, stating that for her as for them, "Rock was still considered a potent weapon in the West's cultural revolution." The comparison to the Who seems apt given the power of their music along with its humor and pathos. Smith's innovation was to carve out a space for a woman to occupy the role of the lead singer in such a group that had previously gone only to men.

In showing how Patti Smith rose up quickly into stardom, we can see several threads connecting 1970s (and even 1980s) music to the culture of 1960s: the bohemian literary and artistic culture of downtown New York, the scene surrounding Andy Warhol and his underground, especially Lou Reed, and the powerful music, style, and swagger of rock male stars from groups like the Rolling Stones, the Doors, and the Who.

Smith's legacy can be heard most clearly in the female artists who followed in her footsteps, especially Alanis Morissette, P. J. Harvey, Liz Phair, and the Riotgrrl movement led by Bikini Kill and including significant grunge-oriented bands from the 1990s such as Sleater-Kinney and Veruca Salt (see Marcus 2010). Those artists used a hard rock sound, but Smith's influence can also be heard in the softer, keyboard-based music of other left of center female performers such as Tori Amos and Fiona Apple. But even as new artists and styles emerge and older ones go out of fashion, Smith's voice and image remain as permanent foundations of alternative rock.

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