



## Finest worksongs

**“Rock and roll wasn’t created for managers, marketing people or whoever makes the decisions about how people should look. That’s bullshit and that’s not what rock and roll is all about – we have completely forgotten what a great thing rock and roll potentially is.”**

**Patti Smith tends not to do one-on-one interviews if she can help it. However, *TotalMusic* was one of the lucky few invited to an ‘interactive performance’ with the poet, writer, photographer, grandmother of punk and one of the most singular artists of her generation, where she discussed a handful of her defining moments...**

**P**atti Smith has just wandered into a subterranean club in London and is surveying the motley collection of music journos dotted around the room, most clutching a glass of wine, and all with pads and/or tape players at the ready. Dressed, as you would imagine, with her usual disregard for anything remotely fashionable, she will shortly ask each person present their name and where they hail from – these days she prefers to get a whole day’s interviews out of the way in one hit, but sweetens the pill by playing a couple of acoustic songs to lend the meeting an air of performance – and points out that the children we are hearing on the track ‘Radio Baghdad’ from her new album *Trampin’* (which most of us are hearing on the PA for the first time) are actually kids playing in Baghdad. It’s quite remarkable how this room full of exclusively male writers is clearly ever so slightly unsettled by this way of conducting interviews, and this is almost certainly why Patti Smith does it. The following are the edited highlights of a very entertaining hour spent in her company...

Does this feel weird? I don’t feel weird ‘cos I do these all the time. I do these in Italy where there’s like a hundred people and paparazzi sticking cameras in my face saying, ‘Patti, Patti, look sad for me,’ so this is just like being in a club. I talk a lot on stage in my concerts, tell really bad jokes and long rambling stories...

**Do you want to get rid of the need for interviews?**

Truthfully I don’t like interviews that much, they’re just embarrassing. People ask me questions like “how does it feel to be a rock icon?” and I’m like I’ve just come from home and doing the laundry or getting my daughter’s food. I’m not a rock icon, I’m a person that just cleaned up cat shit.”

**Is it because they’re too intimate?**

No, [this is] actually more intimate, it takes away,

for me at least, this weird barrier, where you’ll sit with a journalist and they want personal information, which I don’t wanna give ‘em... Look, if it feels weird, you’ll get over it.

**Is this how you started out, with this sort of size crowd?**

Or smaller. What I used to do was tell jokes and read poetry, and it wasn’t like people were knocking on my door for that sort of act. I’d read ‘Piss Factory’ and ramble on at bars just before a blues act or something, and guys would be yelling “get back to the kitchen” or “comb your hair”, but I fought back and here I am, still playing some crappy place to only 20 people.

**How do you feel about ‘Piss Factory’ now?**

I can still access the feeling that caused me to write it. I mean, working in a non-union factory in southern New Jersey in the early ‘60s was hell, and I can still remember what that felt like, so I can still read it with some authenticity.

**Do you still have any contact with any of those people?**

No! They hated me there, the conditions were appalling – no heat, no air conditioning, poor wages – and it attracted people with no prospects, so the work there was important to them, and for me it was something to topple, or rise from. They saw me as an upstart and a troublemaker. I used to bring my copy of *Illuminations* to read in my lunch hour and because it was French on one side and English on the other, they decided I was a Communist (*laughs*). So, no, I haven’t stayed in contact with anyone. When I was 15 I hated the people that worked there. Now when I look back I can see what a rough life they had, so I guess I look back with more compassion than I had back then.

**What did you do during the long period that you didn’t make records?**

I’ve always been a worker. In 1967, I was painting

and writing poetry – I had many different outlets before I made records. I don’t really look at making records as my personal outlet, I make records for other people. For myself, I don’t need to make records because I can write, paint or take photographs. I could spend my whole life studying, just reading and I would be happy, so when I wasn’t making records I wasn’t mourning that fact, because that wasn’t how I gained personal confidence.

**You were a journalist for a while (‘70-74). How do you feel about the music journalism of today?**

I read some journalism that sucks and I watch the news and that seems tabloid-like, but that’s down to the individual. I wasn’t a prolific journalist, but when I was writing there were people around who wanted to make journalism something to be proud of, to be a voice, so when people say “Oh, I had to write like that because that’s what the magazine wanted,” I say, bullshit! You don’t have to write what others tell you – start your own magazine. Just to illustrate I was once asked by an American music magazine to write anything I wanted, open forum, my choice, and I didn’t want to waste that opportunity, so I wrote about the history of Thomas Paine. I handed it in, real proud of what I had done, and no one thanked me and no one paid me, but that’s OK, and then they got in touch and said they were expecting something about the music scene. And I said, Well, you told me it was open forum, you should have said it was only a semi-open forum. They never used it, but that’s OK as well, because I learned a lot about Thomas Paine, England’s greatest gift to America.

**Would you say the same thing holds true about the current music scene?**

Yeah, musicians are the same. “Oh, I had to look like that for the video.” No you didn’t. Fuck that! People have become total wimps. “Well, the marketing person told me I had to do that.” Who the hell are these people? Rock and roll was a revolutionary movement and I remember when





# PATTI SMITH

rock and roll was invented. Sorry, I'm so old, but I was five or six when I heard Little Richard on the way to Bible school. I didn't know what that was but I let go of my mother's hand and ran towards that music. People were afraid of it, American ministers and churches were afraid of it – it was looked upon as the devil's music because of the energy. In the '60s, the spiritual content and the political content and the personal content were stirring, and it was important and gave us strength. Rock and roll wasn't created for managers, marketing people or whoever makes the decisions about how people should look – that's bullshit and that's not what rock and roll is all about, but that's the way it's evolving and it's everybody's fault. It's the artist's fault, it's music television's fault...we have completely forgotten what a great thing rock and roll potentially is.

## How do you feel about your new album?

It's the first time I have looked at each song and thought I couldn't have written that any better, I don't have the skills to write any better. When we were doing 'Radio Ethiopia' I wasn't in a language mode, I felt I had used all my language doing *Horses*, which is why I started playing electric guitar so I could sonically communicate. I was more interested in sound at that point than I was with words. Lyric writing doesn't come naturally to me, I'm no Smokey Robinson, and I also feel the responsibility of putting words to another person's music. If I write a poem and it sucks I have no-one but me to worry about. But I feel good about this record.

## It recalls some of your early work.

Possibly it's because it's a new company, fresh start, new enthusiasm, but also it came out of a difficult period again. I was rebuilding myself as a human being again, because I lost my mum just before we started work on this record, and my mum's energy is so great I just feel her in this record. My favourite song I ever did was 'Rock & Roll Nigger', and my mum liked to clean house to that – she'd put it on really loud and clean. But it's not like I did anything deliberate, things always evolve organically with me. I might feel I have a mission, but I'm not a strategist.

## What was in your mind when you wrote 'Radio Baghdad'?

I wanted to say something about the strike

on Iraq, but I didn't know how I would approach it. Oliver Ray [her guitarist] came up with the structure and I was listening to the band work and had a vision of the children in Baghdad going through war debris, like in a junkyard. I was imagining these children pulling out batteries and wires, and making their own radio station and transmitting to the people. So I thought I would write a song from that point of view. But when we went into the studio that point of view changed to a mother trying to rock her child to sleep while the Americans were bombing. I wasn't trying to duplicate anything – in the past it was Radio Ethiopia, but now we have a new station and that station is 'Radio Baghdad'. I don't imagine George Bush listens to that station (*laughs*).

## Why did you pick the 'negro spiritual' 'Trampin' as the title track?

While I was working on this album I had a little space where I would go and sit and paint or

write, and I heard the song and something about it touched me. It's kinda sparse lyrically, it just about trampin' through life, getting through all the things life throws at you. It was actually the last thing we recorded, literally the day before we mixed – my daughter and I went into Phillip Glass's studio, and she played Phillip's piano and we cut it live."

## You were asked to join Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Review, do you ever regret saying no?

(*Smiles*) It was a mutual thing, really. I got signed and had to record *Horses*, so of course I have no regrets. But let's be honest, I was the rookie and he had asked so many people onto Rolling Thunder that truthfully I would have to say I was cut, but very amicably. I know Bob appreciated what I was doing and was very encouraging, but in the end somebody had to go and it was me. But I really did need to do my own thing.

