

PATTI SMITH

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PATTI SMITH

America's Punk Rock Rhapsodist

Eric Wendell

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“FOR THE BIBLE TELLS ME SO”

1946–1967

The pursuits of a generation are predicated on what the previous generation encountered and what the next generation has to confront, ultimately setting the stage for future generations and their pursuits. The term “baby boomer” refers to the millions of people who were born post-1945. In musical terms, we could refer to baby boomers as the musicians who were born at the finale of the swing era and the start of the British invasion.

On August 14, 1945, President Harry Truman announced that Japan had surrendered to the Allied Forces, effectively ending World War II, a war that would show its scars on the American people and imprint the weight of war on society. World War II was a chasm in the American psyche, with fears and anxieties on the forefront of modern thought, as well as an overarching sense of patriotism and the economic realities of war.

Music and art emulated patriotic efforts as well as the abstract confusion that wartime can cause. A sampling of art during this time reflects a great deal of what Americans were feeling. Author John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* tells the story of the Joad family and its Great Depression–era journey from Oklahoma to California in search of a better life. Director Charlie Chaplin’s anti-Nazi film *The Great Dictator* sought to parody the atrocities that German dictator Adolf Hitler was implementing at the time. Composer Aaron Copland’s *Fan-*

fare for the Common Man sought its inspiration from vice president Henry A. Wallace's speech "The Century of the Common Man," a speech extolling the value of the work of ordinary citizens in building a great democratic society. This type of world preceded Patti Smith, and she had her work cut out for her for changing it.

Patricia Lee Smith was born on Monday, December 30, 1946, at Grant Hospital on the north side of Chicago, Illinois. Born to Beverly and Grant Smith, Patti came into this world during a blizzard that was assaulting the Chicagoland area at the time. Smith was born a day earlier than scheduled, and her urgency to live and her urgency for experience proved a character trait from the get-go.

Beverly and Grant were your archetypal post-World War II working-class citizens who were slowly spreading their wings after their generation faced the Great Depression and the war. The American environment echoed the postwar notion that wartime fear and anxiety were over and that it was time for America and its citizens to recoup its losses and move forward as a prosperous nation—that the "Keep calm and carry on" notion of life was now a reality and that it was a collective responsibility to move forward.

The arts and contemporary society reflected a need to overcome evil in all its forms. A few days before Smith was born, director Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* was released. The movie traces the long-standing conflict between a barbarous rich man and a sympathetic, less moneyed family man, which results in a supernatural intervention and an alternate vision of reality. The tale of George Bailey, the less-than-affluent man in question, represents the belief that the will of the common man is regularly threatened by a constant evil, willing to strike at any time. His community—the members of whom recognized that evil was threatening their very core and the values they held close to their hearts—repays Bailey's sacrifices for them, ultimately showing the beauty of their spirits.

Concurrently, America was still trying its best to vanquish any semblance of wartime atrocity with the Nuremberg trials, which sought to bring justice to those afflicted by the Nazi regime. On December 9, 1946, U.S. military courts commenced the prosecution of twenty-three defendants for having been involved in mass murder and atrocities carried out during the Nazi occupation. The trials were successful in bringing justice to those involved and offering a sense of closure to the

American consciousness. As the final earmark of wartime uncertainty, President Truman officially declared on December 31, 1946, that any and all conflict via World War II had ended: one day after Patti was born. Between such beauty and barbarism lay the kernel of Smith’s artistic quality.

Although Beverly and Grant were working-class people who did not have a lot of disposable income to expose their children to cultural events, both appreciated the arts and held different artistic pursuits in their lives. Born Beverly Williams on March 19, 1920, to Frank and Marguerite Williams, Beverly was a housewife and a waitress. By Patti’s account, Beverly was a capable jazz singer whom she later called a “cigarette tenor.” Grant Smith was born on July 29, 1916, and worked the swing shift at the nearby Honeywell factory, a company that manufactured technology for the aerospace and transportation industries. Although a working-class man, he was a tap dancer in his youth as well as a track star. Her father also had an affinity for classical music and Duke Ellington’s jazz.

Smith was born sickly and was often plagued with illness throughout her youth. By her father’s account, Patti was born with bronchial pneumonia, and he had to keep her alive by holding her over a steaming washtub so that the vapors could clear her bronchi and allow air into her lungs. Smith suffered hallucinations as a child brought on by her illnesses, which often kept her bedridden and isolated as a child. Smith later stated, “I had every single childhood illness—measles, chicken pox, mumps, Asiatic flu, mononucleosis. I was in bed for months with scarlet fever, reading and listening to music.”

The Smith family rapidly grew upon the arrival of Patti’s sister Linda in 1948. Having Linda in her life proved to be an important component to her emotional stability. In the November 2010 issue of *Oprah* magazine, Smith spoke of Linda as helping her “stay [her] moral course” and as the person to whom she turns when she suffers moral conflict. Smith quickly took to being a big sister, which became all the more important to her with the additional of her brother Todd in 1949. Seeing that their family was outgrowing their Logan Square dwelling, Beverly and Grant packed their kids and migrated to Germantown, Pennsylvania.

Located in northwest Philadelphia, Germantown was a largely German neighborhood, with the Smith family settling into a section of town that housed servicemen and their families. Although the Smith family

was not well off financially, they made the best of their lives and sought to have as much fun as possible with what little they had. While living in Germantown, the Smith family often played games together in a empty lot of nearby land they dubbed “The Patch.” During the summertime, the adults in the community would sit, talk, and drink wine while the children played.

As a result of being sickly, Smith was skinny, awkward, and conscious of her appearance. As a result, she was forced to put on a defensive veneer to protect herself. Smith created a persona for herself that one could equate to the streetwise toughie found in movies. Speaking to Lisa Robinson in *Hit Parader*, Smith stated, “I had my own gang and everything. I had this eye-patch and kids used to be scared of me because they thought I had an evil eye. I had a cast eye and it used to go up in my head and it was creepy looking.”

Beverly instilled in her children the idea of dreaming big and beyond their day-to-day lives. Upon reflecting her mother, Smith stated, “‘One day our ship will come in.’ If all she had to make for dinner one night was a bag of potatoes, she would say, ‘We’re going to have a really exciting night tonight,’ and she’d make a mountain of french fries. She always made things as positive as possible. She was a big dreamer—when she hit it big she was going to buy a big house by the sea and my brother would have a sports car.”

While her home life was less than perfect, Smith found solace in her own counsel, knowing that the apparent awkwardness was temporary and that she was destined for better things. Smith told Victor Bockris, “I was very gawky and homely—real nervous, but I was always happy. I always knew that I was more than what I seemed.” In a unique twist, one could surmise that the confidence and bravado that she would later obtain in her performances began as a result of schoolyard bullying. Smith would subdue schoolchildren and their mockery by telling them jokes. Smith contextualized this sentiment with Bockris by stating, “Kids would make fun of me because I was skinny and all that shit, but I would just laugh; I made jokes.”

From her formative years, it would appear that Smith always had a visceral relationship with music. While still living in Chicago, Smith recalled the first song that she remembers singing, “Jesus Loves Me,” while sitting on a stoop. Written by Anna Bartlett Warner, the popular hymn is a poignant first song for the young Patti to learn, as it originally

appeared as a poem in the novel *Say and Seal*, by Susan Warner, mirroring the poem-lyric duality that came to represent Smith’s musical output. Around this time, Smith received her first record player, which came with the songs “Tubby the Tuba,” by Paul Tripp and George Kleinsinger, and “Big Rock Candy Mountain,” by Harry McClintock, which was the first record that she purchased.

Written for narrator and orchestra, “Tubby the Tuba” became a beloved song from Smith’s childhood. Released in 1945, the song tells the story of Tubby and his desire to be taken seriously within the orchestra. The song was immensely popular, selling more than eight million copies and introducing many young people to orchestral music. In March 2013, Smith received the opportunity to narrate the song with the Little Orchestra Society at Lincoln Center’s Avery Fisher Hall.

“Big Rock Candy Mountain” was Smith’s first 45; however, it was not the first single that she purchased. In conversation with Bob Boilen of National Public Radio, Smith said that the first one was “Today’s the Day,” by singer Maureen Gray. Smith stated, “There were so many singles I loved and wanted, but I loved dancing to that one. So I had bought it so that my siblings and I could dance to it.”

At the age of seven, Smith’s world was rocked when she discovered the bombastic stylings of Little Richard—in whom she saw a rowdy character who surpassed his contemporaries in both music and likeness. In a world of complicated rock-and-roll idols—such as the wild tornado of Jerry Lee Lewis and the raucous exertions of Chuck Berry—Richards juxtaposed swank, androgyny, and his tough demeanor with a sound that had a profound influence on numerous artists for the next fifty years. Little Richard introduced Smith to a persona that represented the flamboyance and cross-sexuality that stars such as Prince and Lady Gaga would spin into a winning mixture. Speaking to journalist Tom Snyder, Smith said, “To me, Little Richard was a person that was able to focus a certain physical, anarchistic and spiritual energy into a form . . . which we call rock and roll. I heard ‘Girl Can’t Help It,’ I understood it as being something that had to do with my future.”

Following the birth of the fourth Smith child, Kimberly, the Smith family was evicted from its home and left Germantown, settling into a ranch house in southern New Jersey, specifically Woodbury Gardens. The family’s change from a more urban environment to a suburban life initially threw Smith off her game, as she was weary of her new environ-

ment. In the documentary *Dream of Life*, Smith poised, “When I lived in South Jersey, there was no time for daydreams. And life was simpler there. You weren’t hassled, people holding you up or trying to goose ya and stuff like that. But that’s all there was, there was no chance for extension.”

Although life may have been easier in South Jersey, Smith ultimately found her existence there to be constrictive. During this time, Smith began to question the concept of gender within the confines of 1950s suburbia. Smith detested the overly feminine details that were ironed onto women’s personalities within society. Smith oftentimes felt disgusted with the classic 1950s-esque vision of women with lipstick and heavy perfume. In contrast to this, Smith saw herself more as the hero of her own story, a Peter Pan–esque character that led a group of merry men. In an interview with *Details* magazine, Smith stated, “All through childhood I resisted the role of a confused skirt tagging the hero. Instead, I was searching for someone crossing the gender boundaries, someone both to be and to be with. I never wanted to be Wendy—I was more like Peter Pan. This was confusing stuff.” On one such occasion, Patti, then eleven years old, was approached by her mother for not wearing a shirt in the blazing summer sun. Not understanding that her mother found this inappropriate, Smith was forced to put a shirt on, ultimately feeling a sense of betrayal from her mother, who herself encompassed this 1950s female stereotype.

While the Smith children may have lost the fun that they had with “The Patch” while living in Germantown, in South Jersey they attended performances at Hoedown Hall, a local square-dance hall. Smith reveled in the American folk dance tradition, even stating it as being a “part of me, the fiddler’s call.” As an adult, Smith purchased the land where Hoedown Hall was located with the intention of keeping it in its natural state but ultimately lost it to eminent domain after a local politician appropriated the land and turned it into soccer fields.

Smith’s initial introduction to religion and prayer was influenced by her mother, who taught her a version of Joseph Addison’s eighteenth-century children’s prayer “Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep.” Being an ever-so-precocious child, Smith often had questions that her mother could not answer. To please her young mind, her mother enrolled her in Sunday school, where she learned verses from the Bible and other religious doctrines.

Smith’s introduction to religion provided the young girl her first creative outlet, as religion became a major lyrical framework to her compositional output. In her home life, Smith received both ends of the spectrum, as her mother was a practicing Jehovah’s Witness and her father an ardent atheist. Although an atheist, Grant was by all accounts an open-minded man who read the Bible and always welcomed a lively debate. “My father was very knowledgeable. He read the Bible several times. He liked to discuss it, he liked to spar, he liked to play devil’s advocate.”

It was not uncommon for Smith to accompany her mother on Sunday mornings, when they rang doorbells handing out the Jehovah’s Witness publications *Watchtowers* and *Awake* to her neighbors. Religion also provided Smith a venue for creative thought and imagination. Smith was troubled by the lines “If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take” and soon began to recite her own prayer and speak from her heart. Smith would oftentimes lie awake at night speaking to God without the confines of prayer or official religious verse. Although one could see how the conflicting religious views could confuse Beverly and Grant’s children, above all they tried to instill the concept of being a good person.

Along with her love of prayer, Smith had an equal affinity for literature and the written word. Both her parents shared this love, and it was not uncommon for Smith to sit at the feet of her mother while she smoked and drank coffee with a book on her lap. Smith’s father also fueled Smith’s hunger for writing. A quiet, distant man, Grant was later described as “part God, part Hagar the Spaceman from Mega City.” Even with his eccentric attributes, Grant was always keen on reading, especially the Bible and books about UFOs. Smith’s love for the written word extended to a long-standing tradition that Beverly had for Patti, by which she gave her a diary every year for her birthday so that she could begin the new year fresh.

Smith’s mother was quick to notice her curiosity and her wanting to read, so she taught her how, beginning with simple children’s fables as well as more modern fare, such as the works of Dr. Seuss. “As a little girl I loved books and I learned to read right away and I was reading before I went to school.” An early literary favorite was Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. In reading the story of four sisters, Smith found a role model in the protagonist, Jo March—a tough, headstrong charac-

ter who aspires to be a writer. It's easy to see why Smith would gravitate toward Jo, as she has a strong love of literature and writes short stories and even plays for her sisters to perform. Additionally, Jo portrays unconventional behavior for the time, often refusing to adhere to the gender stereotypes that young women were expected to follow, much in the same way that Smith was experiencing at the time.

Smith also found solace in fairy tales such as *The Wizard of Oz* as well as biographies and travel books. Smith later stated, "We didn't have much when we were kids. My parents worked really hard, but we had a happy childhood. And there was always books in our house." Smith's insatiable need to read almost got her in trouble with the authorities when she was eleven years old. During a particularly lean financial period for the family, due to her father being on strike from his job, Smith was helping her mother buy groceries at the local A&P when a copy of the *World Book Encyclopedia* caught her eye. Smith voiced her desire to have it, but her mother said that they did not have the money for it. One day, Smith returned to the A&P alone to fetch milk and bread. Smith began to read the encyclopedia while shopping and couldn't bear to part with it. Smith impulsively put it inside her shirt and tried to walk out the door when the store security guard caught her, releasing her only upon the promise that Smith would tell her mother when she returned home.

At the age of twelve, a family trip to the Museum of Art in Philadelphia changed Patti's perception of art and the circumstances of the human imagination. On this trip, Smith became infatuated with the work of John Singer Sargent, Thomas Eakins, and Pablo Picasso. Smith's father was particularly smitten with the Picasso painting *The Persistence of Memory*, admiring the painter's draftsmanship. With this visit, Smith experienced firsthand the possibilities of art and what the human imagination is capable of producing with materials. "I saw that art existed and after that, it was all I wanted to do."

During her high school years, Smith began to feel the power of music and how it made her feel. One year, a Motown revue came to the Philadelphia airport and the airport drive-in, where for \$5 per car the Smith family was able to see the show. Performers included Bennie King, Smoky Robinson, Marvin Gaye, and others. The highlight of the show came when King and Robinson brought a young kid out by the name of Stevie Wonder to perform the song "Fingertips," which caused

the entire audience to erupt with applause when he sang “Come on, come on!” Smith later stated that the concert was her “first collective experience” and the power of live music.

A career in the arts was becoming more of a certainty for the young child. However, a career in the arts proved to be a difficult decision in regard to Smith’s faith. One of the axioms of being a Jehovah’s Witness is that artistic expression of any kind is strictly forbidden. For the religious doctrines in which Beverly believed, it’s surprising that she was the one to introduce the young child to music. Once a singer herself, Beverly introduced Patti to vocal jazz singers such as Chris Connor and June Christy as well as operas by Puccini. It was during her teenage years that Smith began to feel the urge to perform. In conversation with Neal Conan of National Public Radio, Smith stated, “When I was a teenager, I dreamed of being an opera singer like Maris Sollis or a jazz singer like June Christie or Chris Connor, approaching songs with the kind of mystical lethargy of Billie Holiday.”

Further salvation came in the form of rock and roll—in which Smith found the freewheeling artistic aesthetic that eventually became her performing persona. The Smith children spent their nights listening to rock and roll while their parents worked. It was not uncommon for them to dance to rock music by James Brown, the Shirelles, and Hank Ballard and the Midnighters. Some of the first records that Smith ever purchased were *Shrimp Boats*, by Harry Belafonte; *The Money Tree*, by Patience and Prudence; and *Climb Up*, by Neil Sedaka.

When Smith was having a particular tough illness, Beverly often tried to help her feel better by purchasing her records. Among those were John Coltrane’s *My Favorite Things* and Bob Dylan’s *Another Side of Bob Dylan*. Perhaps in a foreshadowing event of the power that an album cover can contain—much in the way that *Horses* would be for many—Beverly bought *Another Side of Bob Dylan* because of the cover, telling Patti, “I never heard of the fellow but he looks like somebody you’d like.”

Having a particular distaste for the white-bread cultural aesthetic of the time, Smith was drawn to arts that came out of African American communities. Smith told Lisa Robinson of *Hit Parader*, “I never really liked the white stuff, it embarrassed me. I hated the look of the 1950s. . . . Girls would wear big crinolines and lipstick and I thought it was so dumb. I didn’t want to be a girl because they wore those Elvis

charm bracelets and I couldn't get into that. I had a complete Davy Crockett outfit, I was a relentless tomboy." This may have been due in part to her friends at the time in South Jersey, who were primarily black. Smith stated, "We were really into jazz and poetry and developing our cool and our walk. It was the best education I ever had."

The summer of her sixteenth year, Smith began working in a factory where she inspected handlebars for tricycles. Oftentimes, Smith would escape into her imagination to escape the hold of blue-collar work. Smith's sixteenth year also provided her with one of the greatest revelations that she would experience; she first read the words of Arthur Rimbaud after obtaining a copy of the author's poetry collection *Illuminations* from a bus depot station in Philadelphia. The collection's themes made their way into a lot of Smith's later work, with protest, life, and death making it known. In Rimbaud, Smith found an idol of yesterday that could feed her artistic future.

However much the wallflower Smith described herself as, she was involved in many activities at Deptford Township High School, including stints on the Bulletin Board Committee, the Football Program Committee, the Dance Committee, and chorus. In her senior yearbook photo, Smith listed her life's ambition as being an "art teacher." Although she began to physically take on the personas of Dylan and Rimbaud, her nickname in high school was "Natasha" because her long black hair resembled the character Natasha from the *Rocky and Bullwinkle* program. Additionally, Smith was elected "class clown," which she later described as more a defense mechanism if anything else. Smith contextualized this by stating, "I developed a kind of humor to compensate for being different than everybody."

Early childhood performing heroes came from literary and musical figures but also included the late-night charisma that came from Johnny Carson. "The best thing I learned from Johnny Carson [was] an ability to improvise and to spar." Smith later stated as a teenager that she envisioned herself as his successor. "He didn't just do stuff that people had written for him. And I learned from him. I wanted to be Johnny Carson's successor—that's what I dreamed of. Not of being the next Jim Morrison."

During her early performance experiences, Smith pulled inspiration from Carson, whose loose demeanor and fearless attitude was something that Smith strived to achieve. Smith stated, "When I started per-

forming, I was not well loved. I always pulled from Johnny 'cause he's like a human parachute. He can bail out of any situation and I was always able to one-line them [the audience] to shut these guys up.”

After completing her high school studies, Smith enrolled at Glassboro State Teachers College, where she majored in art. Although attending Glassboro as an art major, Smith received early experience onstage as an actress, performing in several plays, including the role of Phaedra in Euripides's *Hippolytus* and Madame Dubonnet in *The Boyfriend*. Smith augmented her studies at Glassboro at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where she won a scholarship to attend its Saturday morning classes.

Smith did not see a rock-and-roll band until 1965, when she saw the Rolling Stones in an auditorium in New Jersey. “That's the first time I actually saw in person a rock-and-roll band playing instruments.” Given the history, Smith's attendance was most likely on November 7, 1965, at Newark Symphony Hall in Newark, New Jersey. An early vocal influence for Smith came courtesy of singer Hank Williams. Speaking to Bob Boilen, Smith stated, “I recognize some of my vocal style, where it came from because there are certain ways that I sing. Being from South Jersey we have sort of a drawl, you know a twang and I listen to him a lot and sang along with him and sing in the same key. He was an influence on me.”

The summer of 1966, between her sophomore and junior years, Smith became pregnant with her first child. The father was a local boy, who left her to deal with the problem alone. Deciding that abortion would be too dangerous, Patti served the full term of the pregnancy. Surprisingly, Smith's parents were supportive of their daughter's decision. Given the time frame in which this occurred, it speaks volumes about her parents that they would be as supportive of their daughter, as a pregnant young unmarried woman was frowned upon in society. On Thanksgiving 1966, Smith decided to give the child up for adoption; her professor, Dr. Flick, found a couple who would take the child in. This period of isolation caused Patti to look at her body in a way that she had never had to do so in her life. The already fragile perception that she had of her body increased as she felt the growth of her child alter her appearance.

Smith's parents drove her to a hospital in Camden, where she was ridiculed for her appearance and treated harshly by the nurses on call

owing to her status as an unwed woman. Smith's labor was not without difficulty, as her doctor informed her that she was having a breech birth, adding further anxiety. On April 26, 1967, Smith gave birth to her first child, a daughter. Smith later found solace in her postpartum depression by listening to the Rolling Stones.

Smith recalled, "Though I never questioned my decision to give my child up for adoption, I learned that to give life and walk away was not so easy." Furthermore, Smith told Terry Gross on *Fresh Air*, "It would've been difficult for everyone, I think, and the child would have had no father. I felt that I just wasn't ready as a human being, I wasn't prepared and that although I knew that I would be responsible and loving that I just was not equipped to embark on that path."

The memory of her daughter never left her side. In a *Circus* magazine article from December 14, 1976, Smith noted whom she wanted to play her in a movie based on her life story: "My daughter. I have a daughter who's 11 years old. Maybe she'll grow up independent and really really heavy and become a movie star and she'll play me in my life story. She'll be doin' the movie and then, all of a sudden, it'll hit her—I'm her mother. She'll go through all the records and through the whole process of doin' the movie and she'll be startin' to search for me. Then she'll come to this heavy realization about the mother she never knew. This will be after I've had my opium OD."

Following the birth of her child, Smith dropped out of college, partly because the institution left her uninspired and partly because she could not pass biology or the higher mathematics classes. Smith soon found a temporary job at a textbook factory in Philadelphia. The work environment was harsh at best, with her fellow female coworkers harassing her and suspecting her of being a communist after seeing her with her copy of *Illuminations*.

With heartbreak on her breath and the heavy burden of a tactless life in South Jersey, Smith decided that only one place could soothe her soul . . . New York City.