

Me and Patti Lee...

I am ashamed to admit it, but I've come to [Patti Smith](#) LATE. Recently. In the last four years in fact.

Where have you been all my life?

Truth be told, Patricia Lee 'Patti' Smith has always been lurking there in the periphery of my sightline, but never quite square on, in sharp focus, in the same way say, as David Bowie or Talking Heads.

The latter have intensely occupied my heart - and attention - with many years of study and devotion. Patti's and my relationship is relatively new, only now really starting to gain traction.

Growing up in the 70s I'd heard '[Because The Night](#)' tons of times, usually on the any number of AM radios in our house - in the kitchen, garage or bedroom (there on my beloved transistor.) Another shameful admission: until recently I'd never locked on to the fact that it was *Patti* singing it and not, um, Pat Benatar.

Did I really think Patti Smith was Pat Benatar? OMG.

While it was regarded as Springsteen's song, Patti was the one who'd made it a hit. And what a call to arms he'd given her, one artist to another.

In later years (my 20s) I'd heard [Easter](#), the album 'Because the Night' calls home - and *Horses* too - but the limpet effect that usually came with a transformative, rampant music find had failed to take hold.



Photo: Linda Smith Bianucci, Patti Smith, Paris, 1969



Photo: 'Patti with Bolex.' 1969, Judy Linn.

'But *why?*' I've asked myself many times since realising:

- a) I'm an idiot,
- b) I'm embarrassed, and
- c) Patti Smith is one of the most inspiring artists I've ever had the pleasure of wending my way to.

I did *really* like both those albums when I heard them, but it wasn't love. Intrigued, I'd gotten sidetracked by other artists, and abruptly released them back into the pop culture wilds. (By then it was the 90s and en route I'd become waylaid by grunge, hip hop, and film.)

Even so I am a loyal fan with a pretty big appetite for heritage; I Hoover up details about film and music like a boss. So I'm still not exactly sure that I *do* in fact have a decent excuse for my perturbing Patti-bypass.

Though it might have had something to do with the first time I heard [Horses](#)...

In a rural weekender in said 90s I found myself being hectored by a very demanding, angry, sometime-work colleague who - to be fair - at the time was wrestling with what was possibly undiagnosed bi-polar, definitely narcissism, and 'gender identity issues'.

He threw what could only be classified as an abusive tantrum because I resisted the imperative to indulge/engage with his pain and drama (which amounted to savage character assassinations of pretty much everyone he knew.) By this stage, I had done a lot of both for several years, but now it had transformed into toxic, harmful behaviour towards others. Acting out. My compassion bone was creaking in agony.

Patti bore witness to this 'straw that broke the camel's back'. In a petulant rage the 'colleague' threw *Horses* on the record player, DEMANDED I sit and listen or be deemed "NO LONGER WORTHY OF BEING A FRIEND". (What he really wanted to do was rail further, using *Horses* as background muzak.)

Once the record was over I left, battle weary, with Patti's masterpiece the unfortunate collateral damage.

On reflection, yes... That must have been it.

But Dear Patti, ever the optimist you wouldn't let me go, afterwards appearing on turntables at parties, the FM radio/cassette player in my car and later again on friends' CD players, waving at me, bright with hope. *Would I see you this time?*

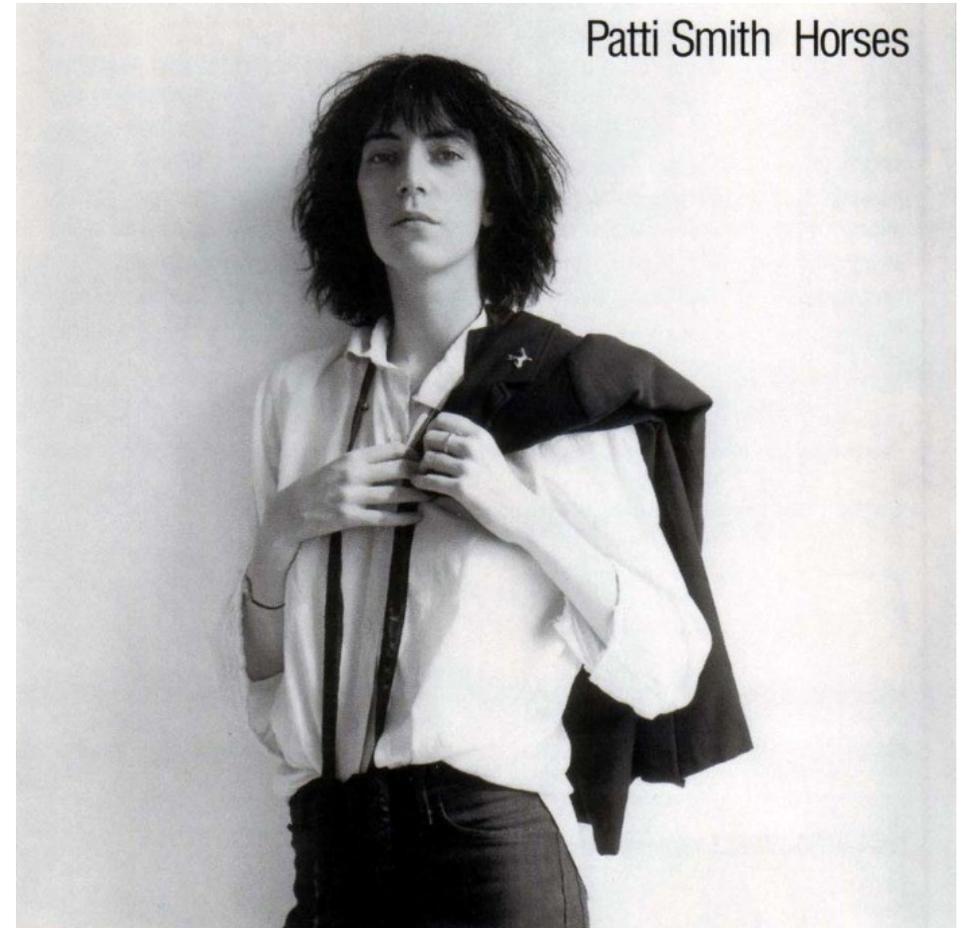
It took me a while, but eventually I waved back. Across fields glistening with music new and old, we found each other. I smiled shyly, apologised, and since have jumped into your full embrace.

Our first proper 'date' was at the [NRW Forum Kultur und Wirtschaft](#), in Dusseldorf, Germany, January 2010. I stumbled into a stunning retrospective of [Robert Mapplethorpe](#) photographs. Patti was on the walls starkly depicted in several large-format prints.

Of course I knew she and Mapplethorpe had been friends and artistic contemporaries in the 1960s/70s Punk Rock Days of New York City. I knew that they had eked out an existence together, while growing their respective artistic voices - hers in music and poetry, his in fine art photography..

Queer fine art photography to be exact – all immaculate form and fucking; 'perfection in form'... I knew he'd taken the cover shot of Patti for *Horses* and others, and that they had been close, compadres, partners in crime...

But lovers? Looking at these images close up, refracted through the spectrum of his deliciously defiant gaze, I got an inkling that their partnership must have been something more. I mean look at her, totally open and happy to reveal herself to *him*.. And he, marvelling at what he finds in *her* (also defiant). Then documenting that exchange – in beautiful, no-punches-pulled, intimate portraits. They could see the poetry in each other's souls. It really *was* 'all there in black and white'.



Cover photo: 'Horses', by Robert Mapplethorpe (1975)



Photo: Judy Linn

I finished the last page as we pulled into Nuremberg Hauptbahnhof. While announcements in German sing-songed over the PA, tears streamed down my cheeks. I sat wishing the book wouldn't end, but knowing we'd reached our mutual, inevitable destination. (The too-obvious metaphor also made me smile.) I'd seen inside her heart. All that was left was 'now'. *What now?* It was overwhelming.

What a rare gift to give a stranger - me in this case; to share her life, thoughts and dreams in this way. I felt such gratitude to this author, Patti Smith, touched by her courage and commitment to the counterculture, Mapplethorpe, life, love.. herself. What a woman. What an *older* woman. What a rock star. What a talent. What an ordinary person.

This was big.

Wow. Intimates. How lovely. Two forces of nature were they, as one, finding the world, changing the world, *being the world*, together. They *must* have been lovers.

Turns out I was right as I discovered on another trip to Dusseldorf late in 2012. This time I'd bought *Just Kids* with me, Patti's moving memoir of she and Mapplethorpe's life together, growing up and out into the universe. Before they were 'Patti' and 'Mapplethorpe', they were Patricia and Robert, 'just kids' from the suburbs who'd found each other in the city. Their sense of romance – the great possibilities life offers up – kept them warm at night in their cold, bare-bones walk-up.

I read *Just Kids* on the many train journeys I took that German winter. As the bleak fields whizzed by my icy window all snowbound and blurry, I covered myself in the warmth of their story like a woollen blanket. I could hear Patti's distinct, lilting voice softly, gently, musically, singing me the tale... It's one of the best books I've ever read let alone memoirs, filled with yearning, art, spirit, truth, love, tenderness, tragedy and joy.

(And rock!)



Photo: David Gabr/ Getty Images 1971

Our third date was a no brainer: [Banga](#). I needed to hear Patti's latest album *stat* - pretty much as soon as my homeward-bound plane hit the tarmac at Tulla. Patti [says](#) she wrote 'April Fool' on *Banga* "inspired by the life and work" of 19th century Russian writer [Nikolai Gogol](#). But I'm convinced it's also about her love for Mapplethorpe, the early, ebullient days, trying and failing and trying again, as artists and lovers, their lives stitched together by rags and gossamer.

We'll ride like writers ride

Neither rich nor broke

We'll race through alleymays

In our tattered cloaks, so

Come - be my April Fool

Come - we'll break all the rules

We're going strong now, me and Patti Lee.. I watch [documentaries](#) about Patti, [videos](#) of her speaking at festivals, and flog *Banga* just enough to not get sick of it. I marvel at how damn fucking sexy she is as she rapidly approaches her eighth decade, brandishing that grey GT stripe of hers and that unwavering, bold sense of ROCK and TRUTH and

BEAUTY and REVOLUTION. She makes my heart sing. Like the great poets she adores, Patti Smith too is timeless and infinite. What a path she has cut through the thorny brambles of time and indifference. Yet she doesn't see herself as an iconoclast; that's for others to say. Maybe that's where her true power lies - in her humility.

'I don't believe people playing rock 'n' roll should have crowns. We're not kings and queens. Anybody can play it.' - Patti Smith, [The Talks](#)

I'm slowly going through the backlog of her music, trying to muster the courage to try *Horses* again. It's not too far away now - I can see Patti Lee waving at me again from across that damp field, singing out reassuringly "*it'll be okay, make a new music memory!*" and, "*just forgive the old bugger*"

Her sister in punk and poetry [Amanda Palmer](#) is there too, standing beside Patti dressed in a tutu and muddy gumboots, beckoning me, beckoning me, with that same, knowing, smile.



Photo: Christopher Felver

Writer: Megan Spencer (c) 2014.