Punk & Post-Punk
Volume 8 Number 3
 doi: 10.1386/punk_00007_1

JAREK PAUL ERVIN
Temple University

'I hold the key to the sea of possibilities': Patti Smith Group and the occult

ABSTRACT

Patti Smith Group's (PSG) music occupies a puzzling spot in punk history, given their oscillation between stylistic elements common to rock and roll and a range of ideas inherited from literature and avant-gardism. This article suggests that Smith's work can be understood in light of her interest in the occult, part of a broader project to render rock and roll as a form of ritualistic practice. I begin by examining the way in which Smith and her commentators engaged with mystical themes, looking not only at her direct relationship to the spiritual world, but also her peculiar interpretation of rock. From there, I argue that Smith extended occult aesthetics, seeking the magical impart hidden within the milieu of midcentury US mass culture. Concluding with an analysis of 'Land', one of the group's most iconic songs, I claim that the singer ultimately attempted to transform punk into an act of musical palingenesis*, a form of sonic rebirth.*

KEYWORDS

Patti Smith
Patti Smith Group
punk
music and magic
the occult
palingenesis

'LAND OF 1000 DANCES'

During the 1970s, Patti Smith Group (PSG) performed the song 'Land' in concert nearly 100 times. Typically slotted first or last in setlists, their signature number christened early shows at legendary rock clubs including CBGBs, Max's Kansas City, the Bottom Line and My Father's Place. As the band grew

in popularity, the hymn floated out of speakers in Paris, London, Denmark and Germany, bringing to rest triumphant international debuts for one of punk's rising stars (Cizek-Graf 2018).

'Land' is a cover of the rock and roll classic 'Land of 1000 Dances', most famous in Wilson Pickett's 1966 rendition. By the time PSG joined with producer John Cale to record their 1975 debut album *Horses*, the tune had been transfigured. While familiar calls to 'do the Watusi' remain, Smith adds a flood of references to the French poet Arthur Rimbaud and the Tower of Babel, alongside images of charging horses, crawling piles of snakes and a churning 'sea of possibilities'. Musically, the PSG rendition similarly estranges its source. Pickett's version is brief, rhythmically consistent and harmonically minimalist, all the while following a basic verse-chorus template. Meanwhile, the later rendition incorporates a substantial introduction, blurs distinctions between sections and omits altogether the iconic 'na-na-na' chorus. Sprawling to nearly ten minutes in length, the song was transformed into a musical odyssey.

On the surface, it might seem intuitive enough for PSG to cover 'Land of 1000 Dances'. An iconic celebration of the music and broader culture of the 1950s and the 1960s, the tune was, as historian Jon Savage puts it, 'for all time: it was a mixture of past, present and future' (2015: 242). It was also a touchstone of the so-called golden age of rock idolized by many later musicians. Despite the revolutionary allure following punk, many historians have argued that, at least in its US incarnation, the genre emerges from a deep self-consciousness about the past (Dettmar 2005; Gendron 2002; Reynolds 2011; Shank 2014; Waksman 2009). Acts such as the Ramones and Blondie mined rockabilly, soul, girl groups and other pop genres for influence. At times, punk projects brought an almost scholarly level of fidelity to sources. Obscure covers were reconstructed with an acute concern for precision, while new compositions emerged as bands studied older records like sacred texts. It was this aspect guiding period critic Keith Palmer as he alleged the genre was not new, but something that began when artists 'rediscovered' the past (1978).

Given such a retro tendency, 'Land' is anything but intuitive. PSG offers a peculiar twist on the punk notion of historical memory. Unlike many peers in rock, Smith regarded the past neither as a dead thing nor a hurdle to be overcome, but as a living wellspring for inspiration. In particular, the singer provides a unique conception shaped by her engagement with occult practices. She cast figures such as Wilson Pickett, Jim Morrison and Jimi Hendrix alongside Catholic saints, poets and spiritual visionaries, producing an idiosyncratic personal canon of mystics. In this sense, the artist shied away from the vision of someone like Lester Bangs, whose writing frames rock and roll as the populist expression of untutored mass culture, or Greil Marcus, who celebrated punk's anarchic, deconstructive quality (Bangs 1988; Marcus 2009). Smith, by contrast, saw music as a form of magic.

While this perspective might seem curious, the singer was simply reinterpreting the historical consciousness of punk through occult aesthetics. PSG also scrutinized the past, but they tore apart their models, seeking the power within. In this sense, the group performed what the literary critic Leon Surette calls aesthetic *palingenesis*: symbolic rebirth as initiation into the occult.

This article begins by contextualizing Smith's art-punk pioneer status within the occult. While the singer was immersed in debates about the relationship of literature and classic rock, she also had an enthusiastic – if idiosyncratic – interest in a broad tradition of magical thought. Smith drew inspiration from a range of spiritual world-views, from Christian traditions and major world

religions to Satanism, mysticism and psychedelia. In addition, period critics and Smith herself suggested that a broad conception of occult aesthetics formed an interpretive heuristic for her music.

After framing this tradition in terms of occult aesthetic theory, the article ends with an analysis of PSG's 'Land', perhaps their most dynamic attempt to render sound as a medium for palingenesis. The song functions as a musical initiation, reshaping rock into an enlightened tradition through rebirth. Ultimately, Smith offers a vision of vernacular culture as a domain of forgotten wisdom – and a means by which we might find ourselves reborn into an enchanted world.

PUNK AND POETRY

PSG is a recognized part of New York punk history (Gendron 2002; Gibbs 1996; Henry 1990; Heylin 2005; McNeil and McCain 2006; Paytress 2011; Shaw 2008; Valentine 2006). In some ways, though, Smith's career has been difficult to fit into a tradition that so often celebrates iconoclasm and amateurism, even kitsch and ineptitude. It was no less a commentator than Johnny Rotten who distanced the singer from punk, mocking the opening chant from 'Land' after he saw PSG perform for the first time: 'Did anybody go to the Roundhouse the other night and see the hippie shaking the tambourines? *Horses*, horses, HORSESHIT' (McNeil and McCain 2006: 245).

Even for more sympathetic listeners, Smith's artistic project has been a re-occurring site of disagreement – in the 1970s as much as now. One of the major factors in this dispute has been the group's admixture of rock and poetry. It was at one of Smith's first performances that the singer began experimenting with stylistic crossover. In a February 1971 Poetry Project show at St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery, the guitarist and writer Lenny Kaye joined Smith for a number of songs, layering scrawling guitar riffs and feedback loops beneath her verses. This concert has been discussed as a significant moment in the development of Smith's career as a rock musician (New Musical Express 2016). But it is notable that in the years to follow, Smith was actually busier with non-musical pursuits. In particular, she was prolific as a writer, publishing three collections of poetry and reading frequently on the New York scene. Smith was also active in theatre, appearing in Sam Shepard's 1971 play *Cowboy Mouth*, as well as a number of plays by the experimental director Tony Ingrassia.

In this period, the singer was better known as a writer. It is perhaps for this reason that many of Smith's early commentators claimed she integrated the spirit of rock and roll into verse – rather than the other way around. Smith's work was somewhat unique for appearing both in traditional poetry collections and in the pages of rock magazines like *Creem*. (Noted punk champion Dave Marsh was one of her early fans, publishing Smith in 1971.) Even Lester Bangs, usually an ideologue for amateurish garage retroness, wrote a glowing introduction to a collection of her poems for a 1974 *Creem* issue:

> It is the grittiest poetic instinct of the 70s which supremely imbues all of her work. We don't often print what's stamped officially as 'poetry' in CREEM, but then Patti's poetry is rock 'n' roll splattered in a vibrating mosaic on the printed page.
>
> (Bangs 1974: 30)

Bangs was overstating the novelty of Smith's approach, which followed in the footsteps of Joni Mitchell, the Fugs and others who had been experimenting with literary crossover since the mid-1960s (Kane 2003, 2017; Robbins 2017). Smith herself would later acknowledge these precursors, citing in particular the influence of writers such as Jim Morrison and the Beat poets on her musical project (New Musical Express 2016). Nonetheless, by 1974, Smith was starting to perform more consistently in rock venues accompanied by Lenny Kaye, including a string of gigs at the famed CBGBs alongside the band Television. This stretch of concerts has additionally been linked to the emergence of the broader New York punk scene (McNeil and McCain 2006: 169–73). Still, it is noteworthy that Patti Smith's regular gig before CBGBs was at their chief rival, Max's Kansas City, playing alongside Elephant's Memory, a psychedelic rock group who served as the backing band for John Lennon and Yoko Ono between 1971 and 1973.

After adding Richard Sohl on piano, Patti Smith recorded a single with an original composition, 'Piss Factory', backed by 'Hey Joe' – best known for the 1966 Jimi Hendrix version, itself the debut single for the guitarist. If it was not obvious that Smith was retracing Hendrix's path, her decision to record it in his Greenwich Village studio Electric Lady made it crystal clear. By 1975, with the support of Arista Records and the additions of bass player Ivan Kral and drummer Jay Dee Daugherty, the group finally released their debut album, *Horses*.

In this period, PSG often played in a traditionalist vein, performing older songs such as the Troggs' 'Louie Louie', the Who's 'My Generation' and Velvet Underground's 'We're Gonna Have a Real Good Time Together'. The group's approach to this tradition was unique, with even throwback covers recast as sprawling musical epics. Smith additionally scattered fragments of her allusion-dense poetry throughout the group's compositions and live performances. As Mike Daley demonstrates in a close reading of 'Gloria' – a cover of a 1964 Van Morrison tune for his group Them – dense intertextual networks and substantive musical reworkings transform the song into something far more ambitious than the original (Daley 1998).

Given this interplay of experimentation and traditionalism, Patti Smith's artistic project has been interpreted in a number of different ways. Carrie Jaurès Noland and Daniel Kane have convincingly demonstrated substantive links between the singer and a range of avant-garde literary figures, including Smith's literary idol Rimbaud and friends in the US/New York art scene such as Gerard Malanga and William Burroughs (Noland 1995; Kane 2003, 2012, 2017). Even so, Simon Reynolds and Barry Shank have offered equally persuasive cases for hearing Smith as a rock traditionalist, one who participated in conventional punk projects of retroness and authenticity curration (Reynolds 2011; Shank 2014: 152–62).

Period critics were similarly divided about Patti Smith's corpus. Many did detect a rear-gaze dimension in her work. For example, Craig Gholson suggests in a 1976 article for *New York Rocker* that, if there was any intellectual aspect to Smith's approach, it was found in the depth of her historical imagination:

> Patti Smith has her PhD in '60's anti-establishment culture, a major in British Bad-Boys, a minor i[n] West Coast Black Leather Poets […]. Good historian that she is, she threatens to dwell too much on the past at the expense of the present. As a result, some performances border on

being little more than exercises in nostalgia for the halcyon days of rock and roll.

(1976: 8)

For Gholson, Smith's engagement with influences evinced more her conservatism than her searches for inspiration. Far from a rebel, Smith was a scholar, one defined by nostalgia rather than progress. Others differed with this assessment, fixating on the experimental dimensions of her writing. Tony Glover put it most simply, writing that Smith's work was a kind of 'poetry that exists in equal partnership with the rhythm and sound of music' (Glover 1976: 52).

PATTI SMITH AND THE OCCULT

In the end, it becomes clear that PSG was eclectic, borrowing freely from high and low, past and present, art and pop. While this hybridity has attracted a good deal of attention, contemporary writers have paid less attention to the role of Smith's occult views in shaping her distinctive approach.

Period critics were actually more sensitive to the matter, fixating on what they perceived to be a uniquely mystical dimension in Smith's performances. Interpretations of the singer commonly made reference to the spiritual or the magical: Lester Bangs characterized her as a kind of 'angel' figure, Lisa Robinson called her 'The High Poetess of Rock and Roll' and John Rockwell dubbed her a 'rock and roll shaman' (Bangs 1974; Robinson 1975; Rockwell 1976: 85). In a 1977 concert review, Patrick Goldstein offers perhaps the most extensive appeal to the occult. Moved by a performance of PSG at New York's Bottom Line, Goldstein penned this fanciful account:

> When the band hits its stride […] one is struck by a blast of what Saul Bellow calls 'the ecstasy of consciousness' […]. Patti slinks in and out of the shifting spotlight, whirling like a dervish […]. This is no mere performance. As Patti crawls up the mike stand for 'Time is on My Side', hocking wads of phlegm, her glazed, mystic eyes darting over the footlights, we gasp for air, shaken by the momentum of abrupt madness, possessed not by some obscure literary text but by a genuine madwoman of Chaillot offering a fistful of debauchery, a lunatic harangue of disconnected images, a spasm of half-conscious incantations […]. For Patti, the stage is the scene of sympathetic magic […] a lease on life beyond the reality of life itself.
>
> (1977: 45)

Goldstein compares Smith to a 'dervish' and her performance to 'a scene of sympathetic magic'. By his account, the event was less a *concert* as such – that is, a public rendition of music. Rather, it was a kind of sacred rite, abounding with cultish properties.

It is easy to chalk up such flowery descriptions to critical zeal – especially when similar sentiments came from writers such as Bangs and Robinson, who were aggressively deploying their platforms to legitimate the nascent New York punk scene. Even so, Patti Smith herself attributed an enchanted quality to her work. Often, she did so via citation, peppering her lyrics and poems with allusions. The singer acknowledged this tendency explicitly, remarking of her 1972 poetry collection, 'if I didn't think so much of myself, I'd think I was a name dropper. You can read my book, *Seventh Heaven*, and who do you get out

of it? Edie Sedgwick, Marianne Faithful, Joan of Arc, Frank Sinatra' (McNeil and McCain 2006: 100).

While Smith frequently cites popular music artists as influences, religious figures also appear in her pantheon. More recently, she remarked that, 'as a young child I was very drawn to saints, whether it be Joan of Arc or St John or St Matthew. I (like) the feeling of different saints that watch over you' (Pullella 2012). Deborah Kennedy has demonstrated that such references are matched at a broader thematic level in Smith's work, with Christian spirituality constituting a persistent thread from the early 1970s to the present. As Kennedy notes, the singer 'brings to the hard-edged swearing world of rock and roll the yearning of a spiritual pilgrim […]. Patti Smith combines the roles of rebel and seeker' (2007: 39).

Smith's religious interests were eclectic, including not only mainstream Christianity but also influences from her upbringing as a Jehovah's Witness and her teenage fascination with Buddhism (Moore 1996: 53). As the singer noted, these religious themes played a formative role in her art from an early age: 'somebody once pointed out to me that I was a religious poet. I didn't even realize it. I do work on spiritual planes, like I have Egyptian Coptic visions, I try to commune with Rimbaud' (Green 1973: 22). This quotation also suggests that she did not confine her spiritual engagement to the realm of official doctrine. Indeed, Smith frequently engaged with people who were interested in alternative spiritual practices, including Satanism, magic and the occult. She pursued a close friendship with Harry Smith, an experimental filmmaker best known for compiling the 1952 *American Anthology of Folk Music*. Harry was also a key figure in the 1960s counterculture, and one who was fascinated with the occult. He studied a range of mystical traditions, from the shamanistic rituals of the Lummi Native American people to Alastair Crowley's Ordo Templi Orientis. It was Harry who served as the mystical advisor to Allen Ginsberg and the Fugs when they attempted to Exorcise the Pentagon through levitation – a protest against the Vietnam War that was eventually halted by the police (Sanders 2011: 266).

Cohabitating in the Chelsea Hotel soon after she moved to New York, the pair met frequently to discuss art and spirituality. During their time together, Harry taught Patti about alchemy, prompting her to draft an illustrated poem on the topic entitled 'Alchemical Roll Call' (Smith 2010: 277–78). Patti also briefly appears in Harry's film *Mahagonny* (begun in 1970 but not finished until 1980), a collaborative project involving work by Allen Ginsberg, Jonas Mekas and Robert Mapplethorpe. The film was intended to be played on a tetraptych screen to provide a 'mathematical analysis of Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass* expressed in terms of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht's opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (The Getty Institute 2002).

Mysticism also saturates Smith's formative years with the hard-edged artist Robert Mapplethorpe – best remembered for offering a frank look at homosexuality through photography. This relationship is somewhat well known, especially in the wake of the singer's lauded 2010 memoir, *Just Kids* (Smith). It is worth emphasizing the significance of the occult in their development:

> I would return home to find Robert in brown monk's cloth, a Jesuit robe he had found in a thrift store, poring over pamphlets on alchemy and magic. He asked me to bring him books slanted toward the occult […]. He grew interested in creating visual spells, which might serve to call up Satan, like one would a genie. He imagined if he could make a pact that

> accessed Satan's purest self, the self of the light, he would recognize a kindred soul, and that Satan would grant him fame and fortune.
>
> (Smith 2010: 117–18)

Mapplethorpe here links his career ambitions directly to the occult. Even as the pair was discovering the possibilities of urban life and attempting to break into the downtown avant-garde scene, Smith and Mapplethorpe never assumed that the city was drained of magical possibilities.

Smith's interest in magic inflected even her engagement with ostensibly secular culture. The singer cast an enchanted eye on all things. Her descriptions of pop music figures glistened with an equally magical tone. For example, Smith wrote a glowing review of Todd Rundgren, who reportedly inspired a transcendent experience: 'for one ecstatic moment you've gone beyond the point of pain into the realm of pure intellect […]. A kaleidoscoping view. Blasphemy even the gods smile on' (Smith 1973: 56–57). The singer frequently visited the homes and graves of artists and musicians, visiting the famed Père-Lachaise Cemetery and even resting in Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera's Casa Azul in an attempt to commune with them (Smith 2015: 224–28). Smith also made visits to jazz clubs in New York City, seeking out, as she described it, the

> hallowed ground of Birdland that had been blessed by John Coltrane, or the Five Spot on St. Mark's Place where Billie Holiday used to sing, where Eric Dolphy and Ornette Coleman opened the field of jazz like human can openers.
>
> (Smith 2010: 90)

Ultimately, then, Smith understood herself less to be a rocker *or* a poet, than a pilgrim in search of sacred magic.

OCCULT AESTHETICS

The evocation of the mystical, the enchanted and the blasphemous brings Patti Smith into the purview of the occult. The link between these concerns and art further situates her within a long tradition of artists who reached out to the unknown for inspiration, promising to reveal mystical wisdom through sensory experience.

Neil Nehring has recently offered a forceful take on Smith's work, calling attention to the complicated influence of modernist aesthetics on the singer and her critical champions (Nehring 2016). Indeed, the artist frequently evoked figures such as Rimbaud and Verlaine, and commentators often frame her work in terms of avant-garde or modernist ideas of artistic experimentation, autonomy and genius.

While such discussions have been productive, I want to emphasize a different strain of that tradition, one that provides a helpful framework for understanding Smith's music. The concept of modernism is often associated with hard-edged experimentalism or even scientific rigour. Even so, recent writers have called attention to figures such as Ezra Pound, Mary Butts and T. S. Eliot, who were also concerned with forms of mysticism, or who more generally blurred the lines between conventional rationality and its alternatives. Ultimately, this discussion has made room to consider the occult as force in art.

The occult is a complicated topic, with a long history and secondary literature (Wilson 2015). The relationship between reason and myth has been

widely remarked on in a number of studies of music (e.g. Ford and Reed 2018; Godwin 1996, 1987; Tomlinson 1994), aesthetic theory (e.g. Benjamin 2009; Hegel 1998) and society more generally (e.g. Adorno and Horkheimer 2007; Weber 1964). Most relevant here is the link between artistic style and occult practice. In one of the first major studies of the topic, Leon Surette argues that modernism was not a simple theory of forward progress. Rather, it harboured an occult notion of *palingenesis*, literally a backwards birth or 'rebirth; a death to the old life and a rebirth to a new, higher one' (Surette 1994: 15). In this sense, then, modernism included a complex admixture of rational 'scientific materialism' and 'the occult belief that myths represent a record of contact between mortals and the *au delà*' (Surette 1994: ix).

Surette understands this view to have two major sub-components: 1) a belief that the occult provides access to a 'noumenal' or hidden realm outside of conventional consciousness, and 2) a belief that access to this sphere is granted through initiation into 'the lives and teachings of enlightened individuals and of the communities of "seekers" after illumination' (Surette 1994: 14). In his 2015 study of the topic, John Bramble stresses the deliberately eclectic character of this community of seekers. Not only did occultists construct an alternate 'canon' by recourse to an assemblage of world religions, they also drew from contemporary writers, scholars, literary figures and cosmological theorists (Bramble 2015: 29–34). Given this fact, occult belief should not be understood to be anti-Christian or even anti-materialist per se, but simply following from an assumption that those were two paths to enlightenment situated among many others. In the end, then, the borders of the occult were deliberately porous, allowing for discovery, reevaluation and growth over time.

Leigh Wilson's more recent book *Modernism and Magic* (Wilson 2015) focuses directly on the aesthetic implications of this tradition. Wilson suggests that modernism was a theory for transcending the representational aspect of artworks:

> Aesthetic experimentation in modernity, the attempt, that is, to challenge representational practices in order to remake the world, can only work conceptually if it uses, relies on and has at its heart an idea of magic. […] [M]odernists engaged with contemporary occult practices because they offered the chance to rethink the meaning of mimesis, and that a consideration of this can reconfigure the relation between modernism and mimesis.
>
> (Wilson 2015: 12)

According to Wilson, modernists challenged mimetic representation – that is, they sought new approaches to art production freed of conventions rooted in the ideals of realism. Their motivation did not only stem from a strict interest in novelty or autonomy, but also from an occult desire to transform the world through sensory experience. Understood in this way, mimesis should evoke not a technique for photocopying reality, but a sense that, via the aesthetic, we might discern the magic locked within ordinary reality.

Ultimately, occult modernists sought an experience of palingenesis through aesthetic engagement. Just as mysticism was a process for uncovering traditions suppressed by modern rationality or dogma, many artists saw themselves as revealing that which was obscured by representational technique. Occultism was a practice of discovery, and also of rediscovery – a mode for uncovering possibilities lost beneath the sands of time.

Patti Smith might be understood in this spirit as an occult artist. Smith worked in a different context from the nineteenth-century literary modernists, instead seeking mystical impart in the world of popular music. But she carried on in similar vein, affirming the powers hidden within the musical conventions of her day. Turning towards rock and roll, Smith sought to unravel the sea of possibilities within the vernacular world. She searched for secrets in the underbelly of mid-century mass culture, the mysterious things lurking in New York City alleys, in the sound of a roaring Chevy Bel Air and a fuzz-drenched guitar riff.

In this sense, Smith's work points to the *noumenal* spirit of rock and roll, the mythical impart within the shell of popular culture. Heard through her ears, music swirls with magic. Smith dredged up subterranean content, the forgotten impart lurking inside an ostensibly disenchanted world. In this sense, the singer's engagement with retro rock and roll was a kind of musical *palingenesis*, using the past to be reborn – into a holy tradition populated as much by Wilson Pickett and Jimi Hendrix as Joan of Arc and Rimbaud.

This framework allows us to make interpretive in-roads into Smith's music. The singer's evocation of heroic figures was a search for the enlightened thinkers of popular culture. Smith uttered the names of poets and rock stars like invocations, calling out to a tradition of forgotten oracles. Similarly, the retro aspects of her work functioned as gestures of sonic transubstantiation. Rendered through the forms, timbres and rhythms of the midcentury United States, Smith attempted to unleash the occult dimensions shrouded within the spirit of rock and roll. Revealing lost sonorities, she reached back into the past as an act of palingenesis. PSG thus transformed performances into initiations, using pastiche, re-composition and deformation as tools to reach out towards the beyond.

Productively, the idea of occult aesthetics helps us assert the centrality of Smith's less hard-edged numbers such as 'Birdland', 'Elegie' and 'Ghost Dance', tunes that have always been something of an ill fit for standard theories of punk. Given that punk artists (and critics) have often privileged aggression, anger and a kill-your-idols attitude, these songs have come to occupy an implicitly feminized role in punk history. But PSG's meditative works, while often lacking a snot-nosed edge, still functioned as parallel modes of musical recall. Moreover, they did so in a novel fashion compared to Smith's peers in the CBGBs circuit, who tended towards kitschy amateurism (e.g. the Ramones, the Dictators) or more aggressive forms of experimentation (e.g. Television, Suicide). Smith performed an occult version of punk – one that centred provenance, meditation and contemplative remembrance.

In a similar vein, we may consider Smith's poetic works, which often appeared as readings or improvisations during her concerts, as with the introduction to her show on 27 December 1975 at The Bottom Line – probably PSG's most collected bootleg. More than moments of respite or deviations from the norm, these moments transfigured concerts into ritualistic experiences. Their presence functioned, as an enthusiastic Patrick Goldstein noted, to set the stage for a 'scene of sympathetic magic'.

This context even inflects how we might hear Smith's more distinctively retro work. I want to finally turn to 'Land'. As noted previously, 'Land of 1000 Dances' is an icon of the 1960s, a testament to the complex musical, social and racial circumstances of popular music during the era (Savage 2015: 237–79).

Chris Kenner had released the first iteration of the tune in 1962, but it was also well known in versions by Pickett, Cannibal and the Headhunters, Little Richard and the Action.

The song is a paean to the teenage dance phenomenon surrounding figures like Chubby Checker and Dick Clark, mentioning by name 'the Twist', 'the Alligator' and 'the Mashed Potato'. Musically, the tune is simple, built around a basic chord vamp. It breaks only for a simple *a capella* chorus – the 'na-na-na' section introduced by Cannibal and the Headhunters on their 1965 version. On a deeper level, the song lyrically celebrates the accessible, democratic nature of popular music. Rattling off the names of familiar dances, the text demonstrates the collective character of rock as a social practice. This shared experience is further enacted in musical fashion with a call-and-response chorus, demonstrating the deep social interplay of the tune. Not only beloved, then, the number is a musical invitation into a kind of collectivity, welcoming the listener into the affective power of rock and roll groove. Patti Smith just gave it a push, transforming the call into a more robust invitation.

PSG began regularly performing 'Land' after May of 1974, as they were crystalizing into a three piece with Lenny Kaye and Richard Sohl. In that period, they often performed 1960s rock classics, including 'Hey Joe' and Motown/Soul numbers such as Smokey Robinson's 'The Hunter Gets Captured by the Game', The Midnighters' 'Let's Go, Let's Go, Let's Go' and The Quin-Tones' 'Down the Aisle of Love'. Song choices even went beyond golden age rock and roll, including Kurt Weill's 'Mack the Knife' from his 1928 *Threepenny Opera* and the blues tune 'I'm Wild About That Thing', most famous for a 1929 recording by Bessie Smith.

Many PSG covers from this period do little by way of alteration, stripping them down for a simpler ensemble but otherwise following the lyrical and harmonic plan of the source. Take 'The Hunter Gets Captured by the Game', a Smokey Robinson-penned hit for The Marvelettes (later recorded by Robinson himself and also Blondie, for their 1982 album *The Hunter*). On a bootleg from a 1974 Max's Kansas City show, the performance features a basic keyboard accompaniment outlining the harmonic and rhythmic content of the original; Smith sings the text unaltered. Even at these early gigs, 'Land' was unique. During that same Max's concert, PSG performs the song with extensive new textual and musical material, expanding Pickett's two-minute-and-change version to over six minutes. By 1975, when the group recorded *Horses*, live renditions of the tune typically sprawled to more than four times the original length.

THE SEA OF POSSIBILITIES

In its final form, 'Land' is a musical suite comprised of three sections: 'Horses', 'Land of 1000 Dances' and 'La Mer (De)'. The first part functions as an extensive introduction, formally and lyrically unrelated to older versions of the song. A dramatic episode, it tells the story of a character identified only as Johnny. Cornered in the hallway of a school by another boy, Johnny is chased, thrown against a locker and stabbed repeatedly with a knife. Although Smith gives little by way of concrete details, the vignette has all of the trappings of a 1950s teenage rebellion film (e.g. the dramatic knife fights of the 1955 films *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Blackboard Jungle*).

The musical setting does little to reinforce its textual imagery. Kaye opens with an open power chord (E5), played as a series of churning eighth notes.

The mood vaguely resembles the opening of the Pickett version, which is also relatively static. Here, Lenny Kaye's accent gently implies a backbeat, further hinting at the characteristic emphasis on two and four that would be expected of a rock tune. Kaye has explained that many numbers such as 'Gloria' started out as simple jams constructed around what he terms 'fields', basic chord vamps above which Smith would 'chant, poeticize and tell stories' (Heylin 2005: 133). We see a similar effect, a wash of sound that provides a musical backdrop for the episode. It is via the gradual accrual of layers – first guitar, then piano and finally drumset – that the song builds tension. By the time we reach the end of introduction and Smith begins chanting 'horses', the atmosphere hums with muted ferocity.

This introduction is more straightforward than what follows: a lengthy series of verses and bridges that fade into each other. The most significant formal shift separating the introduction from these later episodes is a driving, rhythmic accompaniment. Over a basic groove, the ensemble plays a simple three-chord progression (I-bVII-IV), hammered out by bass, drums and piano. On the studio recording, the bridges are somewhat distinctive moments of solace, where the intensity of the song ebbs (typically with the guitar shifting from full-blown chordal accompaniment to muted strumming). Many live versions leave the two effectively indistinguishable. In either case, sections are difficult to differentiate. The lyrics change, but the accompaniment never strays from the core harmonic pattern. Meanwhile, the song flows between points of tension and release, the basic verse-chorus template of rock and roll obscured as if we encounter momentary points of confusion and clarity.

Once the body begins, lyrics stray quickly from 'Rock and Roll High School' towards the occult. Even before he is stabbed, Johnny's perception of reality starts to blur. His pursuer begins to 'merge' with the hallway, transformed into a 'rhythm' as if the line separating sonic perception and matter begins to dissolve. When the knife strikes home, Johnny begins to hallucinate as his consciousness separates from his body. He is swept up in a tirade of charging horses, 'white shining silver studs with their nose in flames'.

Smith first introduces the classic text over her initial verse. This marks the beginning of the section 'Land of 1000 Dances'. As expected, the presentation follows the original closely, with minor variations:

> Do you know how to pony
> like Bony Moronie.
> Do you know how to twist
> well it goes like this, it goes like this.

Gradually, these lyrics bleed into a fabric of conflicting ideas. Johnny departs his body, and we encounter a range of images assembled into a non-linear narrative: angels appear, Smith evokes Rimbaud, we pass through a darkened forest, observe the Tower of Babel and finally arrive above a sea with waves churning like 'Arabian stallions'.

This last set of references occurs in a third bridge, ostensibly signalling the 'La Mer (De)' section of the song. Lyrically, this section is constructed around wordplay, using images of *la Mer* ('the sea'), a *mare* and *Merde* ('death'). This moment does not drastically separate itself formally, continuing to follow the basic structure presented earlier. The sole index of this change is a shift in accompaniment. The rhythm section peels back, making room for muted

guitar strums and soft piano hits that outline the chord progression. It is the most static point, the eye of the musical storm.

From here, the band gradually builds to a finale of sorts. In this moment, distinctions between verse and bridge become even less clear. The rhythm section begins its cycle of growth again: first guitar, followed by bass and then drums, growing louder as they vamp through the core progression. With a return to the primary lyrics ('do the Watusi!'), the song builds in intensity towards a meteoric conclusion. Many live performances of the song segue directly into 'Gloria', as in Smith's 27 December 1975 Bottom Line show. Featuring a snarled chant of the signature 'Gloria, G-L-O-R-I-A' chorus, this elision creates the effect of triumphal arrival. On *Horses*, 'Land' maintains the quasi-symphonic pacing of live performances, but the finale is less emphatic. Rather, we experience a long, gradual fadeout. Kaye strums muted open strings, while Smith's voice is overdubbed in layers. The music seems to drift back in the direction of reality, but not quite the same one that we occupied before.

In the end, 'Land' performs the dissolution of the boundary separating the noumenal and phenomenal. It functions as an occult imitation, enacted through song. Constructing a pantheon of enchanted figures and visionary images, Smith invites us to transcend our everyday consciousness. Meanwhile, her band guides the listener along the journey. We arrive back at our place of origin, transformed, enlightened by our engagement with the occult.

Smith guides us there through a collection of idiosyncratic metaphor and allusion. Her sources include not only the conventional stuff of occult tradition – the assemblage of religious orthodoxy and apocrypha that defined mystical practice in the nineteenth century – but also the vernacular of midcentury United States. Moreover, this process occurs not only in the realm of imagery, but also at the level of form. PSG fractures and reassembles the stuff of post-war popular culture, finding the magic stored in the conventions of golden age of rock and roll. Stretching the simplest chords and rhythms, the group transforms their material into a device for large-scale musical (and spiritual) motion.

In so doing, Smith elevates her sources, aesthetic and textual alike, to the level of occult wisdom. 'Land' performs a form of musical palingenesis, crafting a 'scene of sympathetic magic' through which we can be reborn. It functions as a rejection of the idea that our world is drained of power. Rather, the popular still glows at the edges, nestled beside a vast sea of possibilities. The neighbouring land bristles with enchantment, and Smith beckons us to follow.

REFERENCES

Adorno, Theodor W. and Horkheimer, Max (2007), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Bangs, Lester (1974), 'Sulky angel: The poetry of Patti Smith', *Creem*, February, pp. 30–31.

—— (1988), *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung: The Work of a Legendary Critic: Rock 'N' Roll as Literature and Literature as Rock 'N' Roll*, New York: Anchor.

Benjamin, Walter (2009), *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, New York: Verso.

Bramble, John (2015), *Modernism and the Occult*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cizek-Graf, Georg (2019), 'The Patti Smith setlists', Patti Smith Log Book, June 19, http://setlists.pattismithlogbook.info. Accessed 25 March 2019.

Daley, Mike (1998), 'Patti Smith's "Gloria": Intertextual play in a rock vocal performance', *Popular Music*, 16:3, pp. 235–53.
Dettmar, Kevin J. H. (2005), *Is Rock Dead?*, New York: Routledge.
Ford, Phil and Reed, S. Alexander (2018), 'Introduction: The musicological occult, or show us the dragons', *Journal of Musicological Research*, 37:1, pp. 1–4.
Gendron, Bernard (2002), *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
The Getty Institute (2002), 'Harry Smith's film #18, Mahagonny', The Getty Institute, May 23, http://www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions_events/events/mahagonny.html. Accessed 25 March 2019.
Gholson, Craig (1976), 'Patti Smith', *N.Y. Rocker*, February, p. 8.
Gibbs, Alvin (1996), *Destroy: The Definitive History of Punk*, London: Britannia Press.
Glover, Tony (1976), 'Sweet howling fire', *Creem*, January, pp. 37–39, 74–76.
Godwin, Joscelyn (1987), *Harmonies of Heaven and Earth: Mysticism in Music from Antiquity to the Avant-Garde*, Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions.
—— (1996), *Music and the Occult: French Musical Philosophies, 1750–1950*, Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.
Goldstein, Patrick (1977), 'Patti Smith: Rock 'n' roll pandora unleashes violence and mayhem', *Creem*, March, pp. 42–45, 67–69.
Green, Penny (1973), 'Patti Smith', *Interview*, October, pp. 22–23.
Hegel, Georg W. F. (1998), *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. I, rev. ed., New York: Oxford University Press.
Henry, Tricia (1990), *Break All Rules: Punk Rock and the Making of a Style*, Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press.
Heylin, Clinton (2005), *From the Velvets to the Voidoids: The Birth of American Punk Rock*, Chicago: Chicago Review Press.
Kane, Daniel (2003), *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
—— (2012), '"Nor did I socialize with their people": Patti Smith, rock heroics and the poetics of sociability', *Popular Music*, 31:1, pp. 105–23.
—— (2017), *Do You Have a Band? Poetry and Punk Rock in New York City*, New York: Columbia University Press.
Kennedy, Deborah (2007), 'Looking for you: Patti Smith, God and rock and roll', in P. S. Rudden (ed.), *Singing for Themselves: Essays on Women in Popular Music*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 39–55.
Marcus, Greil (2009), *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
McNeil, Legs and McCain, Gillian (2006), *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk*, rpt., New York: Grove Press.
Moore, Thurston (1996), 'Patti Smith', *Bomb*, 24, Winter, pp. 50–53.
Nehring, Neil (2016), 'Patti Smith and modernism: The problem with dandies', *Rock Music Studies*, 3:3, pp. 233–47.
New Musical Express (2014), 'Patti Smith's my first gig: Desecrating a church with electric guitar', *New Musical Express*, June 12, http://www.nme.com/news/patti-smith-s-my-first-gig-desecrating-a-church-wi-594306. Accessed 25 March 2019.
Noland, Carrie Jaurès (1995), 'Rimbaud and Patti Smith: Style as social deviance', *Critical Inquiry*, 21:3, Spring, pp. 581–610.
Palmer, Robert (1978), 'The punks have only rediscovered rockabilly: Punk and rockabilly', *The New York Times*, 23 April, p. D19.

Paytress, Mark (2011), *Patti Smith's Horses and the Remaking of Rock 'n' Roll*, rpt., London: Piatkus Books.
Pullella, Philip (2012), 'Punk "godmother" Patti Smith pays homage to St. Francis in Assisi', Reuters, 25 July, https://www.reuters.com/article/entertainment-us-italy-pattismith/punk-godmother-patti-smith-pays-homage-to-st-francis-in-assisi-idUSBRE86O18Q20120725. Accessed 25 March 2019.
Reynolds, Simon (2011), *No Future: Punk's Reactionary Roots and Retro Aftermath, in Retromania – Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*, New York: Faber & Faber.
Robbins, Michael (2017), *Equipment for Living: On Poetry and Pop Music*, New York: Simon & Schuster.
Robinson, Lisa (1975), 'The high poetess of rock 'n' roll', *New Musical Express*, 12 April, pp. 16–17.
Rockwell, John (1976), 'Patti Smith: Shaman in a Land of a Thousand Dances', *Rolling Stone*, 12 February, pp. 85–86.
Sanders, Ed (2011), *Fug You: An Informal History of the Peace Eye Bookstore, the Fuck You Press, the Fugs and Counterculture in the Lower East Side*, Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.
Savage, Jon (2015), *1966: The Year the Decade Exploded*, London: Faber & Faber LTD.
Shank, Barry (2014), *The Political Force of Musical Beauty*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Shaw, Philip (2008), *Patti Smith's Horses*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
Smith, Patti (1973), 'Todd's electric exploitation: Rock and roll for the skull', *Creem*, April, pp. 56–57.
—— (2010), *Just Kids*, New York: Harper Collins.
—— (2015), *M Train*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
Surette, Leon (1994), *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats and the Occult*, rev. ed., Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
Tomlinson, Gary (1994), *Music in Renaissance Magic: Toward a Historiography of Others*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Valentine, Gary (2006), *New York Rocker: My Life in the Blank Generation with Blondie, Iggy Pop and Others, 1974–1981*, New York: Da Capo Press.
Waksman, Steve (2009), *This Ain't the Summer of Love: Conflict and Crossover in Heavy Metal and Punk*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
Weber, Max (1964), *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, New York: Free Press.
Wilson, Leigh (2015), *Modernism and Magic: Experiments with Spiritualism, Theosophy and the Occult*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Ervin, J. P. (2019), '"I hold the key to the sea of possibilities": Patti Smith Group and the occult', *Punk & Post-Punk,* 8:3, pp. 423–37, doi: 10.1386/punk_00007_1

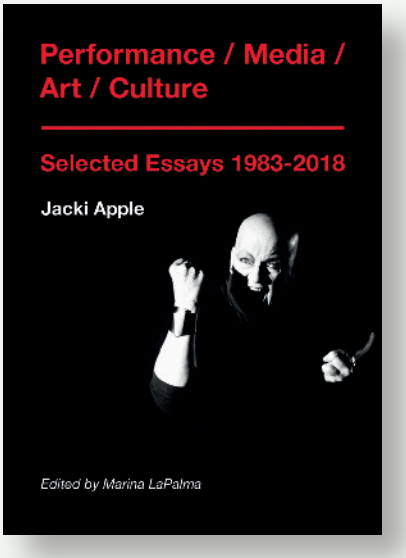
CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Jarek Paul Ervin's writing explores a broad range of issues, including punk music history and analysis; philosophy of art and aesthetic theory; gender and sexuality studies; Marxism, politics and social theory; and political pedagogy. He is presently working on two books: *Pull Down the Future: New*

York Punk in the 1970s, a study of the famed early US punk movement in its first decade, and *Marxist Aesthetic Theory: An Overview*, a survey of canonic as well as forgotten writers from the lengthy, contentious tradition of historical materialist aesthetics. Ervin's shorter publications have appeared with a range of popular press and academic platforms, including *Popular Music & Society*, *Popular Music*, *Jacobin*, *Enviro-History* and *The Baffler*, as well as on his website, jarekpaulervin.com. At present, he teaches music history and theory courses at Temple University.

Contact: Department of Music Studies, Temple University, 2001 North 13th Street, Philadephia, PA 19122, USA.
E-mail: tua43104@temple.edu

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1645-7086



Performance / Media / Art / Culture

Selected Essays 1983-2018

By Jacki Apple | Edited by Marina LaPalma

Experience the interdisciplinary performance scene of the 1980s and beyond through the eyes of one of its most compelling witnesses. Jacki Apple's *Performance / Media / Art / Culture* traces performance art, multimedia theatre, audio arts and dance in the United States from 1983 to the present. Showcasing 35 years of Apple's critical essays and reviews, the collection explores the rise and diversification of intermedia performance; how new technologies (or rehashed old technologies) influence American culture and contemporary life; the interdependence of pop and performance culture; and the politics of art and the performance of politics.

ISBN 978-1-78938-085-9
272 pp | £28, $37
Paperback | Fall 2019
244 x 170 mm
E-book available