

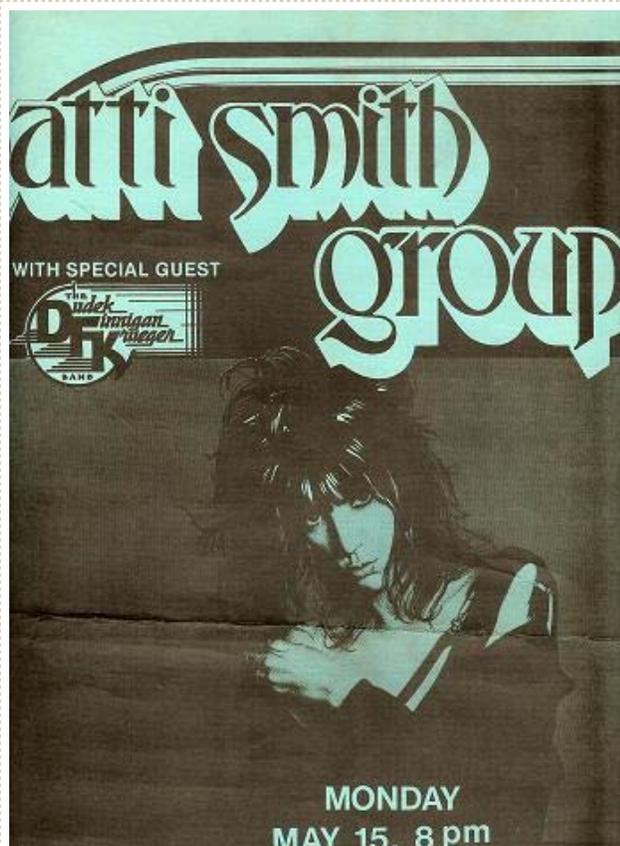
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News Archives.

September 21, 2009

It's Too Late

As the only member of my southern San Diego bordertown's Class of '78 who was a card-carrying member of the Patti Smith fan club, I waited for Patti's vanishingly rare appearance in America's Finest City with the giddiness of an Opus Dei insider waiting for a papal audience.



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ALL SEATS RESERVED \$7.50

Poster from May 16, 1978 Patti Smith concert, San Diego, CA.
Author's collection.

In one of rock history's weirder harmonic convergences, the opening act for Patti's May 16, 1978 date at San Diego's California Theatre—a down-at-the-heel 1920's music hall hard by the transient hotels and tattoo parlors of the city's tenderloin—was Dixie rocker Les Dudek.

An hour or so before showtime, Patti materialized onstage, peering balefully into the auditorium. Les Dudek had cancelled, she growled, in a deader-than-deadpan New York accent that withered everything on contact. "If you got a problem with that, you can get your money back. But you gotta leave now. In the *light*. So I can *see* you. So I can see how much *money* I'm losin'." No one moved. Patti turned on her heel and, with an air of fuck-you-very-much satisfaction, disappeared through the slit in the stage curtains.

To fill the opening act-sized hole left by Les Dudek's unlamented departure, Patti introduced a last-minute replacement: "the guy who taught me how to write poetry," a lank-haired stick insect of a man whose skin was so luminously pale it seemed to glow. His name was Jim Carroll and this, I would later learn, was his first live reading with a rock band.

Carroll was a blur in my peripheral vision, one more frustrating delay before the Main Event. Near the end of Patti's set, she clambered off the stage, still singing, and walked up the theater's center aisle, bathed in the incandescent aura of the spotlight that followed her. Now. This was the time. Pushing my way down the row I'd been sitting in, I stepped into the aisle, face to face with Patti, and handed her a sheaf of poems I'd written, in my adolescent mind—a mind not unduly burdened by false modesty—a Work of Soul-Crushing Beauty and Manifest Genius, straight from the brow of Chula Vista's blown-dry Rimbaud. Patti accepted my tribute, blankly, and made her way back to the stage.

I waited for weeks that lengthened into months for the response I was convinced would come, an invitation—written in Patti's sprawling hand, on Radio Ethiopia stationery—to join the other pomaded loveboys in her East Village seraglio, there to languish in an opium-eaters' haze, like the dissolute bohemians in Nicholas Roeg's *Performance*, to sleep, perchance to dream, maybe even to star in the remake of *Robert Having His Nipple Pierced* as an after-school special. Crushingly, it never came, leaving me marooned in the cultural wastelands of '70s San Diego, where mullets ruled and ZZ Top's "Le Grange" jockeyed with Loggins & Messina's "Vahevala" for FM-radio supremacy.

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"I have always been a voracious reader of what I term 'invisible literature'—market research reports, sex manuals, medical textbooks...By comparison with this, most writers have nothing of interest to say whatever, and an hour spent not reading them is an hour gained forever." —J.G. Ballard

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Media criticism. (Title courtesy [Ant Farm.](#))

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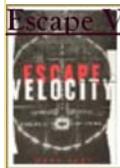
Years later, after I'd moved to NYC and passed through an ill-advised but mercifully brief-lived phase as a Jim Carroll impersonator on New York's Lower East Side performance-poetry circuit, Jim and I would meet again, over margaritas, to speak of the Gnostic gospels and Catholicism and Bukowski and Catholicism and Hassan I Sabbah, founder of the cult of the assassins, and Catholicism, and Michael Jackson, unbelievably enough, and watching a cat eat a bird at the legendary Chateau Marmont in Los Angeles. And Catholicism. Speaking of which, how is punk rock like the Stations of the Cross? Answer: "I said it on the Tom Snyder show when my first album came out, that punk rock is just like the Stations of the Cross. What could be more punk than this guy getting a crown of thorns, being scourged, carrying a cross up a mountain and being crucified?"

Read "Words I Want Carved on My Tomb: Jim Carroll, R.I.P.," my meditation on Carroll's passing [here](#), at *Mother Jones* magazine.

Read my 1984 interview with Carroll [here](#).

Posted by Mark Dery at 04:04 PM | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack](#)

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