

STYLE

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Patti Smith's eye for fashion

Fashionistas embrace Patti Smith as a kindred spirit, which may come as a surprise to many of her fans

BY RUTH LA FERLA
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Necks craned for a glimpse of Patti Smith as she settled at her customary corner table at Da Silvano in Greenwich Village, a favorite afternoon haunt, earlier this month. The wonder was that the patrons, silver haired and sleekly buffed, could pick her out at all. Smith was understated, even self-effacing in her mannish jacket, boater shirt and beat-up jeans. Watching her sip hot water and lemon, you could easily have mistaken her for one of any number of androgynous downtown hipsters adopting skinny jeans and boyfriend coats as a low-key urban armor.

Was she trying to merge with the scenery? Smith shrugged, noncommittal. "My style says 'Look at me, don't look at me,'" she said, a hint of testiness ruffling her easy composure. "It's, 'I don't care what you think.'"

So it was surprising to learn that her roomy gray jacket, with cuffs that unfasten at the wrist, was designed by Ann Demeulemeester, a high priestess of Parisian vanguard chic. Her jeans were Ralph Lauren, prized by Smith for their racy lines. Her boots, a gift from Johnny Depp, who wore them as the Mad Hatter in *Alice in Wonderland*, were the perfect fit, Smith exulted, "like when the magic cobbler made your shoes."

She has a rarefied feel for that kind of evocative detail — no stray seam escaping her scrutiny. That might stun her fans, who think of Smith as a gnarly rocker, thrashing and howling soulfully on stage. But style-world insiders embrace her as a kindred spirit whose discerning eye and sensitive fashion antennas might be the envy of a veteran stylist. Smith's look, after all, is nothing if not rehearsed.

"She is very aware of her style and she controls it," said Demeulemeester, a longtime friend and fashion collaborator. (Smith favors the designer's mannish white shirts, inspired by the one she wore on the cover of her debut album, *Horses*.) "It's about being conscious of who you are and using all the strength you have to communicate that."

Back in the public eye, if indeed she ever left it, with a best-selling memoir and a series of concerts that promise to burnish her legend, Smith is the same deft communicator — and, not less, the canny custodian of her own image. In conversation she was gracious, even genteel, giving no sign of the trash-talking provocateur who dropped explicit sexual references into magazine profiles when she was at the height of her career, and peppered her comments with expletives.

Yet from time to time, a certain flintiness took over. "The thing I've always liked about performing," she said, storm clouds gathering in her eyes, "is that I decide what I want to wear, whether I want to comb my hair. No one ever told me what to do, and no one tells me now."

At 63, she has hung on to that resolve, sloughing off layers that strike her as inauthentic or alien to the character she crafted in the 1970s, as the gangly diva of downtown punk.

"Even as a child, I knew what I didn't want," Smith recalled. "I didn't want to wear red lipstick. When my mother would say, 'You should shave your legs,' I would ask, 'Why?' I didn't understand why we had to present a different picture of ourselves to the outside world."

A star attraction at iconic events like the final night of CBGB, the fabled Bowery club where she performed as a girl, and at a string of public outings throughout the past decade, she has cleaved to her signature style, an unlikely fusion of glamour and grit. In her raffish T-shirts and boy coats, in concert she is the anti Gaga, rejecting gaudy, serial costume changes, refusing to bend with every shift in fashion's wind.

That constancy has made Smith a trendsetter for several generations — how many young girls emulate her look of pegged jeans, boyfriend jackets and white shirts without ever realizing it? And her style resonates with designers as diverse as



Punk-rock icon Patti Smith cultivated a fashion eye as a child by studying movies and photographs of movie stars and models. PHOTO: EPA

Christophe Decarnin of Balmain and Limi Yamamoto of Limi Feu, for whom Smith has been a kind of spiritual muse. "The capacity to accept anything that happens to her," Yamamoto said recently, is a source of constant inspiration.

Smith has filled out over the years, no longer the lanky consort of Robert Mapplethorpe, the taboo-smashing photographer she memorializes in *Just Kids* (Ecco/HarperCollins), her lyrical tale of coming of age in Manhattan. She is youthful just the same, fresher and more alluring than she appeared in recent photos, her turnout more artfully calibrated than her stage persona would suggest.

Her abiding passions are reflected in her style, a thoughtful pastiche modeled on her cultural heroes. At any time, it may owe a debt to the Harris tweed jackets she spied on a couple at the Metropolitan Museum, to Veruschka, the 1960s runway Amazon, or to vintage Keith Richards and John Lennon. She combed shops for months in search of the striped linen trousers that evoked Lennon because, she said, "something in those pants spoke to me of myself."

She likes to knot her white shirts at the waist in homage to Ava Gardner. Her stringy men's ties are a simultaneous nod to Frank Sinatra and Bob Dylan. Like the beat-up biker jackets she hunted down long ago in thrift shops on the Bowery, they are totems.

Smith, who dropped out of college at 20, cultivated a fashion eye by studying movies like *Funny Face*, and photographs of movie stars in Photoplay and of models in 1950s Sears catalogs. She encountered high fashion at 7 when she chanced on a cache of discarded *Vogues* and *Harper's Bazaars*. "At home we couldn't afford them," she said.

"I remember a lot of Penn photographs," she said. "His wife was so elegant," she said, referring to Lisa Fonssagrives. "I was very moved by that."

At the time, fashion magazines "were such a window into the culture," she added wistfully. "There would be a spread on Morocco, another on what to wear to a fox hunt. I studied those pages all through the 1960s. I became very knowledgeable."

She refined her expertise, combing a Salvation Army store in Camden, New Jersey, near her home. The shop, a dumping ground for the castoffs of the rich, was filled with high-end labels, some that made their way into her closet.

In high school Smith thought nothing of wearing used Dior dresses or pink shantung capri pants with a Kelly green raincoat in honor of Audrey Hepburn. Smith waxed nostalgic describing Hepburn in *Funny Face*. "She was the beatnik girl in the bookstore who wants to go to Paris. That was me at the time."

Nor did she mask her effusive romanticism. "People wouldn't know this about me, but I adore ball gowns," she said. "I love their cut, their architecture and the thought of the hands of so many seamstresses working on them."

Steven Sebring, who followed Smith with a camera for his 2008 documentary, *Patti Smith: Dream of Life*, caught her

surly defiance when he photographed her in a floor-length Dior evening dress that was steamily laced up the sides.

"There's a chicness about her," he said. "She had the authority to pull it off."

She can swan like a high-strung society diva. And she was glimpsed during New York Fashion Week at a Chado Ralph Rucci show, mingling with uptown stalwarts like Amy Fine Collins and Martha Stewart. Last month, in a concert at Milk Studios, she dedicated her final song, *Because of the Night*, to Alexander McQueen, who took his own life last month. "I just wanted to send some positive energy into his continuing travels," she explained.

Yet her wayward appearance has drawn scorn and, on occasion, hostility. She writes in *Just Kids* of giving birth at 19, only to be sneered at by hospital nurses, who called her "Dracula's daughter." Stung years later at being dismissively described by one of Andy Warhol's gatekeepers as a ringer for Joan Baez, she sheared off her shoulder-length waves, as she writes, "machete-ing my way out of the folk era."

Reactions to that peremptory gesture impressed her. "Though I was still the same person," she recalls in the book, "my social status was suddenly elevated. My Keith Richards haircut was a real discourse magnet. I miraculously turned androgynous overnight."

Nighttime excursions to Max's Kansas City, a societal mixing bowl for artists, actors and slumming politicians, found her, she writes, dressing "like an extra preparing for a shot in a French New Wave film."

She sifted, accordingly, through her skimpy repertoire of striped boating shirts and red kerchiefs "like Yves Montand in *Wages of Fear*, or the long black sweater, black tights, white socks and Capezio's, that were my take on Audrey Hepburn in *Funny Face*."

She gathers references with a magpie eye; they serve in the book as mnemonic triggers, taking her back to the gritty carnival that was St Marks Place in the early 1970s, the cramped, art-strewn quarters she shared with Mapplethorpe at the Chelsea Hotel, and the coveted round table in the back room at Max's, once home to Andy Warhol and his entourage.

In those days she took to giving fanciful names to her outfits. There was her *Song of the South* get-up: straw hat, Br'er Rabbit jacket, work boots and pegged pants; the "tennis player in mourning," a black-on-black ensemble accessorized for evening with white Keds; and her Anna Karina in "Bande a part": dark sweater, plaid skirt, black tights and flats.

Never averse to role-playing, she reveled in those costumes: they were meant, after all, to render her unforgettable. Posing for a photograph for her friend Judy Linn, Smith lighted a Kool, hoping, as she writes, that it would lend her a bit of professional swagger.

"I know I'm a fake smoker," she confided to Linn, "but I'm not hurting anybody and besides I gotta enhance my image."

Yet she she's no actress, Smith insists. "I have neither the discipline nor the desire to turn into someone else."

Superstition and a kind of stubborn pragmatism guide her sartorial decisions. For tours, she said: "I pack lighter than anyone else in the band. I only bring what I can wash in the sink." And she wears the same garments over and over, "because for me they become emblematic of a certain tour."

She makes no secret of scanning jewelry and clothing for signs and portents. "To me these things are talismans," she said, her fingers brushing the 200-year-old Ethiopian cross that dangles at her throat. "This cross is something I hold on to when I'm singing." Though she lost her husband, the rock guitarist Fred Smith, in 1994, she still wears her wedding band — "one of my most precious possessions."

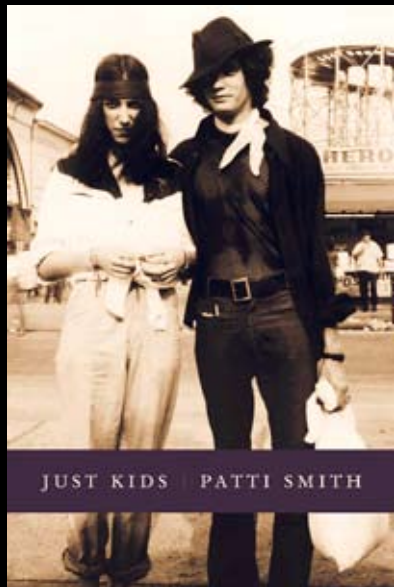
Admirers find her disheveled look alluring. Such observations seem to please her. Gaunt and bony as a girl, she was told by a fawning Salvador Dali, "You are like a gothic crow."

Yet in the sunlight streaming from a corner window, her features were soft, even seductive. Calculated sultriness has never factored into her fashion equation, however.

"I like to be comfortable," she said evenly. "Sex has never been my thing. I just wanted to feel like myself."



Clockwise from top: Patti Smith performs during the 2009 Jisan Valley Rock Festival in Icheon, South Korea; the cover of Smith's new book *Just Kids*; Smith poses with a feather in Paris in 1969. PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG AND EPA



JUST KIDS | PATTI SMITH