



Horses

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Described as the perfect fusion of poetry and garage band rock and roll (the original concept was "rock and Rimbaud"), *Horses* belongs as much to the world of literary and cultural criticism as it does to the realm of musicology. While *Horses* pays homage to the record's origins in the nascent New York punk scene, the book's core lies in a detailed analysis of Patti Smith's lyrics and includes discussions of lyrical preoccupations: love, sex, gender, death, dreams, god, metamorphosis, intoxication, apocalypse and transcendence. Philip Shaw demonstrates how *Horses* transformed the possibilities of both poetry and rock music; and how it achieved nothing less than a complete and systematic derangement of the senses.

Horses Details

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Richard says

These 33& 1/3 books are as addictive as--well But they are uneven affairs. Some of them are extremely most tedious subjective appreciations masquerading as "creative" writing. Others are solid and well researched. Shaw's book on the great Patti Smith album falls mostly into the latter category. But, unfortunately, Mr. Shaw discovered Lacan and Kristeva in graduate school and acts as if his armchair psychoanalysis might actually interest someone without a Ph.D

Since I have a Ph.D, I can say that despite his trying to be the village explainer (good if you were a village, but if not, not---as Stein said of Pound)--Patti Smith's masterpiece survives his exegesis, and because of his historical and biographical information and decent bibliography I feel that I got my money's worth.

Frank Jude says

The 33 1/3 series from Bloombury Publishing has produced a series of over 100 books (so far) detailing the context (personal, historical, cultural) of mostly "landmark" albums such as *Bitches Brew*, *Parallel Lines*, *Marquee Moon*, *Unknown Pleasures* and *Pet Sounds* as well as albums that may not have had huge popularity, but did have huge cultural impact such as *Trout Mask Replica* and then others that are more quirky personal favorites of the authors involved. Along with the historical narrative, each book gives a mostly song by song critical analysis.

I picked up *Horses* about the making of Patti Smith's 1975 debut at the Sub Pop store in the Seattle airport. It's a bit confounding to me that this album that is 22-years old sounds like it could have been recorded yesterday, it's that fresh and relevant! Happily, I can say this about most of my favorite albums and is telling when held up against albums like *Meet The Beatles* (my first LP buy with my own money!) which, though cool sounds like the time it was made.

I've a confession: while all my female friends were in absolute awe and love of Patti and this album at the time of its release, I didn't fully get it. I totally LOVED the opening with the bass/piano ostinato over which she sang the still-unsettling, confrontational AND liberating "Jesus died for somebody's sins but not mine / Meltin' in a pot of thieves / Wild card up my sleeve / Thick heart of stone / My sins my own, they belong to me." And I liked the more "song-like" "Kimberly," "Redondo Beach," "Break It Up" with Tom Verlaine's vertiginous lead guitar and the poignant closing "Elegie." But I just didn't get the two long centerpieces of the LP, "Birdland" and "Land," both just over nine-minutes each.

Between not being able to make out many of the words and the non-linear narratives, compounded by the imagistic poetics, I was lost. So, though I bought the album, I didn't listen to it as much or as deeply as I listened to an album like *Blank Generation* or *The Velvet Underground and Nico* for instance.

This book, by Philip Shaw was eye-opening to me. He connects the dots from Smith's poetry, inspired by Rimbaud and Baudelaire as well as her enthrallment with Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix' early deaths, through her alignment with the Beats as well as her familial relationships and her drive towards transcendent spirituality influenced by her growing up a Jehovah's Witness and listening to the album today was simply revelatory!

If you already love the album, I think you'll love this book. If you were confused by the album or actively didn't like it, I think this book will be as revelatory to you as to me. Over 40-years on, as Philip Shaw writes:

Patti Smith enters into the realm of the simple present. It is a moment of pure indulgence, a temporary, yet, for me, vital suspension of the drive to critical accountability -- all the time I am mindful that what I am listening to and what I am describing is documentary evidence that I am listening to events that happened a long time ago, and that I am trying to reconstruct them, fruitlessly no doubt, in 'the present time of playback.'

Vaughan says

I've been "currently reading" this one for months. Another one in this series that is way too cerebral and "let me justify all my college degrees by mentioning lots of structural theory. And did I mention the Situationists yet?" Yeah, one of those. A shame too as this is, well, a desert-isle album for sure. Some interesting historical stuff about the times but too much egg head philosophizing. Oh well, it's short and I'll finish it at some point.

August 12, 2009: I may never finish this one. Not because it's horrible (though it errs away a lot of the books in this series do by being really pretentious and really navel-gazing at the same time.) If you're a fan of hers, you probably know all this stuff anyway. I wanted to find out if it was true that Ms. Smith was pleasuring herself during the "go, Johnny, go!" part of "Land," but this, sadly, doesn't seem like it's gonna do it.

Matt says

" In this book I have tried to convey something of this emotional freedom: I associate Horses with intense feelings of pleasure and excitement, even, at times, with states of rapture; it would be disingenuous of me to deny this. But Horses also lends itself to intense and rigorous thought. It is, after all, a record born out of a strange collision of high and low art: for the purposes of shorthand, the poetics of French symbolism and the raucous rhythms of early rock n roll. For Smith, there is no significant distinction between Hendrix and Rimbaud, Blake and Little Richard, T.S. Eliot and Jim Morrison. The sense of audacity, of challenging the listener's expectation of what a rock n roll record should do, is sustained in Horses' conceptual range: from the struggle between liberty and authority ("Gloria") to the unsettling effects of desire ("Redondo Beach," "Kimberly"), and then again from the evocation of dreams and altered states of mind ("Birdland" "Free Money" "Land") to the unexpected beauty of melancholy and loss ("Break It Up" "Elegie"). Underlying all of this is a concern with the relations between the spoken and written word, the poem and the song; in a final dialectical twist, Horses is about what happens when we listen as well as read."

Bridget says

I learned that "Birdland," my least favorite Patti Smith song, is based on the life of Willem Reich- also the basis for one of my favorite Kate Bush songs- "Cloudbusting." I just think that is kind of wonderful that this is how the universe works. One person reads about another person's life and creates art from it; another artist sees the same source material and make something less than my ideal. Maybe it's all the orgone. Thanks 33 1/3 for making this happen.

Vincent says

Based more on assumptions than research.

Patrick McCoy says

I recently read Philip Shaw's 33 1/3 book length essay on Patti Smith's seminal album Horses. Shaw is a Reader in the English Department at the University of Leicester; therefore his analysis is rife with theorists like Lacan, Benjamin, Freud, Jung, and others. But I think the real strength of his book lies in the biographical sketches he provides about her early life and development as an artist. Shaw does an admirable job with explaining how Smith got to the point where she could record an album like Horses and provided insight into the background and lyrics of the songs. For example I was unaware that "Redondo Beach" was code for a gay beach in the LA area. It was interesting to hear about her past with people like Sam Shepard and the whole downtown scene. I find a many of Smith's songs timeless-and the ones from this album include "Land," "Gloria," and "Redondo Beach."

David says

I loved this book...I learned more about Patti's youth and can now understand some of the influences in her life that come through in Horses. At times Shaw is too technical and we really don't need to know what key the song is written in, but he dives deep into the lyrics of Patti's epic album. Without Patti's validation to the meanings behind the lyrics it may be all speculation, but it is interesting and thought provoking. If you're a fan of the album and Patti Smith...it's definitely worth the read.

Ruth says

Oh- there is way too much Freud in here, and I wasn't sure whether to take seriously all the stuff he says about "the power of the phallus". This record is great because it's straight-up rock and roll poetry, and all that psychoanalysis is way too distracting, and almost offensive- there must be other ways to approach a close reading. I did like knowing the background of what all the songs were about, though, especially my favorite, Kimberly, and now when I hear it I can imagine a young girl holding her baby sister in the middle of a storm & having this Huck Finn moment when she decides she won't go to heaven if there is no art there. I hadn't known about all the references to dead rock stars, either, or about all the particulars of the inspirational visions and dreams. But I probably could have gotten that info somewhere else. I think this guy was just trying too hard.

Tom Schulte says

Another great, slim exegesis of a great album. I spent about 4 hours reading this and flipping the LP,

listening over and over. The first third, roughly, is a personal biography of Patti taking her from Illinois to Chicago, after preface material and remembrances of her early rock poetry solo performances. Then comes a band, recording biography taking us up to Horses. The conclusion before references is a track by track analysis of the album. This is a fine balance of heady musicology with big words ("oneiric", etc.) and historical background and setting.

Jeff says

A good look at why HORSES by Patti Smith is not just a great album, but an important album as well. For Philip Shaw, this record seems to be a starting point for rock and roll to be taken seriously as a subject for academic study. Blurring lines between sex and death, male and female, sacred and profane, this record breaks open new territory with its nods to Rimbaud and Verlain, Hendrix and Morrison(s) --- (both Jim and Van), and Shaw references Lacan and Freud and Barthes in his job of pulling apart the ribs and deconstructing the meat of these HORSES.

Matt Comito says

the real 'magic' of this book is the fact that Shaw, an academic, manages to turn a study of one of the most vital and sensual records of all time into a dry, dull slog - there is nothing of the very fine album in this very dull book

brings to mind this quote:"Writing about music is like dancing about architecture - it's a really stupid thing to want to do" - Elvis Costello - while I don't agree with the sentiment of this quote this shitty book certainly puts a thumb on the scale in Elvis's favor

Fredrikke Wongraven says

a great book about one of my favourite albums.

Alex says

I love these 33 1/3 books. Subjective to be sure, but that's part of their charm - their sheer geekiness and evident passion for their subject tempered by a light touch and a wink that acknowledges the indulgence (and "release"?) of finally being able to share with the world a teenage obsession which, in the end, as both reader and author know, is still just a pop record.

Sadly, Shaw's effort illustrates none of this insouciance and gives the impression of taking himself, and his "material", rather too seriously (Freudian pun fully intended). At their best, the series can give fresh new insight into well-loved tracks, at their worst it can ruin favourite songs by exposing them to over-analysis and undermining the listener's own personal attributed meanings and fantasies. (A bit like the disappointment of first-time sex with the class hottie you've always fancied, one might say, or is that just me?)

In my opinion, this book falls somewhere closer to the second category. An example: "Kimberley", for me, is one of the most beautiful and powerful expressions of love, sibling or otherwise, I've ever listened to. I appreciated learning about Patti Smith's early childhood experiences that so obviously contributed to the writing of the song. But surely that's just it. I failed to follow Shaw's argument that the song actually represents "an attempt to occupy, possess and displace the power of the phallus". Really??! I've listened and thought about this song so many times, yet neither have I picked up the supposed "ironic" coda. Maybe I'm a sucker (ahem), but far from leaving me with a sense of "uncertainty and unease", I've always thought the power of the song comes from its very simplicity and genuine heart-felt sentiments.

In contrast to this, somewhat anticlimactically (oh dear...), Shaw hardly even scratches the surface of the complexities and multiple layers of "Land". This is probably just as well; the song maintains its ambiguity and thus its mystery and power. After all, no amount of intellectualisation or speculation can enhance the experience of listening to that terrifying passage where Smith maniacally intones "Horses, Horses, Horses, Comin' in in all directions". Makes me shiver every time. Nevertheless, it's disappointing that so little is said about some of the most arresting and disturbing images of the entire album. Whilst it's clear that the author aims to illustrate the multiple-self and gender ambiguity aspects of the album as a whole, it seems a bit naive to ignore everything else completely. I'm thinking specifically of the many references to heroin in "Land". It's what I thought the thing was about in the first place. For chrissake, the whole 9 minutes sounds like an aural (oral?) version of Naked Lunch!

On the plus side, the book gave me a fascinating insight into the social context, early biography and art/music/literature that informed and inspired the record - but I get the feeling this would add nothing new for existing fans of Smith. The section on the songs themselves, usually the most enlightening parts of the 33 1/3 books, is too short and comes right at the end (that's what she said...), almost as if the music is too complex and escapes the commentator's grasp. I had the distinct impression that Shaw was making up for this lack of interpretability under a blanket of uni-student pseudo-Lacanian philosophising. In fact you might say this book represents an attempt by Shaw to impose his psycho-analytical interpretive "structure" (this is equivalent to a phallus, I've learnt) onto what, thankfully, remains a beautiful and mysterious record that refuses to give up completely its darkest meanings. Ultimately, I'm secretly quite glad he fails to penetrate Patti Smith's depths with his over-intellectualised probings. On the other hand, perhaps I'm reading waaay too much into this thing...

Matt Lohr says

The 33 1/3 series varies fairly drastically in quality and style from book to book. Philip Shaw's volume on Patti Smith's 1975 proto-punk classic HORSES chooses to go the egghead intellectual route, mostly addressing Smith's work as it relates to classical poetry, constructions of celebrity, and myth. It's also very heavy on gender studies with a smattering of queer theory, so anti-Freudians might do best to steer clear (the word "phallus" gets tossed around a lot). An engaging enough read, and it did make me want to hear the album, but if you like your music criticism loose and rangy, this will not be your cup of tea.
