

Patti Smith

back in the park



Patti Smith during her autumn shows at the Shepherd's Bush Empire, London.

Photo: Steve Gillett

LIVE! presents the first appearance of a regular monthly column from our U.S. correspondent in the Big Apple, Jo Gardetta. *New York Nights* will offer her account of goings-on and gigs in the live music business in America – beginning this month with an account of Patti Smith's return to the boards on her home turf, shortly before her recent European dates.

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What a corker. Patti Smith live in Central Park: a quintessential moment in rock's rich tapestry.

Back on the New York scene after a 17-year absence, the salient tones of the godmother of punk float through the balmy New York night: "I'm dancing barefoot..." and indeed we were. A warm September evening, with hurricane Fran blown out to sea, it was a fitting end to the Summer Stage's season. And an excellent venue to view Ms Smith's return to her New York roots, a sort of alfresco Forum. Those who couldn't cough up the \$15.00 ticket fee had decamped to a grassy knoll on the other side of the fence to enjoy the festivities. A gracious and respectful audience, they were obviously keen to see her back. An eclectic bunch of hippies old and new, some left over from the Grateful Dead, some dead trendy, dogs and children: all were welcome.

This may not have been a pivotal gig in Patti Smith's ground-breaking career; however, it was a poignant one. Back on the road to promote her highly-acclaimed new album *Gone Again* – her first in eight years – it was not a tour in the conventional sense. She is now armed with two children, and prefers to fit her work around their lives too: it's very much a family affair. So much so, in fact, that not only are we introduced to mom senior, but the 14-year-old Jackson Smith also came out to take lead guitar on what we must assume is his current favourite song: Deep

Purple's *Smoke On The Water*. [Patti's sole contribution to this in London was to sing the chorus's second line "...and fire in the sky..." – anorak-wearing Ed.] But hey, it's his mom's show. Apart from her immediate family, on stage Ms Smith is also joined by her extended one: old cohorts Lenny Kaye (guitar), J D Daugherty (drums), Tony Shanahan (bass) and Oliver Ray (guitar). Other musical highlights were supplied by Zeke Schein. The latter, itinerant readers should note, is normally to be found behind the counter of the Matt Umanov Guitars store on Bleeker Street in Greenwich Village – which has been flogging plectrums to rock's aspiring and inspired since 1965. It is, he says, "simply the best guitar shop in New York City," a view quite possibly shared by Patti herself, who likes it so much she invited Zeke to join her show. Does this happen often, *Live!* wondered? "Patti's a friend of mine and I've sold her a couple of guitars," explained the modest Mr Schein. "Tom Verlaine was out of town and they needed someone to play slide. I did a song called *Wing* off her new album. I just filled in," he grinned. "It sure was a real fun gig." Nice work if you can get it.

This long-overdue return to the stage comes in the wake of personal tragedy with the untimely deaths of her husband, former MC5 guitarist Fred 'Sonic' Smith, and then her brother, Todd. She and Fred had already started work on her resur-

gence and these shows were as much a confirmation to herself as to her fans that she's back on track. It may not quite be the Patti of the past – there is an absence of youthful irreverence – but she can still captivate an audience. The characteristic braiding and un-braiding of her hair, the monosyllabic torrent of spoken words and her ever-distinctive vocals: the plaintive wail of a long-since-vanished tribe wound around the nasal shout of a woman who still wants to wake us all up. She moved easily between the new material of her current album and old hits like *Rock'n'Roll Nigger*, slipping in one or two of rock's finest, notably a splendid rendering of *When Doves Sing*, which had most of the audience guessing until she spilled the fourth line: "Maybe I'm just like..." . During her decade-and-a-half of domesticity the heady world of male-dominated rock has seen an resurgence of female talent. For Patti Smith costs a long shadow. Her presence can be felt throughout the current crop of top acts. Michael Stipe cites her as his monumental moment in musing on all things rock, and she is now to be found crooning on REM's single *E-Bow The Letter*. It was an evening filled with nostalgia, with family and with friends. Patti Smith is as much an inspiration now as she was then. If she was worried that we were worried, she may rest assured...no worries.

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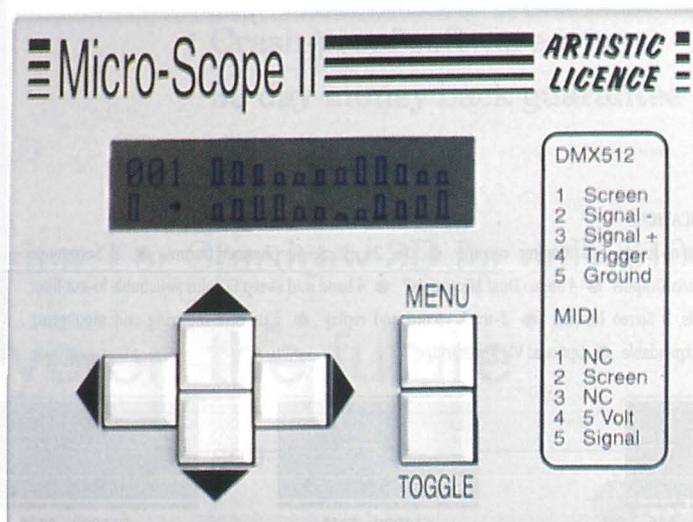
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