

## Interview with Lenny Kaye

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**Abstract**

Lenny Kaye has been Patti Smith's long term guitarist, friend and collaborator, ever since they first began together in the early 1970s. He grew up between New York and New Jersey, graduating in American History from Rutgers University, where he later taught a course in the Department of American Studies on the History of American Rock, which became famous because of the large number of students who wanted to enroll in it. A very prolific writer and musician, he has produced an important number of records, as well as collaborated with numerous music magazines. He is the author of two books, *Waylon Jennings: An Autobiography* (1996) and *You Call it Madness, The Sensuous Song of the Croon*. (2004). *Nuggets* (1972), his anthology of 60s garage music, is famous for defining the genre. This interview took place when he was visiting Spain in November 2012 with the Patti Smith Group. In it, we discussed the New York scene of the 70s, music, literature, drugs, politics, and many other things.

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**Keywords**

Seventies, underground, counterculture, beatniks, music.

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*You probably have told the story of how you met Patti Smith too many times already: how she came looking for you in 1971 at the record store where you worked (Village Oldies on Bleeker Street) because of an article you had written in Jazz & Pop called "The Best of A Capella" (now anthologized in The Penguin Book of Rock and Roll Writing), that had inspired her; how you became friends and you played guitar for her in her first poetry reading at St. Mark's church, then you played together from 1974-79, and again from 1996 until now, right? But we would like to know how it was for you before that. What was it like to be a college student in the US in the 1960s? How did you become interested in music and how was it working in Greenwich Village and living in Manhattan then? How do you remember those times? How different was New York in the late 60s-early 70s from today?*

I was an American History student. I originally wanted to be in American Studies, which to me combines History and Culture and English, but there was a Department called

American Civilization, which I wanted to be in, but when I was a sophomore in college they stopped it, so I went into American History. But really in those days what I was studying was music, rock and roll and culture. I was not too much interested in political history or military history. I was interested in popular culture. Probably if when I was a student they had had Popular Culture courses, like they would later have, I would have pursued that. I am not exactly sure why. What would you do with it? That's something else. But I was always very much drawn to music and I think of myself as a musical historian. I've written my books, I do research. In my writing I try to understand why music happens at a certain time. I'd say the *Nuggets* album of garage rock was my monograph of Musical History. You know, working in a record store, and writing about music, thinking about music – I had played in bands in the 1960s – so all these things came together in a New York moment where it seemed that everything was ready to start again.

In the early 1970s there were no New York bands after the Velvet Underground broke up, and the folk scene vanished. There was no real scene, and the reason for that is because in New York you get everything coming through, so you don't need a local scene. But I love local scenes, that's where things begin. That's the grassroots. Something I think about was *Nuggets* where you have all these very local bands generating energy and inspiration, and going to the culture at large. So, even though I wasn't expecting it in New York at that time, the conditions were ripe. There was a lot of creative energy, especially downtown, where you'd have avant-garde music and theater, and film, all in a very small twenty blocks area, so everybody was influencing everybody else. You also have all the musics of New York where, if you walk 5 blocks in one direction, you hear Latin music coming out of the speakers; if you walk 5 blocks in another direction, you have folk music, you have rock & roll, and in the early 70s that all started to come together. When I was working at the store, I would see on the wall the first poster for the New York Dolls, and I thought, "Cool name. I wonder what they are about." I was hanging out, and I just started writing for some of the rock magazines: *Confusion*, *Rolling Stone* and *Jazz & Pop*, so I was kind of unseen, and writing about it, thinking about music and listening to music, so for me it was a very fertile time, and for other musicians it was also, because everything had been erased, so it was time to begin again, and that's the time that I like, because you have a lot of things happening and nobody knows what they are doing. There's lots of experiments, strange things happening that don't really fit in any definitions. Especially for New York, where I was involved in a scene that was called "punk rock." Punk rock was an attitude, it wasn't a type of music. Nobody had figured it out. You could do anything. And that to me is when interesting things happen.

*When we use the word "Counterculture," we think of the hippies, the West Coast, the 60s, peace, love, LSD, etc.... What do you think of that? How did you relate to what was going on in the West in terms of music, etc? Where would you locate yourself and PSG in this dichotomy?*

For me there is mass mainstream culture, and then there's the underground. I guess you can call it the counterculture. But for me, and I can only speak about myself personally, there is a direct line between the Beat writers and what was going on in New York in the seventies. When I read Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* for the first time, when I was 14 or 15 years old, it changed my mind. When I read Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, William Burroughs, you know, the big four, I got the sense that this was an underground culture, an underground movement. In the 60s I read a magazine "The Realist"

put out by Paul Krazner, and it was really like an alternate view of society. There was a radio station in NYC called WBAI, which was a kind of free form radio, and you would listen late at night at a disc jockey named Bob Fass, and people would stop by and it provided a kind of media outlet for those who were not part of society. For me, that's what Patti's song "Rock and Roll Nigger" is about: being outside of society. It's not so much counterculture in the sense of rebelling, in the sense of the main society does this, so we do the opposite. It's more that it's a parallel universe.

In 1967 I embraced the hippy culture. I found it was not only musically challenging, but it opened a whole sense of possibility. There was a moment, and it has been very much obscured by stereotyping, where you could really believe that love could change the world. It sounds very naïve now, but you could feel the sense of communal power and I, as a young teenager in New Jersey, felt this sense of possibility, this sense of motion, this sense of setting yourself off. In radio, for instance, you had A.M radio, which was very structured, and all of a sudden you had a progressive rock radio, F.M radio, where you would hear a different interpretation. There was a sense of freedom there. And in my personal life, I was able to understand that within myself so, when I would meet someone like Patti, we had the same sense of dialogue. It wasn't that we were embarking on something totally new, I mean, we loved the music, from the Rolling Stones to John Coltrane, but the sense of free jazz, for instance – where you had no boundaries – that you could slowly remove the rhythm, that you could slowly remove the melody, that you could slowly remove actual notes, and you could play sound upon sound, a certain psychedelic viewpoint . . . it was very liberating. And it meant that you had a great sense of what you might be able to do if you just followed your emotions and instincts.

With Patti, when we did our first poetry reading in 1971, there was no sense that we were going to have a band. There was no sense that we were going to do it twice, you know. We had this little art happening, and as it developed, we did not try to steer it in anyway, you know: let's get a drummer immediately, or let's start writing pop songs. We kept following whatever instinct we had, placing all these weird musics within each other, and we were given an opportunity within Lower Manhattan to do it because people were very open. You could experiment. You could make your mistakes. And that to me is the greatest thing about the CBGB'S early years: you had all these bands that played for the other bands. There was very little media attention, there was very little sense that you could even get a chance to make a record, because you were so far from the major power centers. So you had a lot of time to get up there and try this and try that, make a mistake, find your own way and come up with something unique. Especially if you look at all those early CBGB's bands, as Tom Verlaine would once say, they are all a different idea. There wasn't one sound. There all had different aspects of approaching music and art. And in that sense of blurred definition and border, a lot of interesting things happened. I mean, I like when things get figured out, and all of a sudden it's straight away and it helps to spread it all over the world. The Ramones' template definitely had a look: motorcycle jacket, jeans, they had a style, they had a very specific way of playing, but for me, I find that sometimes predictable.

I like when weird stuff happens together. It's the same thing with garage rock and the *Nuggets* album. I mean, now it's called garage rock and it's a very specific type of sound, but if you actually look at the track list of my record, it's all over the place: you have a group like Sagittarius, which is very orchestral, you have somebody trying to do Bob Dylan like Mouse, you have the Blues project trying to figure out a pop way to frame the blues. That's what I enjoy, when everybody is trying to find out something. I like expe-

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rimentation, and trying and unpredictability. And once it's figured out, it's more a matter of interpretation and convention. I like the invention part.

*So it seems you don't believe in categorization? I mean, some historians tend to see the Eastern cultural scene as the complete opposite of the California scene in terms of attitude, use of drugs, sense of community/alienation, popularity, etc.<sup>1</sup> What do you think of this binary division? Would you say that PSG represents the transition between the sound of the late 60s-early 70s counterculture (or hippie culture) and punk rock?*

No, no, I don't see that division. Especially in early scenes, like the early San Francisco scene, which I derived so much inspiration from, I mean I had my Fillmore posters on the wall, and all I wanted to do in 1967 was to get in a car and drive across the country, which I did, and I remember getting to San Francisco, and seeing this just amazing place, like a locus. It was as if lightning had struck there. It was great. All the bands were kind of a little bit different, but after a while, especially when the media picked up on them, well, you know, they like to see things in a certain way. They'll take the most sensationalistic and sometimes the most shallow, like the strike we just saw.<sup>2</sup> You know, it's easy to take a picture of a burning garbage can, and that's the dramatic picture, instead of the hundred thousands of people marching calmly in solidarity, but that's the way the world lives.

But what I like, especially in the early 70s in Manhattan, there was such a sense of experimentation, in theater, in music, and they were all kind of blurring into each other. The first time I saw Patti, for instance, it was in an Avant-garde theater piece written by Jackie Curtis. I didn't know who she was. I didn't know she was a poet. I knew she was incredibly striking and a really cool person, but I didn't know anything about her talent for writing, or her talent for art. And she didn't know anything about her talent for singing. We figured it out, and learned it, and I didn't really know anything about my talent for understanding how she breathes and being able to play along to that. It's nice when things have a chance to figure out a new way of doing things. One of the problems of today, maybe a problem that there was back then too, was the speed of communication. People want something so quickly: let's do a song, let's put it on the internet, and it will go viral, or something. I like when things have time to grow. It's like wine. You got to age it a little bit and make sure that it blossoms at a time when not only the work is ready for it, but you're ready for it. Comparatively, Patti and I really didn't start making music on a consistent basis until we were in our late twenties. We didn't want to come out of the boat and say, "Wow, we gotta get ahead of the curve". We just did whatever it was we did, and whatever came later came as a kind of surprise, included being here in Spain forty years later.

*Your anthology Nuggets (1972) was very important because it opened the way to many bands as it defined a genre. Would you say that an anthology such as Nuggets could be successful nowadays when everything is available through internet?*

<sup>1</sup> Such as Bannister 163-178.

<sup>2</sup> He's referring to the general strike in Spain on November 14, 2012.

know. Forty years for an oldies album. It's pretty amazing, actually. I always think that if there were a *Nuggets* celebrating its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1972, it would be about the music of the middle twenties. What a survival rate for it! I think that *Nuggets* captured something of people's desires and yearnings to understand who they are. But internet is progress, and I think it's kind of cool the things you can do with a computer. Somebody sent me a track from Memphis, a friend of mine had said "play some guitar," and I went in my basement, and I was able to edit it, and I didn't have to go into a studio that would cost me 200\$. I didn't have to figure out how to get a record pressed. It's all about the tools. In the 60s or 70s you had certain tools that you didn't have available in the 1920s when you really would have to play your trumpet into a horn. Tools are great. It depends on what you do with them.

I think the possibilities for personal expression these days are so much greater, because you have access: somebody at home can figure out a way to do something greatly. It's what you do with it that counts, and the amounts of emotion that you put in it. But I am very excited about the possibilities that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will hold, in the same way that if we lived in 1912, a moment in time before there was radio, before there was television, when recordings were coming out in cylinders, to understand what could be possible, you know, the electric guitar was still thirty years away from being invented, who knows what can be invented in the year 2035 that will change our culture irrevocably? I like progress. I listen to a lot of oldies. People ask me what's your favorite band now? I don't know. These days I mostly listen to country music from the 1960s. But I like when things happen. I like the way pop records sound. I like the way Rihanna's records or Taylor Swift's records sound and the way they make things. They are very smart pop records. I don't ask for them to do the same things that I ask for somebody who is, I don't know, much more artistically deep, but I'm excited about today's possibilities and how somebody who has a sense of mission artistically can find a way to do it. I love books. I would never read anything on a kindle, but I have to say that if you don't know how to get a book printed, and you want to write, and you can write something, put it up on some site and somebody will find it.

I think that if something puts together a *Nuggets* of something that happened in the past five years, that really captures the moment in time, it will speak to people forty years from now. I don't think *Nuggets* is about garage rock. I think it's about a genre where you find really great songs. You can have a *Nuggets* of girl groups; you can have a *Nuggets* of 90s grunge bands. It's about the scene, and to me every scene has its own *Nuggets*. I have a list that I have been trying to put out now called *Reggae Nuggets* of that moment in time in the 1970s when reggae moved from a very insular island music to a strange world pop music where it was not quite the R&B, and it was not quite the Rastafarian dancehall that it will become. They were all great pop records. If you came to my house I would play you "hey, this is a great record." No matter what you think of reggae, in the same way that I know that the success of *Nuggets* is not because it's a garage rock record, but because every one of those records is a great record. They always have *Nuggets* nights and I go to see them and I look at twelve bands playing the songs from *Nuggets* and I always think, if these bands had one song as great as the one song they're playing for *Nuggets*, they would have a hit. That's really the untold secret. It's about garage rock, and garage rock is very inspirational in terms of its sense of identity, and its sense of youth gone wild, its sense of release, its sense of discovery not only for the people who live it, but the people who make it. But you can have a great hip hop *Nuggets*. And that's what I do as a musical fan, I wander through genres. I don't really care that much about garage

rock anymore. I've lived it. I was in a garage rock band. I heard just about every great record within it, especially when people bring them to me. I am more interested in other things. In the last ten years I had a Bebop moment, suddenly I understood Bebop. I always was said, oh yeah, Charlie Parker is great, Dizzy Gillespie, but I never really got it. And then I started hearing how hooky it was, kind of weirdly pop. It's like a pop song, and I got it. And for two years I learned who is who, what happened.

We talk about the 70s. Well, New York in the late 40s, on West 57<sup>th</sup> St., now, there was a scene, oh my god, I would have loved to be there, then – of course, I would probably have ended up a heroin addict, because that's what they did then, but still, I like these moments. I like to see when all of a sudden lightning strikes, and in Rock & Roll it strikes many times: Memphis in 1954, Sun records, Liverpool in 1963, what a great scene. You know, if you put together a *Nuggets* of these great English bands, which has been done, it's a great listening experience, and reveals that cultural moment. There's a great *Nuggets* waiting to be done of mid-70s stuff. They had big boxes, but you need something more compact.

*You have mentioned addiction related to the 40s. One big issue when discussing the 70s Avant-garde scene in New York has been the presence of drugs. Is this more a legend than a reality, or were drugs really as omnipresent as one would think?*

There were certainly many drugs around, but to me, and for Patti also, I am not into obliteration. I am into remembering why I do it, which is about getting up each day and playing my guitar. I like to party. I've danced to "White Wedding"<sup>3</sup> many times at 4:00 in the morning in a strange town, but I like to get up in the morning and do my work: do my writing, do my music, my research, that's really what's important. There is a book called *Please, Kill Me*. I know all these people. I've watched them do this, but I miss Johnny Thunders. I miss him. He was a great human being, and I loved him. And the fact that he's not there to give him a hug, and say "Come on, and play my favorite song", that makes me sad. I am not into this artist dying young and romantically thing. I'd like to hear what Jimi Hendrix would be doing today. I'd like to hear what Charlie Parker was doing, or Chet Baker, or any of these people who didn't get the balance right. You know, we all like to have a good time, but remember that the best time is when you play that perfect note, and I am not into some of the trappings of the lifestyle, which is why, as you will see, with Patti we are still here, strong, and doing our work, and caring about what we do. We are not afraid of work. My drug is my work ethic. I like to work. I find that much more fun than waking up thinking that I have to get high again.

Every generation is the same. People just love to throw themselves away. There's something romantic about it, I guess. I don't know. I have been reading a lot and thinking about Chet Baker, or Johnny, any of these people that are close to my heart that I can't hear anymore, because they were foolish. They didn't realize. Or Jim Carroll, one of my best friends in the world. And drugs did not help him. I'd like to read his next five books. But they are not going to be there and that's sad. That's a very sad thing for me.

<sup>3</sup> Song by Billy Idol.

*So, do you think that this book, Please Kill Me, is a realistic portrayal of that time, or a distortion?*

I'd say it's sensationalistic. It's somewhat reflective, but it's very up on the surface. To me, what I like to see is what happens in the practice room. It shows what happens after everybody is done working and they are partying. It's like those pictures on the TV of the strike. Yeah, there are three fires going, so let's get the camera there. But where are the millions of people? And why are they there? I wrote *Waylon Jennings: An Autobiography*, a very strange literary genre because nobody realizes how much work you do behind the person. When I met Waylon he had already been through two writers, and he wasn't into doing it. He didn't know me from Adam. I just went there as a writer. But I said to him, "I know there's a lot of sex and drugs in your story, and we all love these stories, but I really want to find out why, as a musician, you get up on that stage 250 nights out of the year." And he said to me: "Well, come up on the bus, we're going to Kansas tonight." And I said, "Oh, good!" That's the truth, we're musicians, you know.

It's a fine book. Some of it is true, some of it is not true. I am not too interested in the drug habits of the Heartbreakers. I know that story. I want to know why "Born to Lose" is such a great song. I want to know why the New York Dolls are like this, or why the Ramones.... You know, I am a musician, and I want to know about the music first and later about the bullshit. That's just me, though. Most people like the bullshit, but when people hand me that book and ask me to sign it I say no.

*In Punk: An Aesthetic, William Gibson calls punk the last macro tribe. He said that he became attracted to punk because it was refreshing and it had not been commodified. Do you know that the Metropolitan Museum of New York will have an exhibition this spring on punk fashion titled "From Chaos to Culture"? What do you think of this? Has counterculture become culture? Has punk become co-opted and commodified? (Teenagers now wear Ramones T-shirts and they don't even know who they were). Gibson also said "punk was the last children's crusade of the millennium." Any thought on that?*

We live in a capitalist culture. Sometimes signifiers show where you'd like to be in the cultural spectrum, or fashion. If you want to show that you're a financially responsible person, you put on a nice suit and a tie, so if you want to show that you're a little bit outside, maybe you wear a CBGB's or Ramones' T-shirt, maybe you'd like to be that. I am not against it. Commodification is why they call it the music "business." They don't call it the music art. You have to move through the culture, as musicians are also workers. Musicians like to get paid. I'd do something for free if I enjoy it, but at this point if you want me to write something, or play a new record, I'd like to have the same respect as when you go and have some tapas. I know Johan Kugelberg, who is behind *Punk: An Aesthetic*, and we talked a lot about it. In fact, he just bought my science fiction fanzine collection. But this is how culture moves through culture.

If somebody wears a T-shirt the way that the Sex Pistols used to, it's an interesting aesthetic decision. And sometimes, just like videogames or spaghetti westerns, if you see violence, it doesn't mean you're necessarily violent. It means you're expressing yourself artistically. And for me, that's the function of art: to take these elements of conflict within you, this violence which we have, these contradictions, these strange sensualities, the fetishists that revolve around inside you, the sense of personal identities that you have within you, all these 12, 15 or 20 people fighting for dominance, some of which get

tamed down. Maybe the person that wears the Ramones T-shirt can't express that in real life. They can't get out there and play guitar real hard, and get your aggression out, so maybe by wearing the T-shirt, that gives them a little outlet to say, this is who I am. This is who I enjoy. And all arts and genres have their own signifiers. Why do all Hip Hop guys and girls wear hoods and pants that come down. It's who you are on the cultural spectrum. This is who I am. It is not just about the music. It's about where you fit in the social construct of our universe, what you align yourself with. In the political election that just happened in America, it was interesting, after all the hooking and hollering, to watch the Republicans, who are all very white and kind of clean, and then you get the Democrats, they're scruffy, with their beards. There's your cultural signifier. It's a way in which we tell each other apart from each other. Maybe it's a way in which we can declare allegiance. The punk aesthetics was so varied, but of course, that developed after punk, when people had figured out that this was punk, whereas in the early years of the CBGB's there was no real look. Richard Hell might have ripped his pants, but my pants were ripped too, because, you know, you wear your jeans long enough and they're ripped. And that's your jeans. Maybe you don't have five pairs, and maybe you like the little ragged look, and maybe it's a response to the artifice of the glitter rock look which happened right before. Each genre has its own way of looking. You get into the realm of the aesthetics in fashion and how it helps us move, and then it becomes the task of academics to figure out what that means. Otherwise, it's no accident that the 60s was when the mini skirt was invented. I grew up right in the crust of it. In high school nobody had sex. When I graduated, high school was very moralistic, and three years later, everybody was having sex. You were in the 50s, they were very coercive in a way. For punk there was a certain sense of do-it-yourself, of homemade, of bringing things back to a starting point. To me it's not like you forget everything that came before. You start here and then things become more and more commodified. Then it becomes a cliché: something to rebel against. All of a sudden you're back where you started, but you're up a level. That is the progress of a culture, as I perceive it.

*You have mentioned the "Do-It-Yourself" punk ethic. Do you see this "DIY" idea as a legacy of punk? The idea that anybody can make a movie, put out a cd, create a blog, form a band, write a book?*

I don't think so. I think it's always true. In the early years of Hip Hop for instance, you had that too. I think it's the beginning of any movement, any genre, any starting point. Punk waved that flag because it was part of punk. The punkie attitude: "I know better. I'm the first on my block, even though I'm gonna make the same things and make the same mistakes as fourteen generations behind me. Don't tell me what to do" and then the mass culture comes and knocks you out. When I was young, I was a punkie rebelling mouthy kid, I was small, and young, and not very cool, so I was kind of funny, and I'd say things and I got beaten up and I would stand up and say "yeah, give it up" that's the punkie attitude. "Do It Yourself" came about because all new movements have to create their own universe. Today there's a real do it yourself aspect, but I don't think it's unique to punk. When anything begins it's because it can't get entry into the main arena, so it stand outside and it hollers long enough until it gets recognized. For me, what punk became was a certain sense of no nonsense, very easy to play. It wasn't like you had to go to school, you just had to develop your upper arm strength. When punk became a motorcycle jacket and speeding, then it became a self-fulfilling prophecy, the same thing,



that is, until it morphed into its opposite, which would be New Wave, which was skinny ties, and very polite, and synthesizers, and that would be supplanted by the Heavy Metal bands of Los Angeles with their own androgynous look and the outrage, and the extreme drug taking. And obviously, there's going to be grunge coming after, which is a reaction after that. And then you have the alternative revolution, which is that everybody who is in a band looks like the nerd down the street. And then, for me, rock and roll is pretty done. What else can you do with it? And now it's time for it to morph into whole other textures. I play guitar, but for me, the 20<sup>th</sup> century will go down as the era of the guitar. I can already see a guitar chain in America that is nearing bankruptcy. The millions of people that picked up a guitar are not going to do that anymore. I think they will always be there, because it's an easy instrument to play, but things change. Listen to the radio. Lots more synthesizers. That's ok, I don't mind. I know how to play it and I enjoy it. But just my random look at that, what the music videos are, when you see a guitar band on them, they sound like something you've heard before. And when that happens, once a generation outgrows itself, you've got to establish a new thing. In the 50s horns were everything. If you wanted to be cool, you'd pick up a horn and become a jazz person, or something. I don't mind. I like change. There will always be great guitar players. But it's like the blues: there's not going to be anything new happening with the blues. You can be a great blues player, a great interpreter, but you're not going to do something new that nobody has heard of. And rock and roll started in 1950 or 1952, that's almost sixty years ago. Classical musics change. Musics change. And sometimes that's ok, because it's like humans: we're born, we die. We leave something that maybe somebody will hear in the future and it will make them do their art, and that's how we move on.

*Do you agree with historians like Allen J. Matusow that say that the underground in the Village was a consequence of the 20s jazz era, that in turn gave way to the Beat generation? I know William Burroughs used to go to CBGB's all the time, and that Patti admired him and Allen Ginsberg. Allen Ginsberg was very much aware of the power of rock & roll as a medium to take poetry to the masses. You were part of Ginsberg's *The Ballad of the Skeletons* recording, I believe (shortly before he died) with Philip Glass, Paul McCartney et al. Could you tell us a little about this collaboration, how did it start? Was it Ginsberg's idea?*

It was Ginsberg's idea. I met him a couple of times in the 70s and 80s. We did a benefit thing for the Tibet House, which is an organization to continue Tibet culture in the face of the Chinese occupation. Allen wanted to do this song, and he asked me to play bass at this benefit at the Carnegie Hall, which is great, so I did. We got along great. There was a record company guy, Danny Goldberg, whom I had known for a very long time, and he said "Why don't you do a single?" So I got to produce Allen, which, especially for an old Beatnick fan like me - I was too young to be a Beatnick - was great. We did this song, and then he wanted to touch up a couple of lines, so it was a really great experience. Unfortunately, not too long after that, Allen passed away and we were just starting to get friendly, so I don't know what more creative work we could have done together. Of course, Allen had an incredible work ethics. That's one of the great things about him. He was an inspiration in that way.

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*Talking about creative work, Patti Smith said that what you did at CBGB's was "fieldwork," that you gave her 3 chords to help her improvise. Can you elaborate a little on that? Can you explain your process of composition? Was this intended, because you liked technical experimentation? Was it mere playfulness, or were you consciously trying to create a new type of music that was spontaneous (e.g. like jazz improvisation, avant garde poetry...)?*

I think that especially early on there was a sense of improvisation. We would call them "fields," where we would have an idea for a song, three chords moving around each other, and Patti would declaim and read her poetry, and then we would move into a song, and out of the song. Because we didn't really quite know what we were doing. We didn't think we were writing pop songs. Perhaps now our process is a little bit more song oriented, except for something on the new record, like "Seneca" or "Constantin's Dream," where we have themes, I guess, or little circular riffs, and out of that we'll almost watch the song grow. Especially early on, we had some actual song forms with the verse and the chords, but a lot of times, we would just have this kind of bed, and Patti over it would do what she would do, and we would follow her, and without talking about it, we would feel the song emerge from the improvisation, like, let's say, "Gloria". All of the sudden, we would give a little emphasis, and the next night we remembered it and by the third night it was part of the arrangement. We didn't go to the practice room and say, "Maybe if we did ah-ah here." It emerged almost like Michael Angelo, like a statue emerging from the marble. It's still one of the ways in which we work. Sometimes, especially Tony would come with a more complete song that we'll address as a song, and sometimes we'll just find something and expand upon it, or grow out of an improvisation. "Rock and Roll Nigger" grew out of *Radio Ethiopia*. We'd be playing and we heard that, and all of a sudden it would start having more parts and then we would separate it and it would be its own song. We try to keep things as free flowing as possible. And not be locked into anything, because we are not specifically a pop band, even though we do have our pop tendencies, and I don't think of them as any better or worse. I love a great song with a great chord. I like a field of possibilities. In the same way that John Coltrane approached "My favorite things," we approached "Land." We had just started and over the course of whatever the adventures were of Johnny, the protagonist, we would see where it went. Especially early on, we didn't have any pressure. Nobody was asking us to write hit singles, really, we didn't even know we had a band. We didn't work on our drummer until we were three years into what we were doing, because we weren't sure of where we were going. And I like that, because by the time we got to have a full band, we had our personality together. We didn't jump up with things, and end up with something more predictable.

*So you didn't envision how global and influential your group would be? Looking back retrospectively, did you ever think that what you started in the 70s at places like CBGB's or Max's Kansas City would be a "movement," a cultural revolution that brought a change?*

I never thought we'd make a record. Our first little disc was "Piss Factory/Hey Joe." We just went in the studio because we knew we were having an impact on the audience, but how do you put this on a record? I always think it's because we didn't set out to become what we became, in the same way that *Nuggets* didn't set out to become what it became. If I had been more conceptual, or thought more about what I was doing on it, it would

have been a lesser record. Because I believe that things become what they are. I wrote a book about the crooners of the 1930s, *You Call it Madness*. When I set it out, I didn't know what I was writing. I knew that I was fascinated with the story, and that I wanted to have certain poetic elements, but I really didn't know, and I didn't even make an outline or organize. I would think of a good opening for a chapter, randomly, and I started. About one third of the way through the book I thought, well, maybe it's time now to figure out about a shape. But you got to let things take their time, and I've always believed that the work will tell you where it wants to go, and that's pretty much our *modus operandi*.

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