

Sounds From the Street: Patty Smith Sings the Blues

Transcribed by Natalie Chen

Patty Smith: Well I like Led Zeppelin and David Bowie and all of them, I like everybody. I was very much into music.

The Beatles, Beach Boys, and everything. My name is Patty Smith and you're listening to Sounds From the Street.

Adam Kampe: That's Army veteran and Street Sense vendor number four, Patty Smith, and as she just sang, this is Sounds From the Street, a podcast about homelessness and life on the margins. I'm your host, Adam Kampe. Born in Mississippi, raised in Pennsylvania, Patty Smith now calls Washington DC home. It's here where she spent the last decade selling Street Sense. She started in 2005, two years after the paper was founded. Like many struggling with housing stability, her life has been stepped in unexpected setbacks, bad luck, bad relationships, and bad health. In fact, she just got out of the hospital for pneumonia when we met two weeks ago. Since then, she's gotten much needed rest, buoyed by the fact that she now has a place to call home. One constant that's helped get her through tough times in music. Patty loves music. She's always singing, taking the pain and the grief of life, otherwise known as the blues, and transforming it into song.

PS: And I sing more beautiful than I can talk, but it all comes from the different songs, like.

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My voice just goes real far when I'm outside. But it don't go far when I'm inside, you know? I better not sing too loud when I'm inside. Been like, always that singing, stop that! You know.

AK: You know, I think that would be a beautiful interruption, I think people would be like "What is that siren, sounds like Nina Simone is..."

PS: Everybody equating me with Nina Simone. I've heard them say Nina Simone so much.

AK: I don't know again how to describe it because I don't have a musical vocabulary but there's this *sings*, this deep kind of, this thing in your throat that is reminiscent of Nina.

Where are you from?

PS: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. When you get to Pittsburgh it's in the Allegheny mountains.

AK: Beautiful country. And that's where you were born and raised?

PS: No, I was born in Mississippi, Brooksville, Mississippi. I went to Pittsburgh when I was 5 and a half years old and went to kindergarten and grew up in Pittsburgh.

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I made them two songs 20 years ago, when I opened "Baby Business," the typing service, I went around to all the colleges and I put up my typing service and I called it "Baby Business."

AK: Why "Baby Business?"

PS: Because the African guy I was with told me that because my aunt had just died, I came to D.C. and he said "Anybody can have a baby." I was a cancer survivor and he said, "Why don't we come up with some names?" So I came up with the name Baby Business. First it was "Patty's Typing to Go" and then it was Baby Business, and that's what name I came up with.

AK: So it was a typing service where you would type-

PS: For college students, I would type for college students. I was typing 95 words per minute. I just got out of the army.

AK: So you're a veteran?

PS: I'm a veteran. Based and train at AIT, I was Fort Jackson, South Carolina. And then I had to went back to Pennsylvania, I had gotten married, went back to Pennsylvania, I had married an army guy. Then I came back down here with him in the MP Unit National Guard, first I was in the Army reserves in Pennsylvania (302 battalion on Southside) and then I stayed there for a little while, then I went to the armory, and they gave me National Guard. They said, "We do not have any services down here that has reserves, we have the National Guard." So I had to join up with the National Guard, so it was in Anacostia, 276 MP Unit (Military Police Unit).

AK: And how long were you in the army?

PS: I was in there 5 years medical, one year military police.

AK: And did you ever leave the country?

PS: We was going to have Desert Storm, but I was pregnant, but our home unit was not sent to Desert Storm at that time.

AK: When you left the army, did you transition into the typing career, or was the typing before?

PS: Before I got out of the service, I was already in the hospital having a hysterectomy. I got released after I had my surgery. I had gotten an honorable discharge and stuff but I was sent home ill. I started off doing temp work and that's how my aunt told me to join a service because I started off doing illegal and medical. I went to ICM business school for legal and medical secretary. And temp work didn't have any benefits at the time, and seeing my mother and my aunt work at the same steel mills and was in the union, and they wanted me to find better fits.

My mother had just lost her property and my mother had gotten paralyzed.

AK: Years later, without a safety net at home and after suffering some health issues, Patty had to find a way to get by, which eventually led her to Street Sense.

PS: And I was sitting around the YWCA, a girlfriend told me, "Why don't you take a typing class at West Morley?" And it turned out the class was an entrepreneurship class and then I went to Brian MacKenzie

info shop where the teacher gave me a computer and the YWCA woman showed me how to use the computer but Brian MacKenzie Info Shop, the college student George Mason showed me how to go online and job search and that's how I found Street Sense.

AK: Right when it had started, I mean it began in 2003.

PS: It started 2003 and this is about 2005 when I found it. A lot of woman at the YWCA had home workers and me having taken water peels, you know bad health, she'd come and clean my room for I think 45 minutes, give me \$20, and after she left, I went out and sold the newspapers. And I was selling in the nighttime and then decided, well this is recently, this is about 2010, and so after that I started doing it in the daytime.

AK: And is this the YWCA that Phyllis Wheatley, Ryland, - ?

PS: Yes, that's where that was.

AK: At what point did you find yourself struggling with homelessness?

PS: I lived in low-pay house, rent near Howard University, 1448 Fairmont Street. I had gotten \$1,000 behind on rent so I had to move in with my uncle. That was that summer, and then my mother came and picked me up, and I stayed at my mother's house. When we was all getting welfare, my brother was stealing my food stamps and stuff like that, it was at the time they gave you paper food stamps and stuff like that. So one of these college students didn't want to spend the night with me, my brother kicked them out, so the next morning, I went to the shelter. That's how I started in the shelter. Miriam's Woman Center in Pittsburgh, and Miriam's Woman Center was designed to find you housing and in the midst of it, my mother had put me on social security. I was sitting at Miriam's Woman Center and I was going out with Terry Kirk and he found housing, my social security came in and me and him moved in together and then the second year, caught him bed with another woman and moved back home with my mother. Moved back home with my mother and stayed with her half the time and then stayed with Valetta, my girlfriend, half the time. Valetta was getting divorced from her husband and she needed somebody to help her pay the rent, so then I came back down here and then that's when I went to the YWCA and they found me housing. I'm waiting for my army pension. I think I'm getting part of the benefits but I'm not getting the full pension yet.

AK: But enough that you're now in stable housing?

PS: Yes, yes, yes.

AK: And how did that come about?

PS: August, the case manager Dennis came and got me, Dottie was here, and Rachel was here, one morning at 9 o'clock and we was all sitting out front, Rachel said, "Hey Patty, look who's here at 9 o'clock!" And I'm sitting on the little steps. She said, "Your case manager here, it's moving day!" So I had my backpack, so he took me up to Woodley Towers and I talked to Ms. Betty and she did a complete move in process and stuff and then she introduced me to Ms. Ashley and she said, "Ms. Ashley, go show her her room." And we went up the 3 flights and she showed me my room. It's a yellow room.

A yellow bedspread and yellow curtains. Got a dresser, got a little end table, got a radio about this big, and got a lamp. 16th of this month, I'll be 10 months.

AK: That's fantastic. Based on the smile on your face and the way you talk about it, it's a huge joy. What did it feel like, that moment that you knew, okay, I've been dealing with all this instability.

PS: I was so sad to leave my friends and the YWCA. I was sad to leave them and we was going through renovations and some of the girls moved, some of the girl moved on their own, and then their case managers moved the rest of the girls, and there was only 40 of us there, and us struggling trying to stick together, and it was so much pain. It was so much pain. Us trying to stick together was very disheartening. So by the time all this was over and done with, I was glad.

AK: And you'd mentioned Dennis? That was your case manager?

PS: He was an African guy, he was my case manager.

AK: Did you also work with, or have you worked with Julie Turner?

PS: That's who I work with now. She's my case manager.

AK: Was she involved in helping getting you housing?

PS: Her and Dennis was the main ones. She stuck by me, she stuck by me. And look, she came to see me in the hospital just last week. "Oh Patty, oh Patty! Get well. We going to do this, we going to do this!" Love Ms. Julie Turner. I see her every Tuesday and the majority of the time if I'm not in any of the workshops I'll see her on Thursday.

AK: What do you like to do when you're not here at the Street Sense, when you're not selling the paper?

PS: I'm at home at Woodley Towers, with all my girlfriends, just having a good time. We eat three meals a day at home. Today we ate a pretty good breakfast and I'm hungry already for lunch. But at the eve, I'm tired and ready to rest. Ready to lay in my bed. talk to my girlfriend Debby. She's a Street Sense worker, and we talk about articles and stories and stuff like that. I would really like to, go to the choir, but the one thing about is I never had enough money on my SmartTrip, I have to stay home because I have the worst clothes on a Sunday. It's just terrible. I can't get down here 7 o'clock in the morning-time. Imma try. I've been smoking cigarettes, I've been buying 2 and 3 packs a day, they put that smoker's patch on me and they gave me and I've been cleared up ever since.

AK: So no more smoking?

PS: I ain't smoking, I ain't smoking. It's do or die, so I'm going to try a little bit better with pacing myself and doing it better this time, as I get older, try to sing better.

AK: Well there's a song that I heard that you do really well. I bet you'll recognize it by the first couple of notes.

PS: **sings "American Woman"**

AK: Wow! Beautiful. So when did you start singing "American Woman?"

PS: Couple years ago.

AK: And what does that song mean to you? Why do you think you like it so much?

PS: Well, I was going out with a Puerto Rican guy for real, and I had left him, I came to D.C., and I met the African guy, but my boyfriend died and left me with a baby, and my mother wouldn't let me take care of my baby, so I was just going through the changes of being a young woman, I had a baby at 17, and you know, coming down here and things like that. I made red, white, and blue t-shirt and I fashioned myself as the American woman and I've been singing American woman ever since that day.

AK: So Street Sense has been a big part of your life?

PS: It's been there for 10 years.

AK: What does it mean to you?

PS: It means a world of everything to me. It was the beginning, I have a good job. So all these progressions have been over the last 10 years, you know?

AK: My last question is, and I've been asking this to everybody, what is your dream scenario in your life?

PS: I want more independent housing. I don't know if I want to leave the Woodley Towers, but they do have other housing in Woodley Towers that is part of our housing complex. It depends on when the pension comes through.

AK: That was blues singer and veteran Patty Smith. To learn more about Street Sense, the nonprofit media center dedicated to creating economic opportunities for people experiencing homelessness, go to streetsense.org. To hear more Sound From the Street, find us on SoundCloud, Stitcher, or iTunes. You can also stream the show on Street Sense's site, streetsense.org/audio. Please keep the conversation going on Facebook and Twitter @streetsensedc.
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PS: **sings**