

Music: Feature

Status quo antebellum

Still revolutionary, Patti Smith and David Byrne soldier on

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In the '60s and '70s, New Yorkers despised the Lower East Side. Once a tenement district, it was merely housing for the "great unwashed." But it also housed both St. Mark's Church, where Patti Smith, in 1971, performed her first public reading of poetry, and since 1973, the legendary club CBGB, where the music careers of both Smith and David Byrne began.

They took circuitous routes to get there: Smith via Chicago, Philadelphia and South Jersey. Byrne arrived through Scotland, Baltimore and Providence. They both gravitated toward Lower Manhattan, which for more than a century was considered a nucleus for artistic expression and cultural diversity, as well as a haven to immigrants and the dispossessed.

Massive development has replaced the trash-strewn sidewalks where CBGB held court. Smith established herself there in 1975, performing songs and improvisational poetry during an initial seven-week stand that drew the attention of Bob Dylan, Lou Reed and Clive Davis, who promptly signed her to his fledgling Arista label.

Perhaps she got some of her manic onstage intensity from Janis Joplin, whom she befriended at the Chelsea Hotel during the latter's early stays in the city. Smith's emergence had begun with her status as a mainstay of the infamous hotel in the early '70s. She met playwright Sam Shepard there, with whom she collaborated on a series of projects, most notably a book of plays called *Mad Dog Blues*.

Becoming a powerful activist and a seminal poet along with being a musician, Smith referred to her work as "three chords merged with the power of the word." But by 1979, she had withdrawn from the business and did not fully reappear until the mid-'90s.

Among the other groups, including Television and the Ramones, that took to CBGB's tacky stage and developed their chops were Talking Heads, all angular, arty and aggressive. Bandleader Byrne spent the early '70s first playing violin and ukulele solo, then in a trio with two other Rhode Island School of Design students, future Heads Chris Frantz and Tina Weymouth. As a child, he had rejected the music lessons offered by his father, declaring his intention to become a secret agent and an astronaut, preferably at the same time.

New York got the best of him, however, and Talking Heads caught on in a big way, despite the potentially limited appeal of the band's Lower East Side art-rock detachment. The band evolved in a multitude of directions and lasted all the way to 1991, when Byrne began a still-vibrant and varied career as filmmaker, performance artist and solo musician.

Now both musicians are well into their 50s and touring behind strong new albums. Smith's *Trampin'* includes a song called "Radio Baghdad," written from the point of view of a beleaguered resident of the city under siege. Elsewhere on the album, her daughter Jesse plays piano on the title track, an old Marian Anderson spiritual. In the song "My Blakean Year," Smith summons the ghost of William Blake, Byrne's favorite poet.

On *Grown Backwards*, Byrne curtails some of his foot-stomping proclivities to tackle a Lambchop cover as well as two arias -- by Bizet and Verdi -- with equal aplomb. Less technical and more emotional, Byrne now evokes the style of Ira Gershwin and Cole Porter. But the funk quota is still present on "Dialog Box" and "Lazy," which, at more than nine minutes long, could well become a DJ staple.

Saturday, these two stalwarts play in town on the same night: Smith will still attack with blistering poetry, and has guitarist/longtime collaborator Lenny Kaye in tow, just as he was in 1971 at St. Mark's. Byrne will still make you want to dance, combining the subtlety of a string quartet with his customary rambunctious and exploratory adventures.

Despite the passage of a quarter-century, these two artists hold strong to the ideals fostered during their early days on the Lower East Side.



Nonesuch

A LITTLE HELP FROM HER FRIENDS: Patti Smith and her band



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SILENT HEAD: David Byrne