

# Patti Smith's 'Gung Ho' works despite glaring errors

**Competent album brings some songs that fans will like.**

**By Josh Krauter**  
Senior editor

Patti Smith's new album, "Gung Ho," is a reminder that icons don't always make iconic music.

It's a competent rock album that sounds like it was made, recorded and produced by real people, not untouchable deities. But that feeling of urgency, importance and absolute necessity that makes for rock god-head is missing from "Gung Ho." Instead, it's just a competent album full of decent rock songs.

Smith's 1975 debut album, "Horses," was an epic — a humorous, melancholy, alive, electric, varied and fiercely-played set of raw rock 'n' roll. It inspired, and still inspires, loads and loads of great bands, and kick-started New York punk.

Smith has never matched the intensity of "Horses" since — though 1978's "Easter" came close — but that's all it took to get the "legend" nameplate on her office door.

Still, "Gung Ho" has its moments, most often on the record's first half. And it's the most comfort-

able album Smith has made since the 1970s.

There are several reasons for this. First of all, Smith and the band (most of which were members of her old band) are finally getting back into the groove of making records and touring. "Gung Ho" is only the third album Smith has made since coming back from her long retirement, and her and the band sound rejuvenated.

Smith is probably also done grieving, which helps the music breathe again. Her comeback was spurred by the deaths of her husband, her brother and a former band member, all from heart attacks, and a good friend, photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, from AIDS.

So it was no surprise that her last two albums, "Gone Again" and "Peace and Noise," were sadder, sorer, sowing with an undercurrent of hope. Both albums had a handful of great songs, but there was something a bit stilted and a bit cold about them.

Smith and the band sounded a little uncomfortable rocking again, and though the material was good, the execution and heavy-handed production squeezed the excitement out of some of the music. It was as if the band were recording in a sauna during a heat wave.

Well, Smith and her band have

turned back into a spontaneous rock 'n' roll machine, and this time they have a producer who knows how to record guitar rock.

Gil Norton is at the helm on "Gung Ho," and his credits include the Pixies, Foo Fighters and Pere Ubu. Guest musicians also help out. Ex-Husker Du drummer Grant Hart, ex-Television guitarist Tom Verlaine and the ever-present Michael Stipe all lift a few tracks a notch or two higher.

But it's mostly Smith and her band who are responsible for this pleasing collection of rock, at least for the first half of the album. Smith manages the feat of making a better album than her last one with lesser material.

The first half of "Gung Ho" regains the intensity Smith has been missing for awhile. The record opens with "One Voice," and Lenny Kaye's winding guitar sounds more fluid and electric than it has in years. "Lo and Beholden" is an excellent companion piece to 1978's "Because the Night," and "Persuasion" is full of pop hooks, passion and fierce playing. "China Bird" is a great ballad.

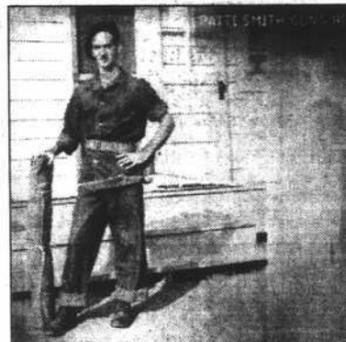
Then the album sags a little. "Strange Messengers" is an eight-minute pretentious mess, in which Smith speak-sings over meandering backing from the point of view of an

African slave transported on a slave ship. What can Smith, a white woman born in the 20th century, possibly have to add to this discussion, especially when she fails to tie it in to anything in the present that she may have a connection with?

Later, she tackles the 12-minute title track, in which she presents her take on Ho Chi Minh's experience in Vietnam. This song gets by on its hypnotic melody and trance-inducing musicianship, but the lyrics are more pretentious nonsense. Smith seems to be suffering from well-meaning white liberalism, and she's doing more harm than good.

She finally tackles a political subject that is in her range of experience on "New Party," an expression of dissatisfaction with the current climate of politics as usual. The song is loud and raucous, but the lyrics bash the listener over the head, without any trace of subtlety. I suspect Smith packs a U-Haul for a weekend vacation.

The pretensions in her lyrics have increased throughout her career. On "Horses," Smith covered Van Morrison and Them's "Gloria," keeping the gender pronouns the same and turning the song into a celebration of punk rock excess. On "Land," she threw snatches of "Land of a Thousand Dances" into the song,



**REVIEW** Patti Smith

**TITLE:** Gung Ho  
**LABEL:** Arista  
**GRADE:** B  
**FIVE WORDS:** Smith is back, sort of.

chanting "go Rimbaud" in between shouts to "do the Watusi," skewering her own pretensions and celebrating the simultaneous importance and ridiculousness of rock 'n' roll.

These three songs are severe missteps, but the strength of the rest of the material will keep "Gung Ho" out of the used bins. Anyone who likes Patti Smith will find much to enjoy here. Just make sure the fast-forward button works so you can trim the fat from the album, even if Smith didn't.

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