



PATTI SMITH, DREAM OF LIFE

109 minutes, 2008, USA

Director: Steven Sebring

Starring: Sam Shepard, Tom Verlaine, Philip Glass, Flea

Synopsis

Less a documentary than a slightly trippy home movie, Steven Sebring's DREAM OF LIFE gathers about 10 recent years' worth of footage of the rock icon Patti Smith: in performance, lolling on Baudelaire's grave, protesting the war in Iraq, strolling Coney Island with her children (who are so physically and spiritually similar to the artist as to appear almost as fractal emanations of her), jamming on acoustic guitars with old friend and former lover Sam Shepard, and chatting openly to the camera without a trace of self-consciousness. On the soundtrack is the elegiac narration by the artist herself, along with her incantatory poetry and music. The absence of portentous voiceovers or aggrandizing talking heads underscores the intimacy and humble quality of the production, although the plethora of cameo shots of members of rock music royalty indicates the wide-ranging influence Smith has had since the mid-1970s. The narrative is not exactly linear, but Smith and Sebring do take us on a biographical journey, highlighting the 1990s and '00s especially, the time of her widowhood and subsequent comeback to music. Longing, sadness, and grief (for her beloved husband, Fred Smith, as well as for her brother, her parents, and her friend Robert Mapplethorpe) hang in the air, but Smith's personality is so winningly girlish and full of present-moment wonderment that the sadness is poignant and life-affirming rather than depressing. The film--perhaps a little long at two hours but still a visual and musical feast--is a celebration of the redemptive power of song and poetry, of being awake to the beauty all around, and it is a tonic for the soul.

Review: **Hannah Forbes Black, Channel 4 Film**

Fashion photographer Steven Sebring spent 11 years following Patti Smith around with a camera to create this access-all-areas exploration of a life in rock n roll. Chanting, drooling, looking like nobody else on earth - Patti Smith gives concerts that are like religious ceremonies. Fittingly, Steven Sebring has produced not so much a documentary as a film gospel for a living god, edited down from 11 years of footage.

Sebring has been filming Smith since he met her at a photoshoot in the 1990s, capturing everything from live performances to quiet moments with friends and family. Smith jokes that, a decade into the project, she has decided to go on strike in the corner of her bedroom until the film is finished. The narrative, such as it is, is structured around this mock-protest, as the artifacts and records unearthed by Smith give a loose order to Sebring's freewheeling account of her life.

Smith's narration - the same unhurried, crooning rasp as her singing voice - guides Dream Of Life as it jumps between years and countries according to which of Smith's belongings and stories the camera last paid attention to. It all feels not a little formless, but it's hard to say what kind of form could best be given to such a full and varied life. On balance the approach works, not only because Smith is a good storyteller but because she doesn't really change, though we see her in different guises: a skinny, grinning twenty something in the Chelsea Hotel, a white witch presiding over an adoring coterie of musicians, a widow walking in the park with her daughter. This down-

to-earth, easy-living quality is part of Smith's charm, quite different from the unreal appeal of other (male) rock stars, and it's one of the reasons why it's a pleasure to spend this rambling 109 minutes with her - an egotistical genius in the traditional mode would start to grate under such intimate examination.

Keeping one foot in the real world, she took 16 years out of her career to raise two children and came back as if hardly any time had passed at all to record a series of critically successful albums, hang out with star-struck younger musicians and act as high priestess at political protests. Not exactly beautiful, lanky as a teenage boy and dressed like Chaplin's tramp, she pushes, without seeming to care, at the boundaries of what is normal or possible for women, which is one of the reasons she's not just admired but worshipped.

This, the worship Smith inspires, is one of the problems with Sebring's adoring documentary - if you're not a member of the Church of Patti, it will do very little for you. From the beginning it's assumed that if you're watching then you're already a convert. This is a fair assumption, and there are more than enough believers in the world to make Patti Smith: Dream Of Life a success. But perhaps Sebring has missed a trick by sticking too closely to his fan-boy instincts, failing to find a way of contextualising his subject and making her charm tangible to outsiders. At no point in the film do we see her interacting with anyone who isn't already a disciple; as must be the case for so many famous and cosseted people, she is like a precious parcel passed hand-to-hand around the world from one admirer to the next. The film's closing scenes, in which she walks the streets of Jerusalem, are somehow jarring - the great legendary woman, trailing her very particular iconography and music, clashes with the great legendary city and the film doesn't benefit from the juxtaposition. Sebring started out as a fashion photographer, and unsurprisingly Dream Of Life is beautifully photographed. Sebring seeks out set-piece shots that look as if they could have been lifted from a fashion magazine, and achieves a remarkable visual consistency across 11 years of footage mixed with archival snippets. The art-school atmospherics are a bit distracting at times but the extraordinary intimacy and access that Smith has allowed save the film from the coldness that can come from this kind of aesthetic striving.

As Smith pours the ashes of her photographer friend Robert Mapplethorpe - who shot the cover of her 1975 debut 'Horses' - into her cupped hand and shows them to the camera, you wonder how Sebring found the discipline to cull what must have been an embarrassment of riches down into just one documentary. Plus he's resisted the temptation to streamline, allowing moments of domesticity or boredom as much space as his star's raucous live shows. In the end, it all comes down to how you feel about Patti herself - is she a poet and mystic, an iconic rock n roll star, a middle-aged eccentric, all three, none of the above? Dream of Life, lovely-looking and open-hearted as it is, isn't going to change anyone's opinion.

Patti Smith is a writer, artist and performer. Her seminal album Horses was followed by eleven releases, including Radio Ethiopia, Easter, Dream of Life, Gone Again, Peace and Noise, Trampin' and Twelve. Her artwork was first exhibited at the Gotham Book Mart in 1973, and she has been associated with the Robert Miller Gallery since 1978. "Strange Messenger" a retrospective of three hundred works, made it's debut at the Andy Warhol Musuem in Pittsburg and has been exhibited world wide, most notably at the Institute of Contemporary art, Philidelphia: Haus der Kunst, Munich: the Parco museum, Tokyo: The Musuem Boijsmans Van Beunigen, Rotterdam and The Palazzo Fontano di Trevi, Rome. Her books include Witt, Babel, Wool Gathering, The Coral Sea, Complete, and Augeries of Innocence. On July 10, 2005 she received the commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres; the highest grade awarded by the French Republic to eminent artists and writers who have contributed significantly to furthering the arts through out the world

Steven Sebring is a photographer/director known for his definitive style of merging raw realism with high fashion. He has worked with numerous magazines and shot campaigns for companies such as Ralph Lauren, Lanvin, Maybelline, DKNY, and Coach. It was however, his shooting celebrity and artist portraiture that led to his meeting and photographing Patti Smith.