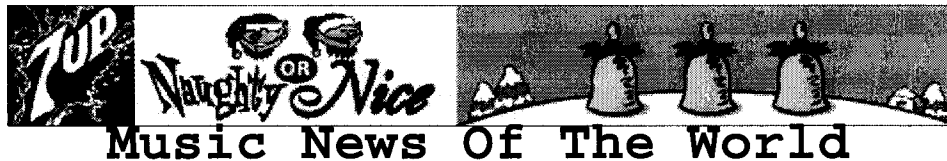


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## Music News Of The World

-- Nov 25, 1997 --

Edited by Michael Goldberg

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## Patti Smith's Punk Improvisations At Music Critic's Memorial

Guitarist Lenny Kaye and Smith create performance art based on Robert Palmer's writings.

**A**ddicted To Noise correspondent Michael Kramer reports : NEW YORK

-- In an afternoon with so much to be shared, remembered and saddened over, it was a moment that all but summed up the life of late, great music critic/musician Robert Palmer.



'I loved Robert Palmer [pictured],' Kaye said, 'because he showed that writing about music and playing it was the same thing.'

Just before Rolling Stone senior editors Anthony DeCurtis and David Fricke finished up the memorial ceremony held at Tramps Sunday with eloquent commentary on the late critic's theory on rock's ability to liberate, punk poet Patti Smith and her longtime guitarist Lenny Kaye ambled onstage.

In one of the afternoon's most poignant speeches, Kaye -- himself the rare person who both plays music and writes about it -- thought for a moment and said, "I loved Robert Palmer because he showed that writing about music and playing it was the same thing."

And then came the afternoon's most perfect moment.

To prove the point, Smith, who Palmer had written so much about in his day, began reciting Palmer's criticism over Kaye's electric guitar improvisations.

She used Palmer's commentary on hearing Little Richard for the first time to create an impromptu poem. Then, in the next song, she played wild, blazing notes on her clarinet, and the music built to a frenzy as Palmer's daughter, Augusta, other family members and a toddler who had just learned to walk danced in a circle at the center of the club.

In the world of rock 'n' roll, there are usually those who play and those who listen and write about it. Rarely is there a person who crosses the divide between musician and critic. Still, the overriding message at the afternoon's memorial ceremony for the late rock critic and reed player Palmer was that this accomplished writer, saxophonist, record producer and documentarian, who died of complications from liver disease last Thursday at 52, was such a rarity.

DeCurtis and Fricke, along with guitar master Gary Lucas, roots-rock/ art-rock band the Kropotkins (with Velvet Underground drummer Maureen Tucker on the drums), and punk great Smith (who played a benefit for Palmer during her recent C.B.G.B.'s shows), joined about 100 of Palmer's family, friends and colleagues for the moving ceremony.

DeCurtis began the afternoon by reading from Palmer's work for those who had gathered in the dark quiet of Tramps, the Manhattan roots-rock club that Palmer not only had frequented, but also had performed at while he lived in New York

In the selection DeCurtis chose, Palmer journeyed back to his first encounters with rock 'n' roll, before he became the first full-time popular music critic for the *New York Times* from 1976 to 1988, before he wrote his groundbreaking work, *Deep Blues*, on the rich musical heritage of the Mississippi delta and before he served as the main consultant to PBS' *History of Rock and Roll* documentary. The passage described a teenage Palmer hearing rock 'n' roll in the 1950s. "It was so much more vitally alive than anything we had heard before that it needed a new category. Rock 'n' roll was much more than new music for us. It was an obsession and a way of life," DeCurtis read.

Then, Gary Lucas, one-time sidekick to Captain Beefheart, stepped forward to flat-pick the acoustic guitar. His playing beckoned back to the blues even as his guitar pyrotechnics moved the music toward something new. Lucas' avant-blues matched Palmer's own musical wanderings, from the Mississippi delta sounds that Palmer so eloquently

recognized as the bedrock from which rock 'n' roll sprang to the critic's free jazz clarinet collaborations with saxophonist Ornette Coleman.

The Kropotkins followed next with a series of Mississippi blues numbers. Maureen Tucker banged away passionately on the timpani for a more experimental song. The band members pointed out that Palmer was the model of a music critic because he put the music in its historical context so that one could learn something. Palmer was a boundary breaker who took rock 'n' roll seriously as an art form, they said.

Everyone listened respectfully as members of Palmer's family talked about their loved one, describing him as a man who liked to have a good time, and who was an exceptional storyteller. Palmer's daughter Augusta said that her father would have wanted to have dancing at such a service, "so if people had the gumption, they should stand up."

Later in the afternoon, DeCurtis seconded Augusta Palmer's request. "Lest we not forget," he explained, "Bob was a wild cat." [Tues., Nov. 25, 1997, 9 a.m. PDT]

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