



SHARP EYE Patrick Robyn in 1978

**BACK** in 1976, not long before Ann Demeulemeester left her small Flanders town of Waregem to study at Antwerp's Royal Academy, she made a startling discovery at her local music store. She was stopped dead in her tracks by the sight of Horses, Patti Smith's 1975 debut album. "I had no idea who it was by," she says, "I was just struck by the cover." Certainly the sleeve image, a portrait of the singer by Smith's close friend Robert Mapplethorpe, is almost as intense as the music itself. Smith coolly stares out, lanky and androgynous, in a white shirt, a skinny black tie around her neck, a black jacket draped over one shoulder; the perfect figurehead for a music world that was spinning away from overblown stadium rock to the fast and furious three-chord poetry that Smith and her proto-punk New York cohorts were defiantly playing. What really made its mark on Demeulemeester. though, was that she had this intuition-she is a great believer in intuition and fate and the way that life brings people together-"I'm going to know this woman."

Demeulemeester and Smith have now been friends for more than a decade. It's hard to imagine them not knowing each other, given the synergy between fashion and rock-especially when Smith modeled in Demeulemeester's menswear show in January 2006 and produced an improvised sound track to her spring 2007 women's show. And when it comes to Ann Demeulemeester, she's the closest thing fashion has to its very own Patti Smitha maverick free spirit who has matured into an iconoclastic talent who always goes her own way, regardless of which way the winds of change are blowing; a designer able to make clothes that are darkly subversive yet are easily capable of being elegant and romantic and, yes, even chic.

'Well, we are very similar in the way that we conduct ourselves," says Smith over lunch at Café

de Flore in Paris, where she and Demeulemeester have met up. That's how their friendship works:

SCISSOR SISTER Smith, photographed by close friend and former roommate Robert Mapplethorp

in 1978.

They see each other when they can be in the same European city, because while Smith has toured the world over, Demeulemeester has chosen to focus her life on Antwerp, rarely venturing beyond it except to go to Paris for work. Smith continues, "I always wear Ann's clothes because ... I feel like myself in them. I can wear them onstage, sleep on the tour bus in them. ... You know, I always find it so funny: I can be all rumpled from being on the road, but I'm still in the most beautiful clothes in the world.

They got to know each other when Demeulemeester contacted Smith just after she made her Paris runway debut in 1991, where she played the singer's album Wave as the sound track. A few days later, Demeulemeester sent her a note and a white shirt from that collection. "I was in Detroit, raising my children, leading a pretty isolated life," Smith says, "and a package arrived, so exquisitely wrapped, with this beautiful shirt. And I thought, This person knows me, because it was as if I had designed that shirt myself, it was so perfect for me." They wrote to each other for five years before they met backstage at a gig of Smith's in Ostend. Demeulemeester was a little hesitant-perhaps she'd heard that old adage about never meeting your heroes-but in the end the meeting was, she says, "easy, natural . . . all the good things were confirmed." And as to why she sent that package, Demeulemeester smiles. "Patti's work is part of my life," she says. "She is so inspiring. But I don't just see her as a woman in rock. She's a poet, an artist, and with that, everything is said."

when she mentions the musicians she admires and you consider her clothes-the slouchy pantsuits, the deconstructed shearlings, the fragile tees, the military coats, the leathers that look like they've been slicked and oiled after a dark, rainy night, and all cast in tones and shades and textures of black-there is the sense that the two feed off each other. Yet it happens in a way that is far subtler and more imaginative than one would expect from a "rock designer," the tag she is sometimes lazily labeled with.

Demeulemeester's runway shows might use the music that moves her, and she might cast them with models who look like gloomy goth rockers, but she has never just appropriated the images of the musicians she admires in her collections; what she strives for is capturing what music evokes in her

designs. "Musicians don't realize how much energy and emotion they bring to the people who are listening to them." she says. "I always think, Oh, my God, I have to make something that's as beautiful."

Not surprisingly, punk was hugely important to her. She started at the Royal Academy-Dries Van Noten was a fellow student in the tiny fashion course-the same year that anarchy made its way from the U.K. to Antwerp. But while she cheered the attitude, she

But if Demeulemeester has succeeded in bringing the spirit of rock to her clothes, there's also something else at work. Something that Patti Smith said over that lunch in Paris could have just as easily been spoken by Demeulemeester. "I have a great reverence for the past," Smith says as she discusses playing the Olympia in Paris, the theater immortalized by Edith Piaf. Demeulemeester shares that quality, balancing the countercultural and the classical. Long before

## Even when I'm rumpled frombeing on the road, I'm still in beautiful clothes"—*Patti Smith*

That's pretty much the refrain you'd hear in all the music she loves. She listens, and listens really intently (because there's no such thing as music-as-background-noise chez Demeulemeester), to Lou Reed. Nico, Nick Cave, and Tom Verlaine, whom she calls "the greatest and most sensitive guitarist ever." And



hated the nihilism. "I didn't agree with what they were shouting-'No future!' "she says. "I thought, Of course there's a future, and I am going to work for it." Work she did, with a single-minded determination. At 26, she married Patrick Robyn, the photographer she'd been with since she was sixteen. She bought the only Le. Corbusier house in Belgium, and had her son, Victor, after setting up her business while she was pregnant with him, sketching her first collection while propped up in bed. And she got pregnant first because she was worried that otherwise work would take over, and that would be the end of her ever having kids. Don't take it as some particularly feminist stance—a Low Countries Gloria Steinem in Siouxsie Sioux makeup, "I've always done things my way." Demeulemeester says simply. "I am just a Flemish girl with her feet on the ground."

And if Demeulemeester didn't buy into punk's rejection of tomorrow, she also limited its belief in ripping up the past to what she wore. Punk allowed her complete freedom to dress whatever way she liked. She'd scour markets for vintage finds to create her own look. "I remember I could never really find exactly what I wanted," she says, so her solution was to attach ties to wrap around the body or add scraps of leather, or paint shoes, or think how she could rework menswear to fit a woman. All ideas, incidentally, that still filter into her collections to this day.

Demeulemeester started her own line, she endured several years at an austere, bourgeois Belgian fashion house, all the better to learn how to cut and tailor, despite the fact that the house didn't always appreciate her ideas. "They put a coat I designed onto a broom, as if it was a scarecrow," she says, laughing. "But I BELOW: The designer didn't care. I've always loved the classics—a beauti-fully tailored jacket, well-cut trousers. And I wanted of Demeulemeester's to know how to make them. I always told myself, One spring 2007 show. day they'll understand what I'm trying to do."

## BOUNDARIES

