"YOU'D GET YOUR CAMERA SMASHED"

Brooke Smith discusses her time in the mid-1980s New York hardcore scene

By Sam McPheeters

Jan Lorenzen (SFA) and Neil Robinson (Nausea) with Sinner the dog.

For the past 35 years, actress Brooke Smith has appeared in *Grey's Anatomy*, *Bates Motel*, *Interstellar*, *Law & Order*, and *Weeds*, yet is best known as Catherine Martin—"It rubs the lotion on its skin"—in 1991's *Silence of the Lambs*. But before her Hollywood career, Smith spent time in the center of the 1980s New York hardcore scene. In 2022, she published *Sunday Matinee*, a gorgeous hardcover collection of photos from this part of her life. We recently met up at the Burbank Ikea and found a suitable living room in which to have a chat.

I started going to CBGB hardcore matinees in 1987. Nobody in that scene cared about the original punk explosion of 10 years earlier. Instead, the hardcore crowd was obsessed with the previous five years of music, 1981 to 1986. Meaning, your era. But when did your era begin personally? 1983?
'83 sounds about right.

What was your first show?
The Mob.

Okay.
And Cause for Alarm.

Cro-Mags at Irving Plaza, the Rock Hotel show from 1985.

Aha. Should have led with that.
But they weren't the headliner. And I had a crush on their singer, Chris Charucki.

Was that a good first show?
It was a *great* first show. And I shot it! Which seems insane, to just show up as a 14-year-old with a camera.

You once described the camera as a way to get very close to the action and yet also be able to hide. Was that something you discovered, or did you have that in mind from the start?
I think it was just instinct. I was super fat and very insecure, and I think I wanted to be a singer.

So, you're not the most secure person, and yet you wind up being pretty tight with the three top bands: Agnostic Front, Bad Brains, and Cro-Mags. Am I right in remembering that you roadied for all three?
I really only drove Cro-Mags.

Which, right there, that's insane.
It's so insane, dude. I'm in [Cro-Mags bassist] Harley's new documentary—I'd just come from hot yoga, I have frazzled hair and a red face, I look like a lunatic. But there's this section in the film where people like Henry Rollins are like, "Yeah, those were the few years where I didn't go near Harley, he scared the shit out of me." *That's* when I was hanging out with him.

It sounds like you pretty quickly became tight with the upper echelon there.
I feel like I did, but I think it's because I had a car. You forgot about my green station wagon! It was kind of like a little VIP lounge there, because I would just park right in front of CBGB.

How soon did these people befriend you?
It didn't take long, because my "in" was this guy Fran who worked at Trash and Vaudeville. He sold drugs to everybody on the scene. So that was a great way to meet people. He lived in an old toy store on Ludlow, and people would come through there, and that's how I'd meet them.

Hard drugs?
Mostly weed, but also some speed.

I've heard you say that speed was your ticket to quickly shedding weight.
Oh yeah. But I didn't realize that then. I thought it was vegetarianism. [*Laughs*]

Were your parents concerned?
I mean, they were both at work.

Rockland County, right?
No, that's where we lived, but they worked in the city. I was a PA on a play the summer before I graduated high school. And I stayed in my mom's friend's sublet, which I then took over and lived in with [Cro-Mags singer] John Bloodclot.

As roommates, right? You and him were never... [*Makes "funny" hand gesture*]
No. Just roommates. And yet I'd be lying if I didn't say I was obsessed with him.

He was a handsome but terrifying young man.
Yeah. Just my type.

It sounds like you knew your friends were terrifying in real time.
Yeah, I think I did.

At CBGB matinees, I was very scared of many of the people you've documented in your book. It wasn't just the violence; there was also a strong through-line of humiliating people. My thing at all those matinees was, "If I'm going to get beat up, I do *not* want to get beat up by any of those girls." Which I guess could have included you.
But I was a poser. I wouldn't have actually beaten you up. I would've just been with the people beating you up. [*Laughs*] I mean...I wanted them on my side.

I later learned that trick. You must've witnessed some pretty gnarly fights.
I'm pretty sure I've blocked out a lot of it. In Harley's documentary, they showed a picture of him holding this tire thumper. I was with him when he bought it at a rest stop on the way to

Montreal, because there was going to be some big fucking fight. And I don't remember any of that trip except for when they separated us at the border, took the seats out of my car, and interviewed us.

Us 1987 people had two big chronological markers for scene cred: A7 and the Rat Cage Records store. Did you make it to the A7 club?
I didn't. But everyone talked about it. *Those* shows started at 1 a.m. I saw shows at the Great Gildersleeves. Jerry's Kids, Minor Threat. Although I don't remember actually seeing them.

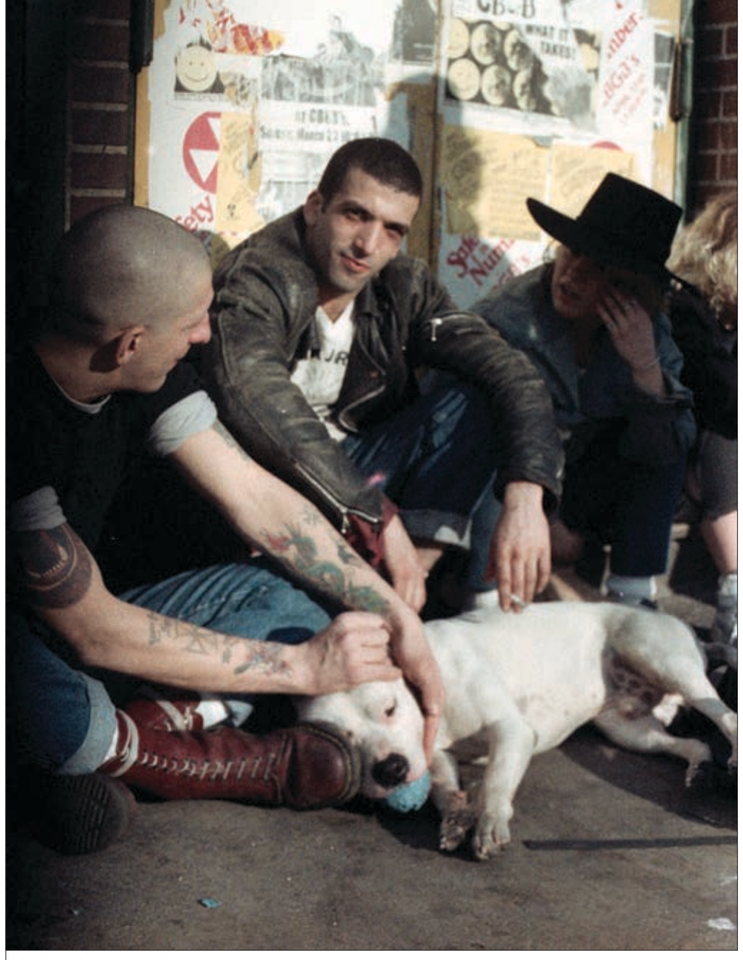
Speaking as an '87 person, that is quite the flex.
I want to see the Damned now, because I know that I worked a million Damned shows as coat check at the Ritz, but I don't remember actually seeing them.

You know, our periods overlapped. I wonder if I ever handed you my coat.
Older people checked their coats. I did it with my friend Alexa. People would come back because they'd forgotten the drugs in their pockets and they'd be like, "Can I just get something out of my coat?" And we'd be like, "Yeah, five bucks."

How musically tolerant was that scene? I remember scrutinizing the Cro-Mags' *Age of Quarrel* LP when it came out. In that band photo on the back, Bloodclot had a PiL hand tattoo, which fascinated me and my high school pals…
Oh my God, that's so funny.

Or like how the Beastie Boys listened to the Slits and Wire in high school…
You're saying we were more musically broad-minded?

***Yes.* I'd always gotten the impression that you '83 people were far more musically broad-minded than my micro-generation.**
It's funny, I do have this memory of being with Roger from Agnostic Front in my mom's Subaru and him singing along to Whitney Houston. I was shocked.



RayBeez, English Mark, Blitz the dog, and friends at CBGB.

When I've heard you talk about photography in the past, you've talked about experimenting with speed and lighting and equipment. But I've never heard you mention any photographers whose work inspired you.
I don't think there were any. At that time there was just Amy from Nausea. She had the best photos of anyone, and they later apparently all burned in a fire. I think it was in watching her, I thought, "Oh yeah, I should do this." And BJ Papas, the photographer.

Did you have access to darkrooms in high school?
Yeah. When I graduated, I got a little government bond as a photography award. But I just was into capturing. It wasn't really about the art of photography.

I got the impression you'd never thought of yourself as a photographer.
No, I don't think I did.

Well, then, this feels like the appropriate spot to mention those incredible Polaroids of John Joseph and Harley Flanagan holding one of Ingrid Bergman's Oscars. You were dog-sitting for Isabella Rossellini, right?
I was. That was in Tribeca before Tribeca was even Tribeca.

Bad Brains at the Ritz, NYC, 1986.

Amy Keim (Nausea) with daughter Nadia at CBGB.

Do you think Rossellini ever found out about those photos?
Oh God. I don't know. They slept over! [*Laughs*]

Having the Cro-Mags secretly visit your house is like *Mulholland Drive* times *Lost Highway*.
I will say that those photos, even one of those that's not in the book, that's the same week I'd called my mom to get money to get drugs and found out my brother had been killed in an accident. So I had to leave.

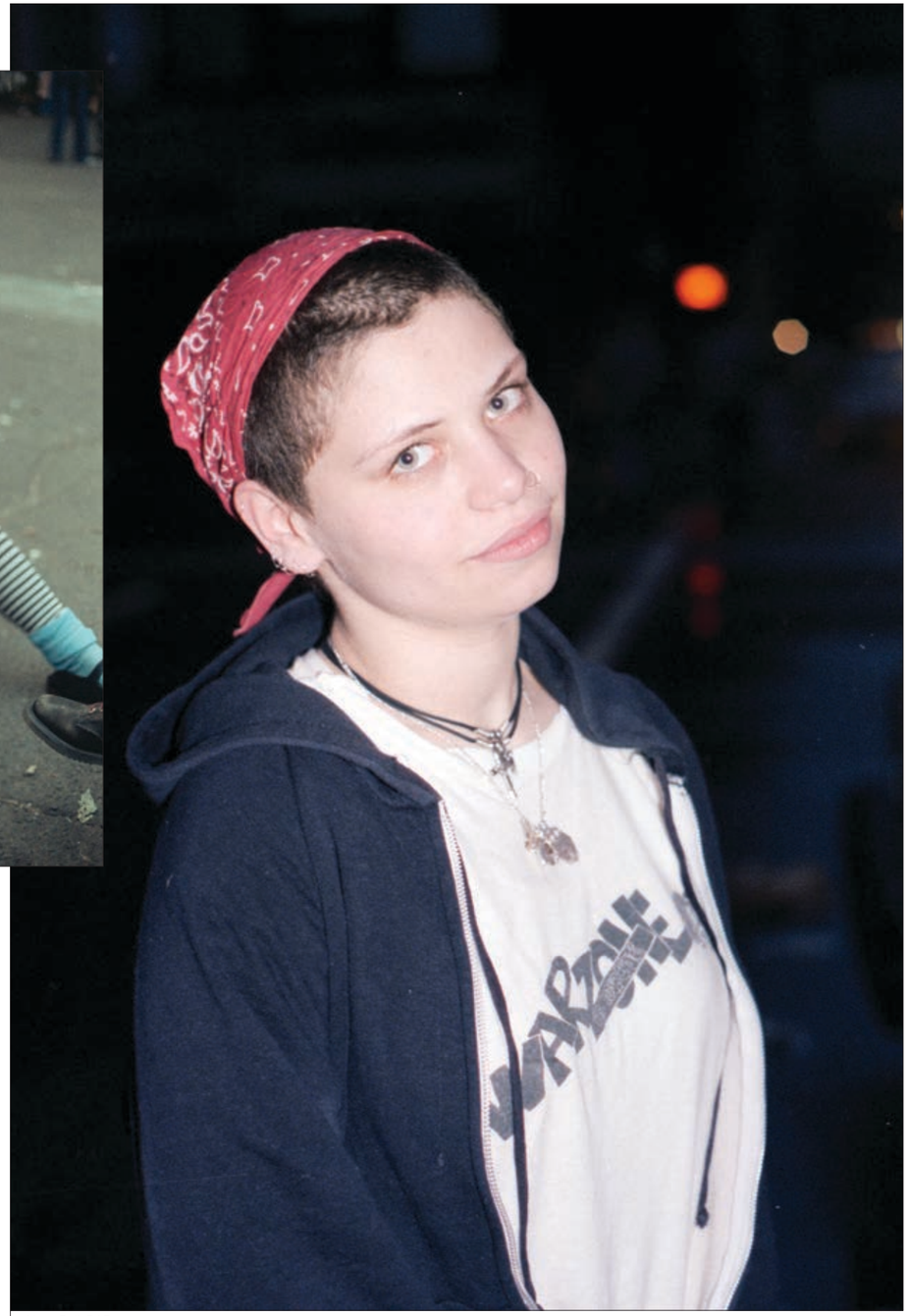
You've talked about 1980s New York eccentrics like Kevin Carpet, the guy who rolled himself up in rugs and let people on the street step on him. Or the guy from Danceteria who wore a saddle on his back…
Oh my God. I saw him all the time. Did you see that guy?

No, I just know about him through you.
I loved Nick Cave more than anyone, and I know I saw him in his very first show at Danceteria with Lydia Lunch, but I was so high, so I don't really remember. *But* I do remember that guy with the saddle. Wow.

It's interesting that you didn't photograph these types of New York characters. In your published photos, people are engaging with you directly. Often, they're smiling and making eye contact…
Because you couldn't take pictures of people if you didn't know them. Unless they were performing. Especially at CBGB. You'd get your camera smashed. It was notorious for that.

Did you ever get in on the charging-tourists-money-for-photos thing?
Oh yeah.

Jodi Wayne at Tompkins Square Park.



Alexa Poli, R.I.P.

A wholesome scam.
Totally.

For us in the late 1980s, much of the mythology of the early 1980s had to do with violence. I remember hearing all these stories of the "skinhead–Puerto Rican wars." These tales were so outrageously violent that they sounded like Bugs Bunny cartoons. Did you hear stories like that? Was it all just urban folklore?
I definitely heard stories like that. And there was definitely a Puerto Rican–versus–skinhead thing. There was one experience where I was in the park, and I was hanging out with everybody, and I'm not going to say who it was…

Jenny Lush and friend at CBGB.

Frenchie Da Skin.

Nor should you.
But a very funny, great guy just turned like that. [*Snaps*] And I saw it. Someone came over and whispered, "This is happening." And he took his chain off his waist and they went off. I just couldn't reconcile the two sides of this one person, the funny guy and the guy fighting with the chain. I just remember him literally telling jokes and then being like, "Oh. *Shit*." And yet it kind of excited me, which feels wrong. I also have this weird letter from the police department from 1984. I'd witnessed a police brutality incident in the park, and all I can remember was I'm sure that I've seen violence that I've blocked out. So there was definitely violence happening, but not in the pit. That happened at the end, when you came along.

I want to get your opinion on the political schizophrenia of that scene. I remember in the late 1980s, everyone at CB's shows made these ridiculous distinctions between "white pride" and "white power"…
What's the difference between white pride and white power?

Exactly. And yet everyone loved Bad Brains, even the white supremacists.
Which I always thought was cool, that I knew people who thought they were Nazis, and yet their favorite band was Bad Brains. I loved that.

I remember being flabbergasted the first time I saw non-white Nazi skinheads at a CB's show. Was that a thing in your era?
Oh, I didn't know those people.

And then there was all the gay bashing, often by the same people who would hang out with drag queens at the Pyramid.
I would hear about gay bashing from people I knew who were supposedly doing it. A couple of whom, if you had asked me at the time, I probably wouldn't have admitted but thought *were* gay. But I was going to say, I definitely witnessed people showing up at CBGB who had heard there were Nazis, and they came down looking for that.

You have an interesting theory about that. By 1987, there was this awareness that bands signing to larger labels had

Todd Youth (Warzone, Murphy's Law, Danzig), Jimmy Gestapo (Murphy's Law), and RayBeez (Warzone).

the side effect of drawing more violent assholes to hardcore shows. We could see it happening in real time. Your take was that some of the blame should have been directed at *Maximumrocknroll*, the leftist San Francisco fanzine, for harping on Nazis at CBGB matinees, thus attracting actual Nazis to CB's.
I think that's what I decided. I remember people showing up and assuming that they were Nazis and thinking, "No, you should not assume that about those people." But there *were* some lyrics that were a little hard to…like "Public Assistance" by Agnostic Front.

Oh yeah. And "Shoot His Load," celebrating [subway vigilante] Bernie Goetz.
Yeah. I mean…people make mistakes.

Do you remember your last show? Did you have a definitive last show?
No, I don't remember. But I do remember when I drove the Cro-Mags to Montreal, it was nine days after my little brother died in a surfing accident. And I remember [drummer] Mackie saying to me, "Why are you hanging out with these guys? These are not good people." And it was the first time it kind of landed. When we got back, we got to the Queens-Midtown Tunnel, and they had those things where you threw the change in. And I was adamant I wasn't even going to put a quarter in. "I've done enough. I drove you guys to Canada and back. I probably paid for all the fucking gas. This is it." We just sat there, with all these cars backed up behind us. It was a good 10 minutes there of like, "All right, guys, who's got some quarters?"

Terry Psycho at CBGB.

Commuters love that kind of behavior.
And I remember soon after coming back from Montreal, being at the pizza place on Avenue A and St. Mark's. I'd met some new punks who had just shown up who were sleeping in the park or whatever, and them saying, "What's up, what's new?" And me saying, "My brother died," and just being like, "Oh, I'm done here." It was a real moment.

During one of the *Sunday Matinee* readings, you used the phrase "trauma bonding" to refer to that world. Meaning, that particular CBGB hardcore crowd—more than any other large hardcore punk scene in America—attracted traumatized kids. Yourself included.
A hundred percent.

After you left New York, you were roommates with Jeff Buckley, right? How did that happen?
I went out to L.A. right after *Silence of the Lambs* for pilot season, and I stayed at the hotel next to the Magic Castle. Jeff was the concierge with long hair who worked at the front desk.

The hotel where Janis Joplin died?
That's the place next to it. I was out here a lot, so we hung out here a lot. But then I remember saying, "I have this other bedroom. My roommate moved out. You want to move in?" And he was like, "Yeah." And there was crossover with New York! Because I hooked him up. He played with Petey Hines and Jimmy Gestapo from Murphy's Law.

What?
Yeah. And E.K., the drummer from Warzone.

Are there recordings of this?
I don't think so.

I didn't realize he was into punk music.
He wasn't. Although I turned him on to Bad Brains. Jeff was obsessed with going to see them live and actually flew to Chicago to see them at one point. And H.R. had hit somebody with a mic or something and went to jail. So their set was canceled and he never got to see them. And he wasn't fancy Jeff then, either. It was a big deal. He was like, "Goddammit, I'm going to see them."

Did you keep in touch with him?
Yeah. Until the end. I don't really listen to his music much. When I hear it, it makes me sad.

Doesn't it seem weird that we have to walk around with this expert knowledge of one little sliver of the 20th century, and every year this knowledge gets more and more esoteric and less and less connected to life in the 21st century?
I was talking to my 17-year-old and her friends in the car, when I was driving them home from school, and I said, "Do you guys know what selling out is?" And they were like, "No, but it sounds like it's not a good thing." But isn't this what everybody goes through? One of my mentors was the playwright Wally Shawn…

Wasn't Wallace Shawn in *The Moderns* with you?
Oh yeah, *The Moderns*! My first movie ever. My SAG card movie. But Wally has an incredible play that was made into a movie called *The Designated Mourner*, I think of it almost every day. It's more highbrow than his other work…

More highbrow than *My Dinner With Andre*?!
Those are actually my mentors! Andre and Wally. I worked with them for years and years and years and years. But his play is about a designated mourner in this tribe where they're the ones who remember everything that came before. And then at the end of the play, a new character becomes the designated mourner. And now that person has to remember everything that came before. Because I feel like… everything just *goes*, right?

Well, shit. Right.
I know this is a weird thing to say, but Robert Redford was my godfather.

Yeah, that's a weird thing to say.
My mom was his publicist. And the fact that there's a large amount of humans who don't know who he is now… When I was a kid, there was *no one* bigger. I remember being at his daughter's wedding maybe 20 years ago, in Vermont. And being at the airport and having the JetBlue lady say to Robert Redford, "Sir, could you step aside, please?" Because he was holding up the line. When I was a kid, they held planes for him. Anyway, it's wild to see all that happen, but I guess it's okay. It's okay.

A friend with Petey Hines (Cro-Mags, Murphy's Law, etc.) and Brad "Batmite" Davis (Warzone) at CBGB.