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[Jim Carroll revisited](#)

by [Ben Spier](#)

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Among the legion of artists who passed away this summer, who spurred you to belated remembrance? For me, it was the punk poet [Jim Carroll](#), who died on the anniversary of 9/11: Sadly, I hardly knew him. Sure, he was the author of the growing-up-rough memoir [The Basketball Diaries](#), a.k.a. the pre-*Titanic* big-screen showcase for Leo DiCaprio. And that song “People Who Died”: arguably one of the hardest-rocking requiems ever written, with a jabbing repetitive chorus that still burns in the brain some 30 years on. (One can only imagine it being attempted in front of Simon and Ellen on *American Idol* – or in a neighborhood karaoke bar.) But what of the rest of his musical output? How does it hold up three decades out?

The pickings are sparse: A search at New York’s fabled record mecca [Other Music](#) turned up nada. Online, the offerings consisted of the Jim Carroll Band’s 1980 debut, *Catholic Boy*, and a 2000 solo EP, *Runaway*. Judging by the former, though, Carroll was far more than a one-trick pony. *Catholic Boy* arguably lacks the bare-bones hookiness of the Ramones at their zenith, the melodic grandeur of Television, or the arty experimentalism of Talking Heads. Yet it boasts a clutch of pop-punk standouts in addition to “People Who Died.” From the druggy tormented howl of “Wicked Gravity” to the soul-searing confessional of the title track, the poet rocks with the ferocity of Iggy and the lyrical chops of Patti Smith. (To my mind, Carroll’s verbal dexterity is best appreciated on the printed or Web page. His tendency to speed up and spit out words in a half-intelligible snarl beneath layers of guitar squall can obscure tossed-off shout-outs to Raymond Chandler and Aimee Semple McPherson – or nail-on-the-head imagery, like “She cleans her skin with a krypton laser,” from “Nothing Is True.”) In perhaps the most indelible track, “Day and Night,” Carroll tamps down the sonic onslaught for a brooding midtempo ballad of romantic yearning. And on “City Drops Into the Night,” a saxophone intro punctuates the song’s urban noir into piquant reverie. *Catholic Boy* may not be the “last great punk album,” as some have hailed it (that leaves out X’s *Wild Gift* and the neo-punk flowering of the ‘90s), but it packs an undeniable kick.

Compared with the sweep of *Catholic Boy*, *Runaway* is almost a throwaway. Besides the title track, a jarringly spooky take on the Del Shannon chestnut, it offers just one new song: “Hairshirt Fracture,” whose pulsing synths undergird a near-dirge of nihilistic world-weariness (“I’ve said all I can, I’ve reached the end”). Those eerily prophetic words may have to serve as a musical coda to Carroll’s on-and-off career, until some enterprising record label issues a retrospective — or reissues *A World Without Gravity: The Best of the Jim Carroll Band*. Also worth checking out: Carroll’s collaborations with latter-day punk outfit [Rancid](#), such as his

spoken-word rap on 1995's "Junkie Man," from *Out Come the Wolves*. Not to mention his nonmusical epitaph "[8 Fragments for Kurt Cobain.](#)"

Sound off, punk-loving Music Mixers. Where would you rank the Jim Carroll Band between the Class of '77 and their no-wave and alt-rock successors? How does its rough-hewn sound stack up against today's more polished punk bands, like Green Day and Paramore? And does *Catholic Boy* have the blunt-force impact of the *Diaries*?

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- *Frank From MusicNerdClub.com*

Mon 09/21/09 2:27 PM

"People Who Died" is one of the greatest punk songs ever, easily in my top 5. There's not a single modern punk/rock band with that type of ferocity and humor out there right now. Hopefully in the next decade!

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- *david*

Mon 09/21/09 2:36 PM

Have you not ever heard of allmusic.com? By far the best way to look up a musician's career. Jim had multiple albums.

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