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[Jim Carroll, Alas](#)

By Nick | September 20, 2009

I interviewed the late [Jim Carroll](#) three years ago, for an article in *AARP the Magazine*. It was a phoner that had been scheduled far in advance, which gave me time to read ‘The Basketball Diaries’ and some of his poetry.

He was more than a little amused (it must be said) about being interviewed for *AARP*. “I saw they had a piece about Debbie Harry,” he said, referring to the former lead singer of Blondie. “Could you get me that issue?”

I could.

“So, what’s this article about that you’re working on?”

“Diary-writing.” Obviously, the 20 million readers of *AARP the Magazine* would not use their own journaling to document a descent into New York City’s hard-drug culture, as Carroll did so famously; but my editor was on orders to imbue the magazine with a hipper theme, i.e., just because you pop blood-pressure medication like Skittles doesn’t mean you can’t still rock out like it’s 1968.

Now, most celebrity interviews follow a very particular pattern. The celebrity in question often only has 30 or so minutes booked to interact with you, the ink-stained wretch; although as I learned early on, showing up at the interview with a bottle of decent scotch will exponentially increase the chances of your little meeting extending far into the night.

Anyway, point being, said Celebrity often has absolutely no idea of you or your background when you step into the room. “What magazine do you write for?” Bigshot movie star will ask, his brows colliding in confusion, as your jetlagged and over-caffeinated self seriously considers collapsing face-first onto the table.

But Carroll was different. Gerald Howard, [in a Sept. 18 piece in *Slate*](#), called him “a classic and now vanishing New York type: the smart (and smartass) Irish kid with style, street savvy, and whatever the Gaelic word for chutzpah is.”

I learned this firsthand during the interview.

“So,” Carroll said, and I imagined that I could hear him smiling through the phone. “I found one of your short stories online... Nighthawks?”

If my cerebellum had been the interior of a submarine, that would have been the moment that the crew would have started screaming, “*Incoming torpedo! Abandon ship!*” The burst of adrenaline shooting down my spinal cord, the equivalent of a hundred sailors running for the escape hatches hollering, “*Danger stations! It’s time to kiss our ass goodbye!*”

[‘Nighthawks at the Diner’ was a story that I wrote one afternoon my sophomore year](#) that, despite its clunky prose, ended up in one of the campus literary magazines, conveniently searchable via Google. Not my best work ever. Certainly not something I’d want seen by someone who published their second book of oft-quoted

poetry by the time they turned 21.

“Yeah, um, I wrote that in, um, college,” I said. Gulp.

“Yes, it seemed like a college story.”

He laughed. I laughed. The one and only time I ever had an interview subject flip the whole situation and start delving into my work.

We talked for an hour after that. I sent a few copies of the Debbie Harry issue to his assistant. The interview itself, in that way of magazine publishing, was reduced to one paragraph within a larger piece.

Interesting guy. Good writer. Rest in peace.

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