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Jim Carroll: The Bard Of The Hardwood

By Tommy Craggs, 4:00 PM on Mon Sep 14 2009, 8,472 views



Carroll — junkie, author, schoolboy basketball star — died Friday of a heart attack while working at his desk. He was a hopped-up Holden Caulfield with a jump shot, and the closest thing basketball ever had to a poet laureate.

Carroll, who was 60, became known primarily through his autobiography, *The Basketball Diaries*, later made into a movie premised on the dubious notion that Leo DiCaprio could pass for someone who was able to dunk. An excerpt:

Summer 65: Fucked up yesterday, lost our last game in the summer 15-and-under league up at George Washington High School, and that deuced us out of the championship game today. We had a good squad, mostly cats from down the block in the projects but they had a rule that no Varsity players could play. That ruined our chances of using big Lewie Alcindor even though he's from the neighborhood and all. I mean, shit, most of the teams got ringers but it's a little difficult to sneak in a seven foot All-Everything cat onto a court. He can't exactly use a fucking pair of sunglasses, dig? So I go up to watch the game today and pick up my trophy for the

all-league team and what a hassle is steaming as I bop into the gym. THE SUGAR BOWL ALL-STARs, one of the teams playing, are in a rage bitching about the ringers on the RUTGERS team. So true! those cats didn't have a dude under eighteen running for them, none of them played school ball, but they were some of the best playground players in Harlem. I walked over and was rapping to a few friends, Vaughn Harper, an All-American from Boys High, and Earl Manigault, a Harlem legend of 5 ft. 10 in. who can take a half dollar off the top of a backboard. He's invariably on and off his school team because of drug scenes and other shit. These two cats are, with big Lew, the best high school players in the city. Finally the captain of SUGAR BOWL points over to us and tells the other team and the man who runs the gig that if they're gonna use that team, that their team's gonna use Harper, "Goat" Manigault, and me. The bossman axes the idea of letting in Harper and "Goat" but says they can use me, which is fine with the other team who don't even know who the fuck this white boy is. Before I say a fucking word I get a uniform tossed in my mug and since there're bunches of chicks in the stands, my new team mates are huddling around me and I whip on the shit and start warming up. Big fucking difference I'm gonna make 'cause we need leapers for the boards and no backcourt dude like me. Anyway the slaughter starts and I'm hitting long jumpers like a fucker (I gotta say that I always burn up that gym, something about it that I just can't miss, crazy) so we're holding our own by the alf and I got twenty-eight points, each move of which I make sticks out like a hardon because I'm the only whiteman on the court and looking around, in the entire fucking place, in fact; my bright blond-red hair making me the whitest whitey this league has ever seen. So in short we made a good show for a team our age, but can't keep up with the other dudes and lose by ten, but that ain't bad and I got myself forty-seven points and at least got to play for once with these cats I've always had to play against in various tournaments since Biddy League days. Then to bust all kinds of balls, the bossman gets some college scout in the stands to testify the other team got at least three ringers he knows and we are awarded the champ bit. After the gold is handed out and all (I didn't get a trophy for the game 'cause they were one short and I had to say "fuck it," but got an outofsite plaque for All-League), we go in a corner and pose a team picture for the Harlem paper, "The Amsterdam News." We're waiting for the birdie to click when the photog calls over the SUGAR BOWL coach and whispers something to him who then walks over to me and mumbles, "Dig, my man, don't know how to say this but for, well, ..." I cut him short and told I got the message and stepped out of the pix. I guess I would have messed up the texture of the shot or something. Or maybe they didn't want to let the readers get to see that the high scorer was a fucking white boy.

And from *Forced Entries*, another book of diaries that contains what might be the truest and most affecting line ever written about the game. It's the last one below:

When I say I "fucked up," what I mean is that I'm sitting here watching the NBA All-Star Game on TV and I'm watching guys I used to seriously abuse on the court scoring in double figures now against the best in the game. Ergo, I fucked it up. I should have stayed an athlete, body well-tuned, cruising around with my accountant in a Porsche, maroon and chrome. More important, with basketball there's always only one direction: to the cylinder on the fiberglass rectangle. And you don't have to aim. If you do, you're off.

Poetry has too many variations. Mr. Frost was right about one thing: there are always promises to keep, and variations on that theme. With basketball you can correct your own mistakes, immediately and beautifully, in midair.

Jim Carroll, Poet and Punk Rocker Who Wrote 'The Basketball Diaries', Dies at 60 [New York Times]
