

Jim Carroll, *Pools of Mercury*- Christina Apeles

REVIEW: Jim Carroll, *Pools of Mercury* (Mercury)

- Christina Apeles

The first time I was introduced to Jim Carroll's music was in the eighties movie *Tuff Turf* in which he and his band (with Robert Downey Jr. posing as the drummer) performed that unforgettable punk song, "People Who Died." Almost a decade later, I became acquainted with his writing and life with the performance of Leonardo DiCaprio as Carroll in the screen adaptation of *The Basketball Diaries*. Now with *Pools of Mercury*, Carroll demonstrates his continuing mastery of songwriting and spoken word in this impressive fifteen track release, without a Hollywood actor in sight -- Carroll is the star.

One thing you could never accuse Carroll of is impassivity. With lines like, 'It goes with vanquished steam gray desire, the last vapors of your dreams....' in "It Goes," or 'Your will is one with the force of my flow...' from "Message Left on a Phone Machine," his words exude anger, hunger, sorrow, and even complacency. Carroll's music is secondary to his spoken word pieces in *Pools of Mercury*; first off, only five of the tracks are songs and secondly, it's his poetry that seduces here, more than his melodies. This is not to say that a song like "Falling Down Laughing" is not moving. It is a somber tune, opening with slow, mellow guitar and sound effects, that gain momentum as Carroll's singing turns into wails, with the instruments getting louder to meet him in a chorus of pure rock with heavy distortion, energetic drumming, and dramatic vibrations; while "Hairshirt Fracture" could not be farther from his punk roots, with a more ethereal feel, reminiscent of the Paris, Texas soundtrack. And there is also the noteworthy title track, "Pools of Mercury," where Carroll throws in a gothic feel, sounding much like Love and Rockets, offering intense guitar riffs, electronic, rhythmic beats, and soft bass to support his dark, processed vocals. However, it is his spoken word pieces that are most poignant, those kept me wanting more.

I could never know what it's like listening to Jim Carroll from a man's point of view, but as a woman, to hear him read his poetry, is to be enraptured. It's not just his sexy voice that draws me in, because many people have deep, sensual voices -- but without anything to say. Carroll, on the other hand, strings words together as an exceptional artist would: 'like a Germanic cough drop dissolving in John Cage's tongue' ("It Goes"), 'I am not a corpse buried in the snow waiting for spring,' ("I Am Not Kurt Schwitters"), 'Saints follow Christ, I followed a woman up 8th Ave. today, it was the color of her hair . . . shaking like dried vanilla beans' ("Female as Thunder").

For the most part, each spoken word piece opens up with quiet atmospheric sounds that could possibly be heard on the city streets, in an industrial factory, or even the outset of an opera, rarely overpowering his voice; the instrumental backdrop serves to heighten his words, aiding the listener to further uncover the messages in his poetry. Though the rhythm of his spoken word isn't unique -- plenty of poets read in the same style -- it is what he writes about that is brilliant. "Zeno's Law of High-Heeled Shoes" is a poem that contemplates 'every next inch of the heels of your shoes...drops me closer' which proceeds to break into smaller and smaller increments, down to the '64th inch of the heels,' until he is on his knees, musing about the 'crescent shape of numbers.' And just when I thought he couldn't top such verse, Carroll closes *Pools of Mercury* with "8 Fragments of Kurt Cobain," a heartfelt reflection on the trappings of fame, the demands of celebrity status, and the struggle with drug addiction. Trying to rationalize both the death of Cobain and his own survival of similar circumstances, Carroll speaks directly to the former Nirvana frontman, 'Genius is not a generous thing, pills and powders only placate it for a while . . . the greater the money and the fame, the slower the pendulum of fortune swings.' Carroll even mentions how he had Cobain's tape in his walkman when he heard the news of his death: 'But Kurt, didn't the thought of never writing . . . make you think twice . . . that's what I don't understand . . . it's kept me alive over any wounds.' Need I say more?

