

HIS MISSPENT YOUTH BECAME 'THE BASKETBALL DIARIES,' AN ODE TO ANGST THAT STILL PLAYS TO TEENS

JIM CARROLL

JIM CARROLL MISSED the world premiere of *The Basketball Diaries* at Sundance last January. He wanted to stay in New York City and meet with a Vatican Monsignor who investigates miracles, "like the image of Christ burnt into a tortilla," he says.

Readers of *The Basketball Diaries* know the miracle of Jim Carroll: Groveling for a fix, he wrote like an angel, creating a transcendent autobiography of his fall from Catholic grammar school golden boy and All-City basketball star to junk-sick 15-year-old scavenger selling his body in public toilets, ripping off old ladies' purses, puking his guts out in a burnt-out basement, moaning "I just want to be pure."

First published in 1978, *The Basketball Diaries* has sold an estimated half a million copies; on the heels of the movie version, it returned to best-seller lists. At book signings with Leonardo DiCaprio, the film's star, it was Carroll the crowds clamored for. Over the years, moody heartthrobs from Matt Dillon to River Phoenix jockeyed to play Carroll. In the late '80s Phoenix carried around the *Diaries*, claiming it was the only lead role he wanted to play. The option money from at least 10 scripts has kept Carroll in relative financial ease.

Now 44, his athletic body amazingly unblemished by the ravages of heroin, his skin still translucently pale, his once orange-red hair dulled to the color of ginger, he is divorced from music industry lawyer Rosemary Carroll and lives alone in Inwood, his old neighborhood in upper Manhattan. Late some afternoons, he likes to go to church. He misses the old Latin Mass, he says: "I liked it when the priest faced the altar. These days it's like a cooking class." He says he never takes Communion. "I always think I'm going to find the ideal priest, but they all end up with booze on their breath, like when I was a kid."

He has a famous first album, too: 1980's *Catholic Boy*. The *Diaries* soundtrack opens with Carroll, backed by Pearl Jam, singing a sped-up '90s version of the title cut. His cult hit "People Who Died," a raucous valedictory to boyhood amigos, also figures prominently. Now Carroll is trying to decide whether to put a new band together (Rhino Records released *World Without Gravity: The Best of the Jim Carroll Band* in 1994) or get back to a novel about a rich young painter in spiritual crisis.

Poetry is a constant. He rises early to write. *Fear of Dreaming*, his selected poems, was published last year by Penguin Books. He still writes in schoolboy marbled notebooks, and though he lives the isolated life of a committed writer, he tries to stay in touch with the world. His major vice is watching too much television. "I got rid of cable," Carroll shrugs. "Now I just watch the infomercials."

Thirty-two years after he began *The Basketball Diaries*, Carroll remains mystified by the book's staying power—"Actually, I wanted to write a novel, but I didn't have the wherewithal to sustain a plot or character, and I was too young to make it literary"—and by his notoriety, which, he understands too well, keeps pulling him back into his own adolescence. "Kids are always coming up to me with a bottle of Carbone and saying 'Let's go up on the roof and sniff.' God, if they only knew how boring my life really was." Though the movie treats Carroll with a respect bordering on reverence, he admits he's never been comfortable with the film's climax: Fresh out of prison, neatly dressed and squeaky-clean, he gives his first poetry reading to torrential applause. "It seems like a Narcotics Anonymous meeting," he cracks, as big a wiseass as ever. "It would have been great if they'd just killed me off."

COOL
POET

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