

Mean Streets

Clad in black, Jim Carroll stalks the New York rock-club stage like a caged panther. The years of drug abuse—the trips, the hustling—have taken their toll: the expression on his gaunt face is at once a smile and a sneer. Over a rush of blazing guitars, Carroll sings an epitaph for his friends from the '60s, called "People Who Died":

Teddy, sniffing glue, he was 12 years old.

He fell from the roof on East two nine.

Cathy was 11 when she pulled the plug On 26 reds and a bottle of wine.

Bobby got leukemia, 14 years old.

He looked like 65 when he died.

*He was a friend of mine.**

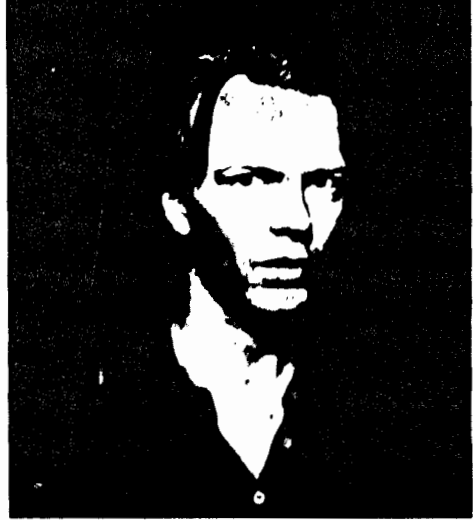
Not since Lou Reed wrote "Walk on the Wild Side" has a rock singer so vividly evoked the casual brutality of New York City as has Jim Carroll, a 29-year-old poet-turned-rocker. When a New York deejay, Dave Herman, recently played "People Who Died" for the first time, the response from listeners was overwhelming. Featured on Carroll's forthcoming album for Rolling Stone Records, that song has propelled him from underground status in a literary circle that included Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and various minions of Andy Warhol to national attention as a contender for the title of rock's new poet laureate.

Basketball: Carroll knows whereof he sings. He spent his boyhood hanging out on many of New York's meaner streets. The son of an Irish-Catholic bartender, he sampled speed, codeine cough syrup, LSD and cocaine while still in grade school. By 15 he was a junkie who supported his habit by snatching purses and hustling homosexuals. But he was terrific at basketball and, when he wasn't shooting up heroin, he was shooting hoops with another playground legend, Lew Alcindor, whom he

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Carroll: Songs about life on the edge

Allan Tannenbaum



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ANNALYN SWAN

claims to have taught the sky-hook. He was also serious about writing. Between 12 and 15, he chronicled his squalid coming of age for an autobiographical novel called "The Basketball Diaries." His terse wit, with its archly contrived naïveté, transformed a tale of teen-age rebellion into a contemporary classic. After "The Diaries" was excerpted in literary magazines, Jack Kerouac wrote, "At 13 years of age, Jim Carroll writes better prose than 89 per cent of the novelists working today." Carroll became a poet of some renown: at 22, his third volume, "Living at the Movies," was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

Habit: But he grew tired of the poetry scene—"You don't get rich writing poetry"—and of his arty friends' romantic obsession with his heroin addiction. As he wrote in "The Diaries," "You just got to see that junk is just another 9 to 5 gig in the end." In 1974, he moved to northern California and kicked his eight-year habit. Now, "The Basketball Diaries" has been re-issued (Bantam Books \$2.50), and he has metamorphosed from poet to rocker, following in the footsteps of a former girlfriend, Patti Smith. Says Carroll: "Poets today are all intellect, ya know? But rock can strike at the intellect and the heart, like a wind in your veins or a fist tightening under your chest. When Henry Miller wrote about Rimbaud, he called this 'the inner register.' Even an illiterate could feel the force behind Rimbaud's work."

Filled with imagery that is spiritual, sexual and violent; Carroll's debut album, "Catholic Boy," is something the debauched poet would understand. Like his best known precursors, Smith and Reed, Carroll isn't much of a singer. But his songs of a city morally gone to seed have a raw power. "When the City Drops (Into the Night)" describes a surreal world populated by hookers, pimps, drag queens and thieves, itching with fantasies of Sodom and Gomorrah. Another depicts a young girl with "inscrutable poise and nihilist charm [who] gets her sleep through tubes in her arms." In the title track he sings:

*I was born in a pool, they made my
mother stand,
And I spat on that surgeon and his
trembling hand...
I was a Catholic boy, I was redeemed
through pain and not through joy.*

Now back in New York with his wife, a lawyer, Carroll is clearly a survivor. To some, his songs will sound like glorifications of the decadent, and indeed Carroll is carrying on the beat tradition of celebrating lives lived on the edge. But, he insists, "I don't want to glorify junk. Susan Sontag once told me that a junkie has a unique chance to rise up and start life over. But I want kids to know it's not hip to indulge yourself at the bottom unless you're planning on one helluva resurrection."

BARBARA GRAUSTARK

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