



Nominated for a Pulitzer
at 22, poet Jim Carroll finally gave
up heroin for rock 'n' roll.

CATHOLIC BOY

BY JOHN MILWARD

Jim Carroll stands before an overflow audience at New York's Public Theater, flipping through *The Basketball Diaries*, a needle-sharp remembrance of things past he wrote between the ages of 12 and 15. Slipping into his sidewalk prose, Carroll slowly peels 16 years off his gaunt, burnt-angel frame like a carving knife skinning an onion. But there are no tears. Back in 1964, Jim, the high-shooting 13-year-old star of the Madison Square Boys Club on East Twenty-ninth Street, is about to take his first shot of heroin. "I was just gonna sniff a bag," Carroll reads from the book that Bantam successfully mass-marketed in 1980, "but Tony said I might as well skin-pop it. I said okay. Then Pudgy says, 'Well, if you're gonna put a needle in, you might as well mainline it.' I was scared to main, but I gave in, Pudgy hit it in for me. I did half a fiver and, shit, what a rush. . . ." Carroll pauses, his eyes like saucers and the silence saturated by the memory of that first shot coursing through his veins.

"I want the angel whose touch don't miss . . . Then the blood comes through the dropper like a thick red kiss," Jim Carroll sings, leading his rock-'n'-roll band through their New York debut. His black T-shirt is inside out with sleeves rolled to his shoulders, and he's spitting mean-streets rock to an audience filled with music-biz dilettantes who are seriously blotto, having just arrived from a party celebrating the release of the Rolling Stones' *Emotional Rescue*. Eyes flicker to the most famous ex-junkie in the room, Keith Richards, whose bone-thin body is strung with worn leather. The second-most-famous junkie, the one on stage, sees his only viable rescue as

PHOTOGRAPH BY EARL MILLER

creativity and leads his band into "City Drops (Into the Night)," the song from Carroll's first album that defines his urban turf. "When the city drops into the night, before the darkness there's one moment of light . . . Then everything seems clear . . . The other side, it seems so near."

Jim Carroll flirted with the other side, death, through a ten-year affair with heroin, and when he introduces the hit song about his comrades who were fatally seduced, "People Who Died," Keith joins him onstage to pop out the Chuck Berry chords: "But Tony couldn't fly . . . Tony died." In the audience are those who didn't die, those who remember Jim as a 15-year-old junkie poet marching alongside Allen Ginsberg (who thought he was pretty) to protest the Vietnam War or shadowing poet Frank O'Hara through Manhattan streets in search of the midtown muse that created the *Lunch Poems*. But there are also deadlier bonds between friends, when junkie cells cry out for smack, or when two men, tensed for violence, enter a dirty tenement for a larcenous meeting with a pusher.

"I wasn't the kind of kid who liked nuns," swears Carroll, pulling on a cigarette, "but in third grade I was close to being called a brownnose for staying after school to help Sister Victoise. She reminded me of Saint Theresa, and I hung out after school with her because I was finding out about someone who I didn't under-

stand. It was like hanging out with a good ballplayer to learn new moves—I got this radiance from her, a sweet sense about grace and living your life with compassion. She wasn't about putting a quarter in the can for starving children, but about seeing people through the heart. She was near death but so sweet and understanding, and this confused me at first, but she gave me a sense of humanity that went beyond the faith that I was already doubting. She showed me the inner register."

Sister Victoise died the next summer, before Carroll was kicked out of school after he was wrongfully accused of playing a lunch-time game of ring-a-levio against the principal's orders. The son of an Irish-Catholic bartender, by 13 he had already sampled speed, glue, codeine cough syrup, acid, and cocaine, but in 1964 his parents moved from the East Twenties to the Dyckman projects in Inwood on the northern tip of Manhattan, where Jim would trade lay-ups with Lew Alcindor (and reportedly teach him the skyhook) and cultivate the twin passions of literature and junk. A shrewd basketball coach got the tall redhead into an uptown Catholic school, where one of the brothers, hip to the light in Jim's eyes, made him the sports editor of the school paper and passed along columns by Red Smith and others that Jim would study, underlining similes and metaphors, and slowly begin to understand the craft of writing.

After reading Kerouac's *On the Road* and seeing how life could be shaped into art, Jim began keeping a diary.

New York City, "the greatest hero a writer needs," permeated his diary and the life he led between the pages. "I'm really a wise-ass kid getting wiser," he wrote in the winter of 1966, "and I'm going to get even somehow for your dumb hatreds and all them war baby dreams you left in my scarred bed with dreams of bombs falling above the cliff I'm hanging steady to." The streets taught him about sex and dope and, in another phrase from the *Diaries*, how to develop "presence like a cheetah rather than a chimp." "I remember seeing the movie *Shane*," he says, his hands pulling at his rusted hair, "and imagining myself as both the innocent kid and the wizened gunfighter. It all came together at the end of the film when Alan Ladd guns down Jack Palance, smooth and cool. But then Shane comes across with one moment of pure flash, his gun spinning from his hand smack back into his holster, and there's this quick shot of the kid, his eyes dancing. Shane showed just enough flash without ever crossing the line into pretension. It's like I had all the basketball moves—behind the back, under the legs—but I would never use them needlessly."

Carroll lost his virginity at 12, but Catholic girls didn't offer much for the young stud. "There was 'Bubble-Gut,' the school slut who would take on four guys in her parochial uniform and who had a spread on her thighs that equalled some number by Boeing. But you were marked if you got caught with Bubble-Gut—there'd be an oath of silence among the guys—so we'd go into the park with these straight girls who would kiss you with closed mouths and get upset when you got a hard-on. So, while the boys were left saying, 'Shit, I thought I'd at least get some lit,' the girls would walk away in giddy fright, saying, 'It actually got big; you know, all of a sudden I felt this thing rubbing against me.'" Frustrated, Carroll and a fellow blue-ball did things to each other that they wanted the girls to do to them. It left a guilty taste, but when he related the tale to a sympathetic Jewish girl friend whom he'd met after crossing the bridge to Riverdale, the young couple slipped into full-blown eroticism. "It was no Prince Charming scene," he recalls. "It was more like the peasant girl debauched as the army moved through town."

A combination of basketball moves and genuine smarts landed Carroll a scholarship to Trinity High School, and for a writer who would base his art on contrasts, the dumping of a street-wise punk into an old-money atmosphere offered an opportunity to play out the theory. By 15, at the same time that Ginsberg and e. e. cummings taught him that poetry was not a hermetic academic pursuit, Carroll had acquired his first heroin habit. Initially, he saw the drug as a means to a literary end. "Junk made me alert—when I got high, I'd want



There's a race of men that don't fit in,
A race that can't stay still;
So they break the hearts of kith and kin,
And they roam the world at will.

Robert Service
The Men That Don't Fit In

JIM CARROLL

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 142

to nod while most guys would immediately start to think about making their next score. But for me the nods were magic—when the cigarette butt would burn your fingers, you'd jump back in total surprise that you weren't actually on that beach with the sun kissing the horizon. But the nods weren't like dreaming—there was no surrealism. Just an intensified reality."

Intensified reality catches you unaware the next morning, however, and as his prowess on the basketball slipped, the pusher's call became a shout. Carroll had split from home after continuing parental battles about drugs, politics, hair, and poetry (basketball they could understand), and he slept wherever he could, most often at "Headquarters," a shooting gallery of a rathole kept by a pair of teenage waifs. Here Jim would subsist on fast food and junk and wake from nods when a forgotten cigarette began to burn the chair in which he sat. He used to scrimmage with guys like Earl Manigault, a six-foot-one playground junkie legend from Harlem who could take a quarter off the backboard and stuff the ball with his elbows, but his habit was making him more of an observer than a participant. "The last line of the *Diaries*—'I just wanted to be pure'—came because I was trying to find purity in decay. Other junkies were oblivion seekers," he says without a hint of regret, "but I wanted to see what oblivion was like without staying in that pit. I wanted to see everything that was in me, and junk slowed things down so I could take it all in. Under junk everything became miniaturized. I'd take notes after a nod, and just a couple of words would bring it all back—my mind latched onto the scene, and it was like I was sliding into a tunnel of my own design."

Carroll was running on "dealer's time," his life bounded by the pursuit and purchase of junk. "I started to hustle gays, because ripping people off left a bad taste. You know, you leave a person in terror, even though you didn't go out to hurt him. By hustling, I could work alone and not have to worry about whether some cat was carrying a gun. This way I'd know how much money I'd make and then could score the dope and nod off." Though he was "an incredible flirt, especially with my eyes," Carroll wasn't a very good hustler. "I didn't like it, and there was only so much I would do. What's more, I was usually loaded with junk; so I couldn't really function. You know, I couldn't get it up."

In the winter of 1966, Carroll spent three months in Riker's Adolescent Detention Center for possession of three bags and a syringe. His mother refused to visit, and he shivered alone in withdrawal. A year earlier, in the throes of breaking away from his parents, Jim wrote an entry in his diary that explained why all the problems that can land a kid in Riker's can't keep

him from calling for his mother:

"I just refuse to give the slightest fuck anymore and o.k. if I'm fucked up and, yes, every other race, creed & color sucks and the war in Nam is sanctioned by the Pope who is flawless of course and if I could just bend in half I could suck myself off all day and load up on some good scag and live in a closet because you can't beat them but you can ignore and induce ulcers and heart pangs and give them grey hair so to drive them stone bust on beauty parlor tint-up jobs and then you begin to cry in the closet because your veins are sore and you can't get over the fact that you love them somehow more or at least always."

He is a rose, he is together, all together, like a wind tunnel, and the rest of us are testing our wings, our straining struts.

—Frank O'Hara, from "Poem"

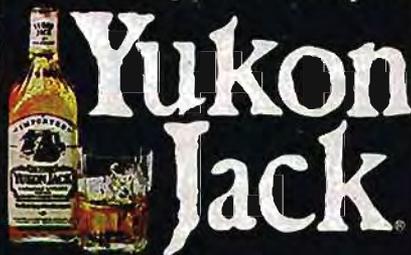
"One day, I waited outside the Museum of Modern Art, where Frank was a curator, and followed him home. He took the subway down to Astor Place and walked to his apartment across from the Grace Church. Frank's *Lunch Poems* were bright lights—even a kid new to poetry could sense his spirit, whereas with somebody like John Ashbery, you needed a more sophisticated background. Frank would write these poems about what he saw in the streets during his lunch hour, stopping at a stationery store on the way back to the museum to use a sample Olivetti to type out the day's impressions. So I followed him home, keying on how he threw his head back like a proud stallion, like Roberto Clemente or somebody, and taking in everything that he looked at. Three weeks later he died."

When he was 15, Carroll began hanging out at the Wednesday night poetry readings at the St. Mark's Church. He kept to himself, absorbing influences and working on his first volume of poetry, *Organic Trains*, which was published a year later by a small press and included a number of works inspired by O'Hara. "I kept to myself that first year because I wanted my work to do the talking, just like I let my playing do the talking on the basketball court. I always wanted to offset my street image, and when I finally introduced myself to poets like Ted Berrigan and Anne Waldman, they said, 'Yeah, we wondered who the fuck you were, a street kid or some sort of tough.' It's all counterpoint—you use two sides, one against the other, to develop a presence, an impact."

Carroll became a fixture on the Lower East Side arts scene, showcasing his new work at open readings, contributing to literary magazines, and becoming friends with people like William Burroughs, painter Larry Rivers, and members of Andy Warhol's entourage, including the seminal New York rock band that would have a profound influence on his later work, the Velvet Underground. "Heroin, it's my life,

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and it's my wife," sang the Velvet's Lou Reed. Jim held the cheap microphone that captured their famous bootleg from Max's Kansas City, and he can be heard calling to Lou for Tuinals. In 1970 the *Paris Review* excerpted *The Basketball Diaries*, and his reputation blossomed, with Jack Kerouac writing that "at 13 years of age, Jim Carroll writes better prose than 89 percent of the novelists working today." At 22, Carroll published his third volume of poetry, *Living at the Movies*, which made him the youngest poet ever nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.

Despite the strokes to his ego, Carroll continued to kiss the needle, and although he took care to keep his junkie-hustling habits from his artist friends, some of them voiced concern. "In a personal one-to-one sense," he recalls, "It was 'Jim, you should get off this stuff and clean yourself up.' But in an overall abstract sense, the poetry scene fostered the life-style on me. People were living vicariously off my street life, their attitude saying, 'I admire you for this, for the fact that you have the balls to live out the image of the drugged-out poet.'"

As Carroll's teens turned into his twenties, his heroin habit became paramount. After graduation from Trinity, he entered Columbia University but dropped out after a semester, partly because he felt that he was learning more through his own work, but mostly because his veins were crying out for more and more junk. "You could always get good shit," he says, "but you'd have to hang around scenes you'd rather not, like dealing the shit and picking it up from the factory. And this was heavy, because you get busted there and it's no party—you're no longer a simple street junkie." His life became a hungry hustle, with few respites of relative sanity, such as shivering in a swaddle of blankets in a Chelsea Hotel room paid for by Jerry Ragni, the cowriter of *Hair*, while his girl friend, poet-turned-rocker Patti Smith, stroked his brow and fed him soup. But the streets were calling, and they were getting meaner by the minute.

"One day I scored from this drag queen and her boyfriend on West Seventeenth Street, and they had these great ten-dollar bags that were these little mounds of powder. It was nice," he recalls, blinking away the oasis, "and it seems that somebody else thought so, too, because later in the day these guys broke into the apartment with shotguns and beat the drag queen dead and killed another guy who was there with a baseball bat. They beat a third guy into a coma, but fortunately he lived, because there was this girl on the first floor who also copped from the drag queen and whom I had made the mistake of taking home and screwing one time at this friend's apartment on St. Mark's. She had seen me leaving earlier in the day and fingered me to the cops, who busted down my door and caught me nodding with my works on the table. And I thought, 'Fuck, I'm busted,' until one of the cops men-

tioned homicide, and the full Kafka scene came clear. So they took me to the hospital, because the third guy was still hanging on, and he said, 'No, that's not the guy at all.'"

Had the third man died, Carroll might have faced a triple murder rap, but frights like these don't stop junkies, and Jim was at the height of his habit. Two weeks later his craving came to a head. "I was still hustling, but it got to the point where my habit demanded more; so me and this other guy started ripping off dealers, which was much more dangerous but set you up to come out with a really big score. It was a totally heavy scene, you know, and I'm not embarrassed to say that it was terrifying. But at the time you do it, because frightening or not, when you begin to feel sick, there is a desperation where you have nothing to lose. And believe me, there's nobody who can tell me that if they were feeling the same physical sensations, they wouldn't be capable of hideous



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violence. Fortunately, I never had to hurt anybody, and certainly never shot or stabbed anyone, but the terror was always there.

"So me and this hardened tough guy had this rip-off scene going, until one day this dealer was waiting for us. We came onto this guy in the hallway, but he had a friend, because when my partner opened the door to the apartment, an ax came down and split his head right down the fucking middle. But I didn't start blasting or anything—the guy was dead, and I was lost to the wind."

The next day Jim Carroll enrolled in a methadone program.

It's when the body at the bottom
That body is my own reflection . . .
But it ain't hip to sink that low
unless you're gonna make a
resurrection . . .

—"City Drops (Into the Night)"

"If you kick junk cold," Carroll remembers, "you feel these hot and cold streaks coming from your groin out the tip of your head. You start shivering and pull a blanket around yourself only to feel heat

spasms. And you sneeze, one after the other, continuously. They say that all bodily functions stop when you sneeze; so I guess it's a matter of dead cells coming back to life. And then there's this feeling that your head is no longer attached to your body. It feels almost like the adhesion around your skull is gone and your brain is literally rolling around your head like it's loose. You're totally weak, but you can't escape through sleep. There are blasts of light in your head when you close your eyes, and there is no way to distract yourself when time is moving so slowly, and a minute feels like an hour. Then you start rationalizing, like, 'I mean, what a fuck-up I am, but I'll have a little junk now to feel straight, and then I'll take the slow cure.' Then you start to look at things, like the abscesses on your body, like these here on the back of my hand. Sounds would be loud and light the brightest—it was as if everything was conspiring to make you feel terrible."

Jim took the slow cure, on methadone, occasionally shooting up his first love but more often drinking multiple doses of the legally dispensed substitute. He was not Keith Richards; so it wasn't practical for him to fly to Switzerland to have his blood changed, although he was intrigued by the concept and amazed that Keith initially interpreted the process as *carte blanche* to stay on the needle. New York City makes it tough to quit: the methadone programs were designed to hook the junkie on his morning glass of narcotic Tang so that he wouldn't stick a knife in somebody's back to steal a wallet. California offered a methadone withdrawal technique; so with a literary grant for subsistence, Carroll left in 1974 for seclusion in Bolinas, Calif., just north of San Francisco.

"The final step to breaking the habit is feeling that you need a second wind, that you can no longer sustain this level of abuse. But out West I was getting used to boredom and learning to use it. I wasn't around people, only dogs, and I liked the life I was leading, and it didn't require any junk. I finally decided that there would be some advantages to getting off junk, that I could start to see things from a whole new perspective and with a new consciousness. It was as simple as that—if my new head didn't satisfy me, I might have gone back to shooting.

"What helped me was the realization that you can never go home again. You could go up the river and go mad like Kurtz, or you could haul up the *Titanic* from the bottom of the ocean, or you could go to San Francisco and get into rock 'n' roll. But the only time you were really free in the heart sense is when you were young and on the streets, because then you were wild and free and murderous. But suddenly I felt detached, and the only thing that sustained me was my work."

Jim Carroll didn't mellow into Marin County hot-tub consciousness. He tended a garden, read and wrote through the day, took long walks with the dogs, and settled

down in the evening to three successive newscasts, an occasional chicken TV dinner, a joint, and prime-time television. The tube, the *Village Voice*, and long-distance phone calls with Patti were Jim's only connection with the outside world, which is to say New York. A couple lived next door, including a statuesque blonde beauty who was slowly recuperating from a near-fatal motorcycle accident and would come to use the bathroom in Jim's house, but he heard only jazz coming from their stereo; so he kept to himself. Soon the couple broke up, with the woman, Rosemary, staying behind and consoling herself by cranking up Patti Smith's *Horses*.

"One night I was sitting out in the yard, spacing with the dogs, when I noticed Rosemary. She stood up against the moon in a white gown that shook my spine. It was my vision of the Virgin, or at least a top-of-the-line saint, and she walked me over the hills and into San Francisco and from isolation to rock 'n' roll."

Rosemary was studying law at Stanford, where she was a deejay at the college station, and she dragged Jim to see the pioneering punk/new-wave bands. Once, when Patti was in town, the old lovers did an underground film, with Jim reading prose poetry to the accompaniment of Patti's guitar and piano, and the next night he traveled with her band to San Diego. When tempers flared between Patti and the opening act, Jim was hastily substituted and he rapped his lyrics, with Patti's band playing backup, and was immediately inspired by the verbal shove provided by a rock-'n'-roll band. Back in San Francisco, Carroll hooked up with a Stones-ish bar band called Amsterdarn, began collaborating on songs with the players and another of Patti's ex-boyfriends, Allen Lanier of the Blue Oyster Cult, and quickly won a Bay Area following after appearances at the Mabuhay Gardens. A demo was produced, and when Carroll returned to New York in 1979 to sign the Bantam deal for *The Basketball Diaries*, he played the tape for Earl McGrath, an old acquaintance and the president of Rolling Stones Records, who immediately signed the band. (By the time *Catholic Boy* was released in October 1980, McGrath had left Rolling Stones Records. Carroll's contract was moved over to Atco Records, another Atlantic subsidiary.)

Meanwhile, Jim had fallen in love, and he was wooing Rosemary with long-stemmed flowers in tiny glass bottles. Late one Friday night, September 15, 1978, the couple took an impulsive drive into the desert. They were married in the wee hours at the Chapel of Promises in Reno, putting the \$35 tab on the bride's Master Charge and a two-bit ring on Rosemary's finger and taking home a cassette tape of the ceremony sweetened by Debby Boone's singing "You Light Up My Life." Jim Carroll, who was "redeemed through pain, not through joy," closed both of his eyes,

and then he kissed the bride.

I want the angel
that knows the sky . . .
She got virtue . . .
got the parallel light in her eye

I want the angel
that's partly lame . . .
She filters clarity
from her desperate shame
—"I Want the Angel"

Jim Carroll is back in New York City, with Rosemary an attorney at Louis Nizer's law firm and their new loft apartment animated by a crate of Russian novels she had in storage. But look close, and his scars still show. "A doctor got rid of my tracks, but some of the bad abscesses are still visible. Like this one in the crack of my elbow. I'd torture myself trying to squeeze the shit out of this lump, but nothing worked until I went with this girl to a movie on Eighth

The methadone program was designed to hook the junkie on his morning glass of narcotic Tang so that he wouldn't stick a knife in somebody's back to steal a wallet.

Street. It was winter, and the theater was real crowded; so I stayed in my jacket and sweater. So on the way out I'm hot and roll up my sleeves and, pop, this shit is pouring out of my elbow. The women in the lobby shrieked, but I was practically joyful—"Hey, let me squeeze it this way to get it all out."

Carroll has never been one to hide his wounds, and though he stands by Blake's belief that "the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom," he understands the trap of his own reputation. "It's dangerous to let your exploits speak for you," he says. "It's a waste of talent, and it's a sin." And these days of heroin chic, when the middle class is dabbling with high-grade Middle Eastern smack, can be particularly troubling to an ex-junkie rock star. "These weekend dilettantes are going to get burned," warns the voice of experience. "They think heroin is like cocaine in its limited ability to take you out, but it's an insidious motherfucker. Sooner or later the habit's gonna getcha. What's more, the purity of the heroin spooks me, because there are times when I'd like to cop some of this shit and check it out. I haven't learned any lesson from heroin except

that I never want to live on that wasted time. And now people think that they can endear themselves to me by offering me a dime bag, and I'm not at all sure that there won't be a time when I'll go for it."

Rosemary's sharp blue eyes slip into a faraway gaze when she is asked whether she worries about Jim's resolve. "I can't spend my life worrying about Jim," she says quietly. Last year, when Jim cut his hair to visit his father in the hospital, he saw a copy of *The Basketball Diaries*, currently the object of heated Hollywood bidding, mixed in among the pile of historical romances by the bed. "I found it rather dry," critiqued Dad, displaying the ability of his wife, and parents everywhere, innocently to blind themselves to the worst nightmares of their children's lives. Jim Carroll speaks from the heart, just as Sister Victoise taught him, and through a medium that Henry Miller, speaking of Rimbaud, called the "inner register." By stripping himself bare, he shoots his art straight into the main line, daring his audience to let the wind run through their veins. Notebooks litter his apartment, with scraps of language headed for a second volume of diaries, a collection of new poems that will supplement a reissued edition of *Living at the Movies*, and any number of unwritten books, poems, and songs. Carroll might sing that "vision's just a costly infection," but it's the safest narcotic he knows, and he's stalking the rock stage like a playground punk looking for an open shot.

"You know you're at the top of your basketball game when you jump for a shot, realize that you've misjudged the leap, and correct yourself in mid-air. These moves are important, not just for the correction, but for the implicit fact that you've taken a chance. It's the same thing with art, and I'm learning to move with the leaps I take onstage. When I play, I'm dancing in my head, and I want to put the audience in a state of ecstasy, to take them out of themselves in the same way that I'm freed by performing, and to let them dance with their heads, with their spirits, and with their hearts as well as their body."

Leaving the Public Theater, Rosemary teases Jim for wearing her blue jeans, and the hairs on his neck bristle at the touch of the siren-scented streets of Manhattan. A vacant cab swallows the couple, and red taillights dance up Broadway where, they say, there's magic in the air and where one in a million junkies emerges to kiss the city in the heart of its night.

I sleep on a tar roof
scream my songs
into lazy floods of stars . . .
a white powder paddles through
blood and heart and
the sounds return
pure and easy . . .
the city is on my side.
—"Fragment: Little N.Y. Ode,"
by Jim Carroll