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APOLLO ON THE HUDSON

Musician, poet and basketball diarist Jim Carroll in a thoughtful mood

by
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It took my Dionysian inner child a few minutes to stop sulking after former-hustler/junkie/basketball player Jim Carroll described himself as really, you know, more of an Apollonian when it comes to art.

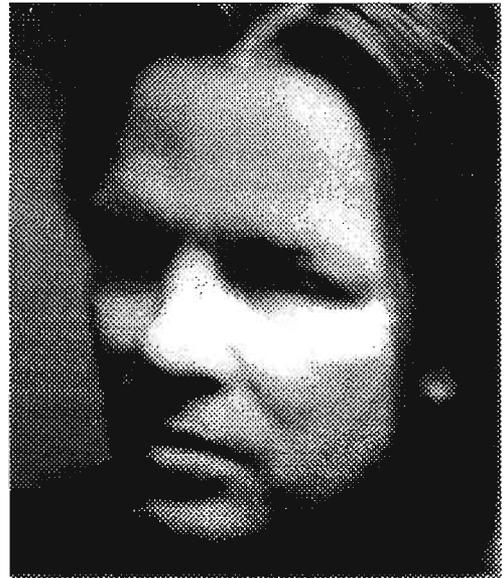
Apollo. Ancient Greek temples in his honor have slogans like "nothing in excess." Words like poise and discipline come to mind. And you'll forgive us -- Dionysus and me -- if it's not the first approach we expect from the diarist, poet and rock musician who has written of such Dionysian-excess-related material as crab races (the pubic hair kind), strategic bridge jumping (to avoid floating piles of crap) and dead friends.

Jim Carroll -- who as a teenager in the mid-'60s published excerpts from his journals, *The Basketball Diaries* -- wrote words that burned with adolescent speed. But perhaps his greater strength -- displayed in the diaries and in subsequent books of prose and poetry -- was a precocious ability to stop the action cold for delicate insights. William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac rained compliments on the young writer, and to bear the torch for the Beat writers, one might assume, is to pump it out straight from the heart.

And, as far as Carroll goes anyway, one would be wrong.

"To me, writing, if it's good, has to come both from the heart -- the inner-register, as Henry Miller called it -- and the intellect, and one has to constantly be checking the other," says Carroll from his apartment in downtown Manhattan, where he recently returned after a five-year hiatus living on the north end, near the Bronx. (Nice holiday!) "You can't write completely from the heart place without the intellect or else it would just be sentimental mush."

Not that he didn't have his Dionysian days. Carroll's work almost always employs a first-person approach and often tells straight-up accounts of all manner of bodily uses and abuses. He admits to thinking he



sounds "like an old fart" in our conversation, but is realistic, not to mention wise, about the maturation of motivation.

"Nothing gives the pleasure that a poem that comes straight from inspiration does. Those poems are few and far between nowadays. Most people think that the only time a poet writes is when he's inspired. But if you do that, you'll write some poems when you're 19 and you'll never write any again."

In interviews Carroll has talked about losing control as a creative tool. Ironically, it's a tool that he wants to control.

"What's losing control? Is it just like throwing everything out the window and writing gibberish or is it getting so deeply, emotionally on a heart level involved in a work that you're just moving along with a Zen sense of what athletes described as, when I was playing basketball, as 'the zone'? Where you feel a sense of flawlessness. When you can't do anything wrong.

"When basketball players are talking about it, it's a sense of touch where you can just feel that the ball's going to go in by the feeling on your fingertips when you're releasing it. And time seems to slow up when you're playing like that.

"It's a peak experience kind of thing, as Joseph Campbell would say."

Carroll's voice is disconcerting. It sounds cracked. Damaged. You want to be gentle with him and then you feel silly for doing so as his strained speech pours out a knowledge that towers over yours and a Zen sort of comfort with the plate that life has slapped in front of him.

I asked him what is the glue that holds him together these days, knowing it's been three years since his last book, *Fear Of Dreaming*, which included a goodly number of previously published pieces, and five since his last album, *Praying Mantis*. He's not married, but he does have a son, born when he was 16 and raised by the boy's mother. Carroll says that, theoretically at least, he'd like to raise a kid sometime, but basically, well, get real. ("I'd like to have a dog," he says, which would be easier to feed on a poet's salary.)

"My work gets me through. I don't even have to work. I can just think about work and get some small idea. It doesn't have to be some epiphany or something. I mean, I just get some small idea about a character from reading a book or something. I know that's what my life is about. That's what it's been about and I made up my mind it was going to be about since I was 15."

And for the first time since he put pen to paper, Carroll intends to write a novel. Two, in fact. One about the occult and one about a priest, which has him spending his days, he says, reading apocalyptic literature, which is fun. And writing.

Diligently.

"Like Dante said, to be lazy in daylight, one is condemned to spend an eternity up to his neck in mud. And I don't dig the idea of doing that. So I feel that these books are really a gift and I have to manifest them in one way or another or else I'm really up the creek! I'm spending eternity up to my neck in mud."