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**MUSIC
BLOG**

Remember Jim Carroll for his music as well as his literature

The author and poet was best known for writing *The Basketball Diaries*, but he was also an accomplished musician who combined primitive punk with prose-like lyrics



Prolific ... the late Jim Carroll. Photograph: Andrew Serban/Getty Images

Jim Carroll was always more famous for his life than his work. The [obituaries that have followed his death since last Friday](#) have focused on his book, [the Basketball Diaries](#), his account of the disintegration of his youthful life as he became addicted to heroin in the 1960s.

This seems a shame. Watching him play live a few years ago I realised that, for me, it was when Carroll picked up a guitar that something truly special happened.

In my mind, Carroll will always be the creator of one of the most underrated albums of all time. [1980's Catholic Boy](#) seems to be New York's missing musical link between drugged-out beat-clown acts such as the [Holy Modal Rounders](#) and the darker sound of [Richard Hell](#). It has 60s style Spector-ish songs like Day and Night, lyrics about girls staying in bed to read Raymond Chandler, synthy love songs to the city and a lot of Raw Power-style garage rock. Carroll's sound walked the line between the coming precision of new wave and the scruffiness of 1975.

It is far from a forgotten record, but it's never received anywhere near its dues. New

bands don't nod to it as a major influence, nor does it grace greatest album lists. I'm amazed by the music geeks who only mutter in response to my proselytising: "Oh yeah, I heard that album was OK. Not got a copy myself."

Perhaps the reason for this is that Carroll was late to the musical party. By the time Catholic Boy was released it was 1980 and he was 30, already an established poet within the world of lower Manhattan. It had been Patti Smith who suggested he get a band together, presumably imagining he could do what she had done: combine the primitive sound of punk rock with prose-like lyrics.

Carroll wrote about the world he came from in such a relentless way that, on the page, he can sometimes seem crude. But when music is added, he manages to somehow create a cartoon out of a nightmare. Take his most famous song, People Who Died. The music sounds like he should be singing about asking a girl to the dancehall, but instead Carroll's lyrics describe various friends he's lost, charting their ends from overdoses, leukaemia, gang murders and suicide. The list only stops for the sinisterly joyful chorus that repeats at the end of each verse:

"Lots of people who died, died/They were all my friends and they died."

It is a simple and unsentimental celebration of the short lives of a bunch of stupid kids, who never lived long enough to know better. With its power chords and brazenness, it is far more moving to me than some bloated tribute song, with full orchestra. I'll be playing it loudly in his memory.

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