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Jim Carroll and the Punk Pulitzer

By Andy Whitman on September 14, 2009 11:35 AM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(6\)](#)

Illustration by Ray Frenden

Celebrated author and musician Jim Carroll **died on Friday**. The following essay appears in *Paste's* September issue.

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Whenever a writer makes a rock record, I expect two things. First, I assume the lyrics will be better than average. They should be—writers presumably know how to communicate in insightful ways. Second, I expect the album to sound like an erudite mess. This is because the ability to write perceptively does not automatically translate to good rock 'n' roll—there are numerous examples of articulate people making unlistenable, pretentious twaddle. Amy Tan and Scott Turow, no slouches as novelists, have produced dreadful music. Similarly, novelist Madison Smartt Bell and poet Wyn Cooper are fine writers, but their 2003 foray into rock 'n' roll was a veritable snoozefest. So I had my doubts about Jim Carroll.

Carroll was a teenaged junkie and prostitute, basketball star, and one hell of a writer. Jack Kerouac thought enough of him to proclaim, "At 13 years of age, Jim Carroll writes better prose than 89 percent of the novelists working today." Carroll's book *The Basketball Diaries* was the stuff of legend, a disturbing and harrowing confessional about leading a double life at the ripe old age of 15—basketball hero at a posh NYC high school, on his way to scholarships and accolades, and heroin addict who hustled gay men to support his habit. So in 1980, when Carroll decided to make a rock record, I was both intrigued and skeptical. It was bound to be a fascinating ride. But would it sound any good?

It turned out to be one of the great records of the early '80s, an adrenaline shot of anger and despair and black humor—smart enough to

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obliquely reference Dostoyevsky's "Grand Inquisitor," visceral enough to encompass overdoses and gangland murders, and buttressed by some righteous, soul-rattling power chords. It was called *Catholic Boy*, and it seemed like Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe had matriculated to Harvard, double majored in journalism and philosophy, and then joined The Clash.

The day after John Lennon was assassinated I wandered down to my favorite music store near the Ohio State University campus. I felt a whole jumble of conflicted emotions—sick, angry, disbelieving. I figured I might as well commiserate with other people who loved the man and the music he made. The place was jammed, as if every sorry, suffering music fan in Columbus had the same idea. Nobody was there to buy music. We were there to share our grief. Jim Carroll's "People Who Died," the single from *Catholic Boy*, blasted from the speakers. And a bunch of strangers stood transfixed, listening to that furious, horrific elegy of a song, that litany of lost friendships. "Play it again," somebody said when the song ended. And so it was played again. And again. For half an hour people didn't move, and barely spoke. They didn't need to. Jim Carroll, spewing rage and heartbreak, said it all for us.

Though he's made a few albums since then (including two Velvet Underground-style spoken-word hybrids), he's never been better than on *Catholic Boy* and "People Who Died." That song is the undeniable highlight of his musical career, and that entire debut album is still revelatory—the perfect merger of an intelligent man and a world falling apart. I'm still partial to the title track. That's because I'm a Catholic boy too, born and raised, and I don't know anyone who has better encapsulated that peculiar package of hope and guilt—the promise of heaven and the weight of the world. I love the whole desperate, conflicted mess.

For most of the past 30 years, Jim Carroll has done what he's always done. He's written prose and poetry. And he's read his words aloud, usually without musical accompaniment. It's what writers do. But for a brief moment in the early '80s, Carroll unfurled his poetic gift to the accompaniment of slamming drums and thunderous guitars. He recorded an album that deserved the Punk Pulitzer, an award that doesn't exist. It should.

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6 Comments

By Keith DeLancey on September 14, 2009 4:07 PM

Very well said.

By Corey duBrowa on September 14, 2009 5:20 PM

RIP Catholic Boy, you will be missed.

By Ms.Mike on September 14, 2009 9:35 PM

Beautiful article. Obviously, Andy Whitman "gets it". Jim Carroll and I have had a love affair for years...he just didn't know about it.

By mutt on September 15, 2009 8:19 AM

the rock was good; the books, helpful. thank you jim.

By Christian Baggett on September 17, 2009 5:30 PM

I first saw this guy in 1981 or so on a show called "Fridays"...ABC's answer to SNL. I fell in love with that song, that performance and that attitude. It opened up my ears 15 year old to what could be between new wave/punk and great words. Patti Smith, Elvis Costello...and Jim Carroll. RIP, Jim.

By Aaron on September 18, 2009 8:42 PM

Back in '96 I performed an excerpt from "The Basketball Diaries" for my HS forensics team. That I made it to the final round a couple of times shows how powerful his words resonated with the audience. That I didn't ever win shows that how he wrote and what he said could never be replicated.

As brilliant as that book was, and as amazing as "Catholic Boy" was and remains to this day, I urge you to find his poem "8 Fragments for Kurt Cobain" which was written less than a week after Cobain's suicide. Reading it, it is apparent how Jim Carroll survived for so many years while so many stronger people moved on from this world. RIP Catholic Boy. You will never be forgotten.

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