

## DISPATCHES: An elegy for a poet's spark

By Hank Kalet, Managing Editor

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*"Cause when the city drops into the night*

*Before the darkness there's one moment of light*

*When everything seems clear*

*The other side, it seems so near"*

— Jim Carroll, "City Drops Into Night"

There was always something regal and elegant about Jim Carroll, something that belied his drug-addicted youth, that seemed to set him apart from his time.

He was a New York poet, descended from Frank O'Hara, Ted Berrigan and the Beats, who drew from the French surrealist tradition and remade it with his wholly American voice.

Carroll, who died Friday in New York, was an early influence for me. His wild, distorted juxtapositions of images, his punk attitude and aggressive intellectualism captured my imagination just as I was starting to play with words.

I met him once, briefly, after a poetry reading he gave at Rutgers. I got there at the end, and he signed the flier — a slip of paper I still have tucked away in a photo album with the other autographs I'd collected during my younger days. It was — and remains — an important totem, an artifact of my origins as a writer and poet.

I first read Carroll's work in 1980 when I was at Pennsylvania State University. I was at sea, so to speak, lacking real direction but developing what might be described as a bohemian bent. I had planned to major in accounting or business — at my dad's suggestion — but quickly changed to communication with the idea I would be a radio disc jockey.

I was into rock — mostly punk and what is now called classic rock — and was just discovering that literature, and poetry in particular, was something worth reading outside of class.

I gobbled up books — Kerouac and Ginsberg, Hemingway, a collection of postmodern American poets and Jim Carroll's "Basketball Diaries," the 1978 book that pushed the 28-year-old poet from cult figure to mass-market author.

The "Diaries" were an accidental find, a small pocket-sized book discovered in a bookstore as I rummaged the shelves. I'd been listening almost continuously to "Catholic Boy," Carroll's searing first album that, as William Grimes pointed out in his obituary in Monday's edition of The New York Times, "is sometimes called the last great punk album."

I'd heard the single (if you can call it that), "People Who Died," on Vin Scelsa's show on WNEW, the New York rock station. Mr. Scelsa, who is probably the last of the free-form DJs, mixed obscure cuts from the New York punk and other underground music scenes into the mainstream rock playlist, which helped broaden my taste and the palates of so many of his listeners.

The album was a revelation for me — poetic lyrics set atop those driving punk guitars — that led me toward bands and performers like Television, Patti Smith and Richard Hell and the Voidoids (I've always been more of a New York punk — thanks to Jim Carroll and Lou Reed — than a London hardcore listener).

The "Diaries" hit me the same way. I read it in a single sitting, staying up through the night as his album played on my stereo. (This part of my memory is a bit foggier, and it is just as likely that I also played some Miles Davis and Bob Dylan as I read.)

The book was raw, but also obviously art, lived experience filtered through the contrivance of a literary voice — and I mean this in best of ways, a stylized reconstruction of the darker side of New York City in the 1960s that helped define a particular strain of writing that would follow.

I was taken by the book, as I said, and began to write — at first, offering derivative pieces that probably sit in the trunk in my attic where I have stored so much of the detritus of my early writing life. But as the influences multiplied — Carroll and the Beats, Dylan and Bruce Springsteen, then T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams and the Spanish and Latin American writers that make up my regular reading list — my poems have gotten better. They bear little resemblance to Jim Carroll's sharp and elegant surrealism.

But it was Carroll's work — in particular, that divine scream of an album, "Catholic Boy," and the "Diaries" — that helped ignite my own poetic explorations.

Thanks, Jim. Rest in Peace.

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