

Intelligencer

Wild and Free

Jim Carroll outlived his own gorgeous myth.

- By [Chris Norris](#)
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Corbis Outline)

Jim Carroll was a poet by 12, junkie by 13, prep-school gangster 14, posh-girl-seducer 15, all-star baller 16, and then on to the Pulitzer nod, the punk-rock classic, and the author of the smartest, toughest New York City lowlife memoir ever published. By the time he was 30, his CV short-listed him for Hippest New Yorker Ever.

Culled from journals Carroll kept from ages 12 to 16, *The Basketball Diaries* won his hero Kerouac's apocryphal but oft-repeated line, ♦ At 13 years of age, Jim Carroll writes better prose than 89 percent of the novelists working today, ♦ which elided the more startling fact it was true. Hoops-shooting, heroin-slamming literary prodigies don't come down the pike too often, and this one moved through all social classes and urban extremities in the gonzo-est moment in New York history. His chronicle evokes the very smell of the Lindsay-era underworld, a grimy, sexy, Panavision dystopia that still brings thousands here to find their own.

Where did Carroll find his? In the East Twenties where he was born and played his first real game of league basketball? In the East Sixties where he snatched purses? In Inwood, where he played street ball with Lew Alcindor and redefined *lanostalgie de la boue* diving into the excrement-clouded Harlem River? Or was it inside the walls of Trinity School, on

91st, where the scholarship case lived an X-rated teen-flick fantasy? Carroll's very presence bound so many Manhattans ◆ Dylan's 4th Street, Ratso's Times Square, Richard Hell's Bowery ◆ that he almost seems invented.

To some extent, early champions of Basquiat, Harmony Korine, and Dash Snow were looking for their Jim Carroll: a beautiful, street-raised, natural-born artist who wasn't quite of his own world. Part of the reason he easily stepped into early-eighties New Wave was that he had too much cool, too good a look (gimlet-eyed, pissed-off Bowie), and too wild a life not to (though being Patti Smith's boyfriend didn't hurt).

But Carroll's most remarkable accomplishment may have been living on after such an incendiary, plaudit-strewn youth. The narcissism of the young and doomed was not for him; Carroll's New York was, he said, ◆ the greatest hero a writer needs, ◆ and it apparently sustained him till the end.


In 1981, he told a journalist his second act wouldn't even come close: The only time you were really free, he said, was ◆ when you were young and on the streets, because then you were wild and free and murderous. ◆ Still, he had another good memoir, three albums, three books of poetry, and almost three more decades. Simply by surviving, Carroll transcended a myth that in many ways he co-authored. ◆ It ain't hip to sink that low, ◆ he spoke-sung on ◆ City Drops Into the Night, ◆ unless you're gonna make a resurrection. ◆

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