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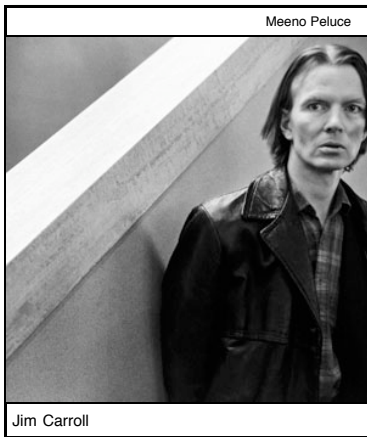
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Jim Carroll Watches the Earth Recede

Comment by Daniel Hutchens of Bloodkin

Jim Carroll, a truly great poet, punk rock singer, philosopher, artistic heir to outlaw creative types such as Rimbaud and the Beat Generation, and all-around NYC icon for our times, passed away Sept. 11 at his home in Manhattan. The cause was likely a heart attack, according to his former wife, Rosemary Carroll. He was found fallen across his desk, where he had been writing.

Carroll was born Aug. 1, 1949, in New York City, and spent his childhood on the Lower East Side, where he attended Catholic schools. At age 12 he began keeping a series of journals that would eventually become the famed *Basketball Diaries*, which in 1995 became a mainstream Hollywood movie starring Leonardo DiCaprio. Carroll had mixed feelings about the movie at the time, saying that, "The actors all did great jobs, they're excellent. It's just that the movie doesn't have very much to do with my book." The book itself recounts Carroll's youth, ages 12-15, when he was a star basketball player in school. But *The Basketball Diaries* also reveal Carroll's other life: by age 13 he had started dabbling in heroin, just once in a while at first, but as his teenage years progressed he found himself a full-blown junkie, hustling on the streets for money to get his next fix, letting sleazy businessmen blow him in filthy subway station mens' rooms for cash, rolling drunks for their wallets, snatching purses, whatever.



During the '70s Carroll became a young, mysterious but magnetic "star" of sorts in the rarified art/celebrity circles of New York City. He kept company with the likes of Andy Warhol, Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe, Allen Ginsberg, Bob Dylan, members of the Velvet Underground, and many others. Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards helped Carroll score a three record deal with Atlantic, the first result of which would be *Catholic Boy*, which was released in 1980. It's an earthshaking masterpiece of a rock n roll record, a buzzing hybrid of raw switchblade punk and Carroll's cutting-edge-poetic NYC street lingo, illuminated with real spiritual fervor. This record is damn sure standing the test of time; it'll still hold your head underwater for a brutal baptizing while kicking you hard in the ass and swiping your wallet just for kicks. It's a measuring stick for all rock and roll bands yet to come.

To me, Carroll's tales of the drug culture, death, and other dark subjects are just pieces of accurate reporting, like Hemingway's dispatches from the wars. Brutal but also can become uplifting to the reader/listener, who suddenly feels a kinship with another human being, someone who has suffered a similar agony or horror...and to hear "People Who Died" blasting full-on earsplitting volume from a great speaker system, or to hear a great rock band cover that song—well, to me, it actually feels healing, empowering, like a prayer plugged into about 10,000 watts of righteous power.

Drive-By Truckers' frontman Patterson Hood had this to say about Carroll: "I was first turned on to Jim Carroll's *Catholic Boy* by my older cousin when I was 16 years old. I totally fell in love with 'People Who Died' and have since covered it in every band I have played in. DBT has probably played it close to 1000 times. Also, in high school, I read *The Basketball Diaries*, probably four or five times over the years. It probably kept me from ever trying heroin back in my wilder days, for which I'm forever grateful. I hate to hear of his passing."

Producer David Barbe formed the seminal Athens punk band Mercyland back around the time he was discovering Carroll's work: "I first became familiar with Jim Carroll when I moved into the UGA dorms in '81 and Joel Suttles had a copy of 'Catholic Boy.' Right off the bat, 'People Who Died' was pretty undeniable to us and fit in with our steady diet (at the time) of The Clash, The Jam, Elvis C, etc. That record led me to read 'The Basketball Diaries'. It is a story that is out of time, a harbinger of things 10 years away. He was an odd figure, in a way. Famous for a series of disconnected images that strangely add up and depict the whole man. I'll miss him." During the writing of this article, I contacted Cassie Carter, a longtime friend of Carroll's and the maintainer of his website, [CatholicBoy.com](#). The happiest news she reported was that Carroll's long-awaited novel, *The Petting Zoo*, had finally been completed just before his death: "It'll need some final editing...but the actual writing is done. I'm positive it will be [published]. And I can tell you that everybody's going to be delighted. It's wonderful."

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Daniel Hutchens

Daniel Hutchens has lived in Athens and played in the band Bloodkin for the past 23 years.

Following is the complete transcription of a telephone interview between Daniel Hutchens and Cassie Carter, Jim Carroll's longtime friend and maintainer of his website, CatholicBoy.com. The interview was conducted September 14, 2009.

Daniel Hutchens: Once again, thank you so much for responding to me.

Cassie Carter: Sure, sure.

DH: In the middle of all this. And just, to let you know, um, I'm not a professional journalist or anything. I'm a musician. And I've lived and worked here in Athens, GA for the last 23 years. But I do occasionally write a magazine article, you know, freelance.

CC: Right.

DH: But when I heard the news, I called *Flagpole* magazine, which is kind of the arts and music publication in Athens. And it's actually pretty cool.

CC: Yeah it is, I think I mentioned in my email to you, my second email, they did a really nice, two article series [about Carroll], it was around '96 or something, I really liked it, but I think it got lost, back in those days I was linking straight to them, and then they just vaporized.

DH: Yeah, that's the thing, especially stuff that's older, I can't find it in their archives online. But if I go down there and talk to somebody...

CC: Yeah, because you're working with them, maybe you could ask them about it because I'd really like to have it...anyway, that's not why you called.

DH: But I will definitely do that and see if I can find them...Now, obviously I don't know you personally, but if I understand correctly, you knew Jim Carroll quite a long time.

CC: I started out, I was a scholar, I published a bibliography about him in 1990, and wrote my master's thesis about him, and I built the website obviously, and published a couple of other articles. But, you know, in the past ten years, we've gotten to know each other and became friends. And really especially we were working pretty closely this summer, helping him get his stuff organized. So I was talking to him at least every week, and seeing him every other week at least.

DH: When you say helping him get his stuff organized...

CC: He had just moved, and, you know, there was just a bunch of stuff. He was trying to finish his book, and edit a big mess of notes and that sort of thing, so I was just helping him with that stuff.

DH: Cool. That's actually one big question that I have for you, and obviously if there's anything that you feel uncomfortable talking about, then I assume you won't (laughs). But I'm just really curious about that book. [Carroll had been working on a novel, tentatively titled *The Petting Zoo*, for many years, and rumors of its publication swirled through the press occasionally.] I've just heard so many stories for years.

CC: The book that has been looming for 20 years you mean? (laughs)

DH: Yes!

CC: Yeah, that's what he was working on.

DH: How far along is that book, do you know?

CC: Well, basically, it's funny, because basically the whole thing is written. And he's been working on line edits. And that was, he had all these notes from, just like line edits from the publisher at Penguin, and going through and making sure those were all done, and then he'd done some other stuff that had to be removed or consolidated, that's what he was working on.

DH: Just editing type stuff.

CC: Yeah, I mean it's all written but, really it was just line editing and shuffling some pieces around, and he had pulled a bunch of things out that were gonna go back in, last week that was what he was working on, the pieces that had been pulled out, he was putting back in. And um, but, you know, from what I've seen I believe the thing can be published. It'll need some final editing just to make sure everything is all together, but the actual writing is done.

DH: Do you think that it will be published?

CC: Yes, I'm positive it will be.

DH: That's great. And you are involved in that process?

CC: I hope so, yeah.

DH: Yeah. That's really great.

CC: Yeah, um, I spoke to Rosemary [Carroll's former wife] about that, and I should be but, we're gonna have to, obviously we'll have to talk to the publisher and see exactly how that's gonna work.

DH: Sure.

CC: Yeah, I don't want to step on anybody's toes.

DH: It's kind of a tender situation I guess.

CC: Yeah.

DH: But, man, I know I would love to see it, and so would so many people, I'm sure.

CC: Yeah, oh yes, and I can tell you that everybody's going to be delighted. It's wonderful.

DH: Well, that doesn't surprise me.

CC: Yeah. And, you know, he's talked a lot about this book, so people that have been following him will already have a pretty good idea what it's about, but you know, it's in the details. That's always it with Jim. *The Basketball Diaries* is not a great book because of the story, it's a great book because of the writing, and the way that it's written.

DH: And, that surely is a great book though. In its own crazy way.

CC: Yes. (laughs)

DH: He affected so many people's lives. It's kind of amazing.

CC: It really is. I mean, just the emails I've been getting the past couple of days, and you know, people just talk about how he influenced them and affected them, people saying, you know, "I was in high school and playing around with drugs, and then I read *The Basketball Diaries* and that was it"...or...(laughs)...people that were already screwed up, and that book helped them turn their lives around. You know, people that have become artists, poets, or musicians, whatever, people who have followed that dream of being an artist because of that inspiration...for me, that's the most wonderful thing at a sad time, is to read these positive stories, you know.

DH: Yeah, absolutely. And there are people out there with criticisms of his work, that it was promoting drug abuse, which is craziness...

CC: Well, I would like to see them actually point to where it says that (laughs)...because it doesn't.

DH: Exactly. I was talking earlier today with a friend of mine, Patterson Hood, who's in the band Drive-By Truckers.

CC: Oh yeah, they cover "People Who Died"!

DH: They do it a lot. And he told me that, when he was young, he read and he said that was probably the only reason he didn't start doing heroin at a wild time in his life.

CC: That's great.

DH: I did personally mess around with drugs at a certain time in my life, but that was my own problem, and nobody could have stopped me from doing it. And it was always refreshing to run across somebody like Jim Carroll, who would talk about the drug experience, and just simply tell the truth. His writing was not glamorizing drugs at all...I mean, the first couple times you do something, it *is* fun, it *does* feel good, that's why people do it. And when people lie about that, you know, it destroys trust, kids don't believe anything else you have to say about it.

CC: Yeah, that was one thing that Jim always said, as far as the "Just Say No" campaigns, that was the problem, it comes off as lying because you don't say that.

DH: Yeah. So anyway...Jim Carroll's writing was always more of a positive force to me, uplifting. When did you first actually meet him?

CC: Um, I think it was about '89 or something the first time...it was funny 'cause I was working on the bibliography, and, I was in San Diego at the time, and I had contacted Rosemary, Jim's ex-wife and now lawyer—poor Rosemary, she's just a wreck right now, you can imagine, she's handling all this stuff, and I feel so sorry for her—but anyway, back then, she just arranged for me to talk with Jim. And I showed up there, I just wanted to ask some questions for the bibliography and everything. He was reading at the Spirit Club in San Diego, and I kind of waited in line while he was talking to people and signing things for people. And I go back there, and one of the questions I had for him was about *Organic Trains*—his first book. And he whipped out a copy and he handed it to me. "Here, this is for you." That says a lot about him.

DH: That's pretty cool.

CC: Yeah. We talked for awhile, and I ended up giving him a ride back to his motel, and we sat in the car and talked for about an hour...and it was the first time I met him, and it was really delightful. I pretty much stayed in touch with him after that. In '96 I singlehandedly organized this massive reading—I was in Bowling Green, working on my Ph.D. at the time—and I organized a reading with Jim there, and God, it was the biggest turnout of any event ever at Bowling Green—and I spent two days with him then. Then later I moved to New York, and eventually started the website. And he'd give me stuff to put on there, you know, I'd take pictures of his t shirts, he had a collection of his old band t shirts that were like yellow with age (laughs)...and I laid 'em out on the floor of the apartment and took pictures of them. And he'd give me copies of the translations, stuff like that.

DH: Was he a computer guy himself?

CC: Yeah, he had a Mac laptop.

DH: Is that what he wrote on?

CC: Yeah.

DH: What was his health like the last couple years of his life?

CC: Honestly, he hadn't been feeling well at all.

DH: That's kind of what I had gathered.

CC: Yeah, he'd been going to the doctor and trying to find out what was wrong, and the usual...I don't know what the state of our health care in this country is...

DH: Not great.

CC: Yeah, you know, he went to the doctors and they'd just go, "You're fine. It's all those drugs you did in the past, it's catching up with you." But you know...at least run a damn test! But I have no idea, we don't know exactly what happened, because the autopsy results aren't back. Pretty sure it was a

heart attack.

DH: How were his spirits or state of mind toward the end?

CC: He seemed to be pretty up. (laughs) He was pretty freaked out about getting the novel done, but I mean...

DH: He was trying not to finish it!

CC: Yeah, well, he was really trying to finish it but it was, you know it was quite a thing, he worked on the thing for 20 years, and it was like, "Get it out of here," but at the same time, "No!" (laughs)

DH: Honestly, coming to the end of a big project like that could be pretty intimidating.

CC: Yeah, it is. It is. Yeah, he was pretty up, I mean, I don't know, he just really always had such a great sense of humor. He didn't seem to be down at all.

DH: Did he still write other things toward the end? Poetry or anything?

CC: I think so, I'm pretty sure that there are some other things, like he started a while back a bunch of monologues...he did these great monologues, and he was starting to transcribe those.

DH: These were, like he would get up onstage and do a monologue?

CC: Yeah.

DH: Did he still follow basketball?

CC: I think the only thing he followed was college basketball. He wasn't interested in pro at all.

DH: Yep. Gotcha. Cool. Once again...thanks for doing this, you've given me a generous supply of information.

CC: Send me a copy, I wanna see it!

DH: I definitely will. And, you know, take care of yourself.

CC: Well, you too, and good luck with that article.

DH: Okay, so long.

CC: Alright. Alright, take care. Bye Bye.

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