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OBITUARIES

Jim Carroll dies at 60; poet and punk rocker wrote about travails in 'The Basketball Diaries'

A cult figure who discovered his gifts and vices at an early age, he attracted serious attention as as writer when he was barely into his teens.



Jim Carroll's "The Basketball Diaries" hit bestseller lists when it was made into a film in 1995. (K.C. Bailey)

By Elaine Woo
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Jim Carroll, a poet and punk rocker whose wry tales of rocky adolescence as an athlete-turned-junkie in the 1978 memoir "The Basketball Diaries" resonated deeply with a generation of disaffected youths, died Friday at his home in New York City. He was 60.

The cause was a heart attack, said Rosemary Carroll, his former wife.

A cult figure who discovered his gifts and his vices at an early age, Carroll began attracting serious attention as a writer when he was barely into his teens. He was praised by such literary icons as Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac, who said that Carroll at 13 "writes better prose than 89% of the novelists working today."

"The Basketball Diaries" was a collection of autobiographical stories that had been excerpted in literary magazines before Carroll put them into book form. It begins with a 1963 entry

describing his excitement at playing his first game in a basketball league, but Carroll quickly establishes that he is no choirboy, detailing how his coach gropes him, how he snatches purses from elderly women, how he gets high sniffing cleaning fluid on the ferry and vomits all over a "fantastically huge man" on the deck below. The tale grows darker as it chronicles his descent over the next few years into heroin addiction, which he supports through prostitution.

The book hit bestseller lists when it was made into a movie in 1995 starring Leonardo DiCaprio. At book signings with DiCaprio, however, "it was Carroll the crowds clamored for," Lewis MacAdams wrote in Entertainment Weekly.

Carroll was born in New York City on Aug. 1, 1949, the son and grandson of Irish American

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bartenders. His parochial school teachers nurtured his talent for writing by encouraging him to keep a journal, but his talent on the basketball court also attracted attention. He won a scholarship to Trinity High, an elite private school on Manhattan's Upper West Side, won all-city honors as a high-scoring guard on the school team, and, at 18, published his first collection of poems, "Organic Trains" (1967).

Poet Ted Berrigan, writing in the journal Culture Hero in 1969, proclaimed that Carroll was "the first truly new American poet." That year, the Paris Review published pieces from what would become "The Basketball Diaries." Desiring to write full time and experimenting heavily with drugs, Carroll dropped out of Wagner College and Columbia University and joined the downtown art scene, working for pop artist Andy Warhol.

In the early 1970s he was living in an artists' colony in Bolinas, Calif., where he kicked his heroin habit. During this period he met his future wife, Rosemary Klemfuss a law student who later became his lawyer. They were married in 1978, the year "Basketball Diaries" was published.

The couple divorced in the late 1980s. Carroll is survived by a brother, Thomas, of Stony Point, N.Y.

After the success of "The Basketball Diaries," Carroll's poet-rocker friend Patti Smith invited him to join her onstage during a West Coast tour. He found the experience so exhilarating that he formed the Jim Carroll Band.

With the help of the Rolling Stones' Keith Richards, Carroll signed a record deal and in 1980 the band released its first album, "Catholic Boy." The best-known track was "People Who Died," a haunting tribute to friends who had died of various causes, including suicide and drug overdoses. Its release coincided with the shooting death of former Beatle John Lennon, which bolstered its popularity. "Not since Lou Reed wrote 'Walk on the Wild Side' has a rock singer so vividly evoked the casual brutality of New York City as has Jim Carroll," Barbara Graustark wrote in Newsweek.

The band released two more albums, "Dry Dreams" and "I Write Your Name," but critics complained about Carroll's vocal limitations. He dissolved the band in the mid-1980s and resumed writing poetry. He made spoken-word recordings, including "Praying Mantis" (1992) and "Pools of Mercury" (1998). He also wrote a second memoir, "The Downtown Diaries" (1987).

He recently completed a second novel that will be published by Viking, Rosemary Carroll said.

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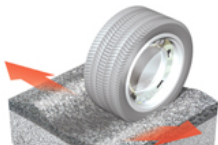
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