

Jim Carroll's brilliant light goes out suddenly

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AMERICA AT LARGE: Poet, diarist, teenage basketball prodigy, heroin addict. He was a friend of mine, and he died, writes **GEORGE KIMBALL**

SO MANY friends had drawn their last breath over the past few months that more than once I've found the lyrics to Jim Carroll's People Who Died rolling around in my head.

Then, a few days ago, the author of People Who Died died.

He was 60, and the most remarkable thing about that is that most of us who knew him in the 1960s would have made it no better than even money that Jim would live to be 20.

Jim's reputation had preceded him before I'd met him. The poet Ted Berrigan had told me about this wild, red-haired kid who'd started hanging around the Poetry Project at St Mark's-in-the- Bouverie.

Though still in his teens, he was writing stuff the rest of us could only envy, high-energy poems with an edge of New York street-smarts that could move you from tears to side-splitting laughter from one line to the next, as well as an autobiographical journal he called The Basketball Diaries, a work-in-progress that had already assumed an almost legendary status in literary circles.

The Basketball Diaries chronicled Jim's athletic career, which had reached its zenith by the time he was 16 and had already begun to experiment with heroin. In a city renowned for the best brand of playground ball in the country, Jim (a bootlegger's son who had attended the swank Trinity School on the Upper West Side on a scholarship) was the only Caucasian selected for a New York all-city team that would tour and compete against similar aggregates from other cities in the National All-Star Game. A couple of years later, literally every other member of that team had become a collegiate star, and some were still playing in the NBA a dozen years later. By then, Jim Carroll was playing with Keith Richards and Lou Reed.

Small poetry magazines had published excerpts from his journal in the 60s, and in the early 70s a small California publisher released it as one volume. It wasn't until 1978 the Viking/Penguin edition came along, and it was 1995 when Hollywood turned it into a movie, with Leonardo DiCaprio as Jim.

The Basketball Diaries is a coming-of-age book set in a world where kids were forced to come of age way too fast. At one point Carroll presages his street-hustler phase when he describes a road trip in the company of “Benny Greenbaum, the infamous queer scout for a well-known midwestern university, (who) kept playing with my hair all the way down”. Later on the road trip one of his all-star team-mates spots Carroll reading a book by Allen Ginsberg. “Corky,” writes Carroll, “thought Allen Ginsberg was another queer Jew basketball scout like Benny Greenbaum.”

The avant-garde New York scene tended to be interconnected in those days. Poets like Berrigan and Peter Schjeldahl and John Ashbery fed their families writing art criticism. Jim spent quite a bit of time at Andy Warhol’s factory, which is where he met Lou Reed.

His sense of humour was always mischievous. One night a well-known poet with somewhat grandiose pretensions staged a mixed-media event at St Mark’s, a poetry reading with a backdrop of cut-up tape loops, flashing strobe lights and a pulsating smoke machine that disgorged huge grey puffs. Jim and I thought it a bit over the top, and, having excused ourselves to go outside for a quick cigarette, availed ourselves of the pay phone on the corner to ring the Fire Department.

Five minutes later the church doors were flung open and a phalanx of axe-wielding men clad in firemen’s overcoats and helmets marched up the aisle and into the poetry reading. A steward attempted to assure them it was all a misunderstanding and the place wasn’t actually in flames, only to be shoved aside by the lieutenant in charge, who pointed to the smoke belching from the altar and said “Whaddya mean there’s no fire?”

He had published his first book of poems still in his teens, and another before his 21st birthday. By the late 1970s, the singer Patti Smith encouraged him to expand his audience by reading from his work with a backing band. He hadn’t even thought at this point about trying to sing, but that evolved into his mode of delivery, and he was soon being hailed as the cutting edge of punk rock.

Richards joined him for live performances, as did Reed.

How good was he as a basketball player? At 15 he was holding his own against the likes of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and there are those who’ll tell you to this day that he was the best white player to come out of a New York high school in the second half of the 20th century. But since he had all but abandoned any serious pursuit of the game by the time he was 16 we’ll never know.

The closest I got to a first-hand look came in 1969. My Greenwich Village local, the Lions Head, had lost a summertime softball game against its rival saloon, Max’s Kansas City, and was now seeking revenge in a writers v painters basketball game to be played at a gym in Chelsea that winter.

Jim wasn't a Lions Head regular, but he'd had a pint there once or twice, and somebody reckoned having a Jim Carroll on our side might improve our chances dramatically. As the late poet Joel Oppenheimer noted, Jim made the supreme sacrifice: he stayed off junk for 10 whole days before the game.

What we hadn't figured on was that Max's might counter Jim's presence by bringing in ringers of their own. In addition to the expected assortment of actors and painters and sculptors, the pair of African-Americans (the smaller of whom stood 6ft 6in) were fairly conspicuous. Mickey Ruskin, who owned Max's, claimed they were recently-hired busboys.

Jim hadn't played competitively for over three years, but he scored at least 20 points and was easily the best player on the court.

His supporting cast, alas, was not up to his standard. Late in the game, the novelist/journalist Joe Flaherty was brought on for a cameo. Jim grabbed a rebound and fired an outlet pass to Flaherty, who spotted me streaking down the court and hit me with a long pass, only to have me blow a wide-open lay-up.

Several years ago I'd gone to one of Jim's shows in Providence, and we'd hung out a bit afterward, but he'd stopped touring several years ago and was reported to be in ill health. Given that even in his youth his poetry evinced a preoccupation with Arthur Rimbaud, who died at 37, and folksinger Phil Ochs, who was dead by his own hand at 36, and that People Who Died was his all-time biggest hit, not a few people were surprised he lasted as long as he did. He was reportedly at his desk, writing, when he suffered the heart attack that stilled his voice last Friday.

The Jim Carroll Band's debut 1980 album had been entitled Catholic Boy, and yesterday, after a requiem Mass at the Church of Our Lady of Pompeii, the Catholic Boy got a Catholic funeral.

He'd have liked that, but what he'd have liked even more was Tuesday night's wake, held at one of those old-time funeral homes in the Village more accustomed to laying out politicians and Mafia foot soldiers.

There was a smattering of old friends from the Poetry Project, and even a few Trinity classmates. The best we could tell, there were no members of the 1966 All-City basketball team, but there were more red and purple hairdos and more nose rings than the joint had seen in the last hundred years.

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