

Memories of Poet-Rocker Jim Carroll

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Jim Carroll, poet, writer, rocker, died last week at the age of 60. He was the author of "**The Basketball Diaries**" and "**The Book of Nod**" and also a dynamic rocker. I interviewed him nearly 30 years ago when he was just starting out on the rock scene. The following is an excerpt from my interview with him:

"There's something about Jim Carroll that makes you stop and listen. It's not because he was a junkie at age 15, or that he was a teenage poet, a basketball whiz or a new wave rock and roller. It's his gift of creating images out of dust, drugs and depression that can shake you out of your stupor, your music or your dribble.

As a teenager, Carroll began hanging around The Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in Manhattan. He was the tall, emaciated kid in the corner who would listen to the poet heavyweights. Eventually, he mustered up the courage to offer some of his own works and, when he was 16, they were published in The Paris Review and World Magazine.

During this time beat poet Jack Kerouac wrote, "At 13 years of age, Carroll writes prose better than 89 percent of the novelists working today." Author William Burroughs called him "a born writer." When he was 22, his third book of poetry, "Living at the Movies," was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

Now, Bantam has just released "The Basketball Diaries," an autobiographical work he wrote as a teenager which chronicles his life with drugs and basketball in New York City in the mid-'60s. He is currently writing "The Book of Nods" detailing his experiences on and off heroin.

But the other news is that the 29-year-old poet is now a rock and roller with an album coming out this month on Rolling Stone Records. The label, which records and is owned by the Stones, has only one other artist on its roster -- reggae star Peter Tosh.

Carroll looked nervous as he came into the conference room at Rolling Stone Records for an interview. His voice quavered. He was thin, gawky and talky. There was still a slight "heroin halo" about him. He also bore a striking resemblance to playwright Sam Shepard who, it turns out, is a friend and neighbor.

"There's a snobby aspect to the poetry scene," he began, chin-smoking Kent IIs. "It's real petty in some ways, with people writing for one little magazine, saying, 'I'll publish your poems if you publish mine,' or 'People won't understand my poems but other poets will.' Everybody put down Patti (Smith) after she shifted from writing poetry and started to work in rock and roll."

Pal Patti encourage him to try writing rock. His wife, Rosemary, also got him interested in the new wave scene in San Francisco.

"I got a taste of a rock and roll audience as opposed to a poetry crowd. There's this great music energy coming from behind you and this real kid energy in front of you and there you are in the middle."

He said he didn't want to come across as a poet slumming in the land of punk. He is fascinated by rock and roll on its own terms.

He is also conscious of "not making a fool of myself" when he first started performing, but he

developed more confidence as his popularity grew. "Cockiness is a real big quality in your stage presence in rock, you know. It's like when I was playing basketball."

He uses basketball as a metaphor in his 'Diary.' He said that what connects basketball, rock and his writing are "presence and grace. There's an element of grace involved in basketball more than any other sport. It's not that you just scored two points but that you look good while doing it. It's a chance to transcend yourself.

"It also gives kids in the inner city a chance to really show themselves what their capabilities are. There's always some guy who comes into the playground -- like an old-fashioned gunslinger who you think you're gonna knock off. He might look like a lamb or something but once he starts playing he beats the shit out of you. So it gives you this quality of being humble a lot, too."

He hasn't played basketball in years. Too old. No strength in the legs. He does on occasion play racquetball, but "It's a racket all right. It cost an arm and a leg to join...and the people are such snots about everything. I think I'll join the 'Y' instead."

Can he transcend himself with rock and roll?

"A lot of new wave music is background for the apocalypse. It's not so much pessimism but a negativity. In 'When the City Drops into the Night,' I sing that it ain't hip to sink that low unless you're gonna make a resurrection. It's like a dilettante idea on heroin, that it's very romantic in a poetic sense, and heroic. But it's only heroic if you rise up again."

Some of his best images come from the world of heroin -- which he took for about 10 years... As he wrote in "Diaries:" "You just got to see that junk is just another nine to five gig in the end, only the hours are a bit more inclined toward shadows."

He brushed his straight, red hair from his eyes. "Cocaine isn't romantic either," he says. "I think it's a real cold, ephemeral drug. I never liked it. It's a real musician's drug, though. Sometimes it's good before a show because it gives you a sense of cockiness and gives you drive and musical energy. People would sometimes mix junk and coke to make speedballs but I felt it was ruining my good junk to put coke in it. It's like putting apple sauce on a good pork chop.

"But I don't like all the psychological paraphernalia that surrounds coke -- like it being passed around on a silver tray and all those tooters, you know. I feel you should just take it and shoot it up if you're going to do it. You got any?"

One of the reasons he left New York was to get off the methadone treatment. "Methadone here is not geared to getting you off drugs but just to maintain you on it. They put you on the highest dose of methadone so you won't go out and score [heroin]. They're not going to detox you because you might get back on junk and become part of the crime problem again.

"Methadone jails you in a certain way, mentally and spiritually. It's a real insidious drug. In California, it's different. The whole attitude there is to get you off it."

So the street kid flipped coats, became a recluse and, in 1974, kicked it all, got married and started singing.

We left the executive offices (Mick slept here, Keith nodded out there) and strolled a block to St. Patrick's Cathedral. he was going to get ashes for Lent but the line was too long.

Carroll's Irish-Catholic background plays a major part in all his writings. The original title for his album was "Catholic Boy," but it has since been changed to "Dry Dreams."

"How are your dreams?"

"I'm having a series of bad dreams lately," he says, bundling up in his high school basketball jacket. "But what people think of bad dreams I think of as adventures. The only bad dream to me is when the actual dream is taking place on the room where I am sleeping and I wake up and I don't know if the guy in the corner who was in the dream is really there or not."

"Have you ever been to a shrink?"

"Yeah."

"Did you like it?"

"No. I think all shrinks are bullshit." then he qualified. "I guess a good shrink can hep someone but...it's..." His voice trails off. We arrive at St. Pat's.

We take a lap around in the inner sanctum of the gothic structure. A Mass or two was taking place. Pockets of prayer alternated with tourists and religious voyeurs.

"Psychiatry is really a variation of the confessional, isn't is?"

"Yeah, but Confession is a lot easier," he says. "You don't get absolution from a shrink."

We walked by the altar. Carroll genuflected and blessed himself.

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