

VANITY FAIR

JAMES WOLCOTT'S BLOG

Dead Poets' Society Inducts Newest Member

And one by one, the line is drawn through the names of those who helped make New York what it was back when what happened below 14th Street still mattered and reverberated around the world. This week brought news of the death of the poet, memoirist (*The Basketball Diaries*), and rocker Jim Carroll, who in his beautiful young manhood had Christopher Walken's bone structure with a translucency all his own. Gerald Howard, who superintended most of Carroll's work into print when he was an editor at Penguin, retraces the contours of Carroll's ethereal force in **a heart-filled eulogy** published at Slate:

Tall, slim, athletic, pale, and spectral as many ex-junkies are, Jim was a vivid presence in any setting. He was a classic and now vanishing New York type: the smart (and smartass) Irish kid with style, street savvy, and whatever the Gaelic word for chutzpah is. The line of succession runs from Jimmy Cagney and Jimmy Walker through Emmett Grogan and Al McGuire. In the '30s they would have cast him immediately as a Dead End Kid—he certainly had the unreconstructed accent for the part, an urban rasp that was sweet music to my aboriginal ears. He came up athletically in an era when New York produced the best basketball players in the country—and a lot of them were white. Despite playing his high-school ball for a Manhattan prep school, Jim could more than hold his own on some of the toughest playgrounds in the city against the likes of Lew Alcindor and Dean "the Dream" Meminger. But his street-kid affect never quite hid his essentially generous and vulnerable nature and his poetic soul.

Perhaps the biggest shock in the first obituary notice I read was that Carroll was 60 years old when he died. 60 was hard to compute, so fixed was his sleeveless, slender youth in my memory, having seen him vocally blast "People Who Die" on stage at probably the same Ritz concert Howard attended in 1980. With his passing, another link to the Beats and the St. Marks poetry scene and the Warhol Factory joins the posthumous fraternity of the starry Kerouac night:

Jim Carroll was waked (in a blessedly closed casket) in a funeral home on Bleecker Street before a few dozen family, friends, and fans. The grief and loss was even thicker in the air than usual at these affairs. After the priest led us in prayers, Jim's ex-wife, Rosemary, invited people to share their thoughts and memories. New York rock legend Lenny Kaye gave a moving mini-eulogy that touched on Jim's gifts as a raconteur and evoked his sweetness, ending with the famous line from "People Who Died": "I salute you, brother." Two members of the original Jim Carroll Band, Terrell Winn and Steve Linsley, reminisced about hooking up with Jim in Bolinas, where he'd retreated to get clean, and crafting the triumph of punk sound and poetic sensibility that was the album *Catholic Boy*. Richard Hell marveled at the early arrival of Jim's gifts and expressed his admiration and astonishment. I spoke of just how much fun it was to be Jim's editor, fun being about as easy to experience in publishing these days as smoking in Mike Bloomberg's New

York, and remembered the best Fourth of July of my life, when I played basketball in the Village all afternoon, showered, got good and ripped, and saw the Jim Carroll Band tear it up at the Ritz in their first New York appearance a few days after Scott Muni had unveiled "People Who Died" on WNEW-FM.

And then Patti Smith got up, her star power dialed down, and told a simple funny story about her first encounter with Jim, who had proceeded to recite for her a long section of Whitman from memory until he ... nodded ... off ... for about half an hour. Patti, "because I was a polite girl," sat there patiently until Jim awoke, and then he picked up exactly where he'd left off. This perfect vignette perfectly delivered, Patti turned to the casket, laid her hand on it gently, and and said, "Jim, when you get up there, say hello to Allen, and to William, and to Gregory, and to Herbert [as in Ginsberg, Burroughs, Corso, and Huncke]. And to all our friends." That's when we all cried.

September 19, 2009, 2:09 PM | [Permalink](#) | [RSS Feed](#)  [Digg This](#)  [Post to Facebook](#)  [Yahoo! Buzz](#)