

The Washington Post

'Basketball Diaries' Author, Punk Rocker Mined the Depths

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By Patricia Sullivan
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Tuesday, September 15, 2009

Jim Carroll, 60, a poet-turned-punk rocker whose book "The Basketball Diaries" chronicled his descent from elite high school basketball star to Times Square drug addict, thief and prostitute, died Sept. 11 at his home in Manhattan after a heart attack.

Mr. Carroll's best-known work was an autobiographical account of his years from 12 to 15 when he received a basketball scholarship to Trinity, an elite Manhattan high school, and began abusing cocaine and other drugs. The journal, excerpted in the Paris Review, became highly popular on college campuses and was published as a book in 1978. A 1995 movie version starred Leonardo DiCaprio as Mr. Carroll.

The book's bleak description of adolescent life in a heartless city rang true for many. It began with wary joy: "Today was my first Bidy League game and my first day in any organized basketball league. I'm enthused about life due to this exciting event. The Bidy League is a league for anyone 12 yrs. old or under. I'm actually 13 but my coach Lefty gave me a fake birth certificate."

"The Basketball Diaries" ends with the author at an abyss: "Totally zonked, and all the dope scraped or sniffed clean from the tiny cellophane bags. Four days of temporary death gone by, no more bread. . . . Nice June day out today, lots of people probably graduating. I can see the Cloisters with its million in medieval art out the bedroom window. I got to go in and puke. I just want to be pure."

Mr. Carroll was hailed as one of the best poets of his generation, and by his late teens, he had befriended Bob Dylan, artist Andy Warhol, photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, and poet and rock singer Patti Smith.

Beat poet Jack Kerouac, upon reading Mr. Carroll's diaries as a manuscript, said, "At 13 years of age, Jim Carroll writes better prose than 89 percent of the novelists working today."

James Dennis Carroll, the son and grandson of bartenders, was born in New York on Aug. 1, 1949, and began writing as a boy. His first published poetry was "Organic Trains" (1967), followed by "4 Ups and 1 Down" (1970) and "Living at the Movies" (1973).

In a successful attempt to escape his drug habit, he moved cross-country to Bolinas, Calif., an almost-hidden coastal enclave north of San Francisco. Smith, whom he had met at a poetry reading and who gave him a place to live in New York, encouraged him to perform spoken-word pieces with her band, and he enjoyed it so much that he formed his own band.

Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones got him a record deal with Atlantic, and his first release, "Catholic Boy," met with critical acclaim in 1980, although reviewers said he could hardly carry a tune.

The album's single "People Who Died," a manic, accelerating roll call of the singer's dead friends, became a punk classic.

Teddy sniffing glue, he was 12 years old

Fell from the roof on East Two-nine

Cathy was 11 when she pulled the plug

On 26 reds and a bottle of wine

Bobby got leukemia, 14 years old

He looked like 65 when he died

He was a friend of mine

Those are people who died, died

They were all my friends, and they died

Mr. Carroll worked with rockers, including Lou Reed, The Doors, Pearl Jam, Blue Oyster Cult and Boz Scaggs.

He eventually left California to return to New York.

His marriage to the former Rosemary Klemfuss, a lawyer he met in California, ended in divorce. A brother survives him.

He released other books of poetry and music albums, often appeared at spoken-word events in New York and Washington, and wrote a sequel to "The Basketball Diaries"

called "Forced Entries: The Downtown Diaries, 1971-1973."

Critic Christopher Lehmann-Haupt wrote in the New York Times: "Whether or not one believes Jim Carroll's redemption, his two diaries constitute a remarkable account of New York City's lower depths. At the very least, they should serve further to demystify the usefulness of drugs to writers."

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