

Jim Carroll

Jim Carroll, the New York poet, author and singer, who died on September 11 aged 60, enjoyed a writing career that spanned more than 50 years.

Yet it will always be *The Basketball Diaries* – which he wrote between the ages of 12 and 16, and which was made into a Hollywood film starring Leonardo Di Caprio in the mid-1990s – for which he will be best remembered.

The *Diaries*, published in 1978, chronicled Carroll's teenage years, during which he won a basketball scholarship to Trinity, an elite private school on Manhattan's Upper West Side. It was not a simple story of sporting excellence; instead Carroll's adolescence descended into a litany of late-night delinquency and hustling for heroin in Times Square.

When an excerpt from this memoir was published in *The Paris Review* in 1970 it was greeted by the literary world as a sensation. By then he was already a well-known figure on the New York poetry scene; he had published his first book of poetry, *Organic Trains*, when he was 17, and gained plaudits from Beat Generation heroes such as William S Burroughs (who described him as a "born writer"), Jack Kerouac and Ted Berrigan.

"He's 20 years old, stands 6ft 3in, and has a body like Nureyev," wrote Berrigan in the journal *Culture Hero* in 1969. "Across a party, or a poetry-reading one sees a black swathe of leather, Jim Carroll's brilliant-red Prince Valiant [hair]cut quietly nodding."



Jim Carroll in 1980 Photo: REDFERNIS

James Dennis Carroll was born in New York on August 1 1949. He grew up on the Lower East Side, where his father, an Irish-American war veteran, owned a bar. Later he talked of his hatred of the Roman Catholic schools he attended during his childhood. After his parents had moved north to the middle-class area of Inwood, Jim ensured that his sporting prowess and good grades got him into Trinity.

By 13, however, he was using heroin: "Everyone else was going out drinking, and I hated drinking," he recalled. During his teens he was imprisoned at Rikers Island juvenile reformatory for heroin possession. He later attended Wagner College on Staten Island and Columbia University, although he did not study at either institution for long.

In 1970 he met the New York punk musician Patti Smith at a reading. Attracted by Carroll's Rimbaud-like rebel image, she would bring doughnuts and coffee to his room at the Chelsea Hotel each morning on her way to work, as well as a little money to feed his habit. "Patti was one of the few women I met who actively encouraged my addiction," Carroll said. "I think she would have been disappointed if I had stopped."

He soon moved in with Smith and her friend, the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, and worked for the artist Andy Warhol during a period documented in *Forced Entries: The Downtown Diaries: 1971-1973*.

In 1973, to kick his heroin habit, Carroll left New York for California, joining an artistic community in San Francisco. The same year, his poetry collection *Living at the Movies* was published. It was subsequently nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

It was Smith who helped to usher him into the consciousness of punk-rock fans when, faced with the problem of no opening act at a San Diego gig in 1978, she suggested he sing some of his poems while her band played behind him. The Rolling

Stones guitarist Keith Richards was soon a fan, helping him to sign to Atlantic Records.

He released his first album, *Catholic Boy*, with his group The Jim Carroll Band in 1980. It featured the song *People Who Died*, a frenetically paced remembrance of friends whom he had lost during his adolescence which many regard as his recording pinnacle. In the same year a paperback edition of *The Basketball Diaries* became a best-seller, cementing his reputation as a hero among angst-afflicted teenagers.

Yet Carroll was not always comfortable with his new-found rock-star status. "When I came back to New York, it was such a joke, because I was always referred to as the pure young poet who wasn't in it for what he could get out of it," he later told *New York* magazine. "And all of a sudden, the pure young poet comes back... and I'm hanging out with the Rolling Stones."

Two albums, *Dry Dreams* (1982) and *I Write Your Name* (1984), were released to a lukewarm reception. Carroll shelved his singing career, aside from the 1998 record *Pools of Mercury*, preferring to concentrate again on his poetry. He published a collection, *The Book of Nods*, in 1986, following up with *Fear of Dreaming* and *Void of Course*.

According to reports, he had recently completed a novel, *The Petting Zoo*, which he had been working on since the 1990s.

Jim Carroll, who died from a heart attack, married Rosemary Klemfus in 1978. The marriage was dissolved.

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