

Jim Carroll

Lynn Hirschberg, describing a Jim Carroll Band concert in 1980, before the release of *Catholic Boy*, reported overhearing a *Oui* photographer remark, "You're watching the Dylan of the 80s, you know. . . . Seeing Jim Carroll now . . . is like witnessing history."



***Catholic Boy* (1980)**

Indeed, Jim Carroll expressed the Bomb-fear anticipation, the optimistic nihilism and glittering darkness of the 1980s that we who were there felt even if we couldn't communicate it ourselves. When John Lennon was assassinated in front of the Dakota in December 1980, "People Who Died" was one of the most-requested songs on FM radio, just after Lennon's own "Imagine." Steven Spielberg chose "People Who Died" to play during the opening scene of *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*. "People Who Died" tapped a mainline. It was a hit even before it was released, and, as *Newsweek's* Barbara Graustark noted, it "propelled [Carroll] from underground status . . . to national attention as a contender for the title of rock's new poet laureate."

"People Who Died" wasn't the only thing that sustained Carroll's reputation. The first full-length article about him appeared in 1969, when Jim was 19, and he was featured in *Rolling Stone* as early as 1973. The 1980 release of *Catholic Boy*, along with the re-publication of his cult-classic book *The Basketball Diaries*, shot Jim and his band into the international spotlight. *Catholic Boy*, named the second-most-popular album of 1980 by *BAM*, is now considered one of the last great punk albums. Jim appeared with his band on the variety program *Fridays*, he was interviewed by Tom Snyder, and he was featured on the MTV series *The Roots of Rock*, hosted by Lou Reed. Cover stories appeared in *Newsweek*, *New York*, *Creem*, *Interview*, *Melody Maker*, *Stereo Review*, *Rolling Stone*, *Variety*, and *Penthouse*. *Playboy* even printed a cartoon in which the punch line was, "Ever since the advent of Jim Carroll, 'I'm a Catholic junkie poet' seems hipper than 'What's your sign.'"



"Crusier," by Christopher Browne (Playboy 1981)



The Jim Carroll Band's first US tour

The Jim Carroll Band's success can be attributed to the powerful combination of pure rock 'n' roll with Carroll's poetic sensibility and ability to write from his own experience, forging a style that articulates the relevance of the individual to the particular, the past to the present. Carroll once said, "There ain't much time left, you're born out of this insane abyss and you're going to fall back into it, so while you're alive you might as well show your bare ass," and that's exactly what he does. *Musician, Player and Listener* described Carroll as "a transformer, chanting and moaning his litany into something infinitely more palpable than symbols made of sounds."

When reporters began lining up in droves, wondering, "What's a Pulitzer Prize nominee doing fronting a rock band?" Carroll was already well-known in underground circles for having lived a life of mythic proportions. One writer observed, "Carroll has his own voice and sound and he earned it the hard way." Descended from three generations of Irish Catholic bartenders, Carroll was born in New York City in 1950. He spent his childhood living on the city's Lower East Side, attending Catholic schools, and at age 12, shortly before his family moved to Upper Manhattan, he began keeping the journal that would eventually be published as *The Basketball Diaries* (1978). In this diary he recorded the ins and outs of his remarkable adolescence. A star basketball player and excellent student, he won a scholarship to Trinity, an elite private school on Manhattan's posh upper West side.



**The Trinity School Tigers, 1968
From the 1968 Trinity School Yearbook**

While leading the Trinity Tigers to victory as an "All Ivy" player, Jim led a double life. He had first experimented with heroin at age 13, unfortunately thinking marijuana was the addictive stuff; he was soon a junkie, supporting his habit by hustling gay men.

By age 15, he was still hooked, but he was also writing poems and attending poetry workshops at St. Mark's Poetry Project. His diaries immediately attracted the attention of the literary crowd around him. When he published *Organic Trains*, his first collection of poetry, at age 16, and excerpts from *The Basketball Diaries* were printed in *Paris Review*, he was firmly established as a genuine prodigy and a literary talent to be reckoned with. Poet Ted Berrigan took young Jim under his wing, and toting a manuscript of *The Basketball Diaries*, the pair made a pilgrimage to see Jack Kerouac, who observed, "At thirteen years of age, Jim Carroll writes better prose than 89 percent of the novelists working today." Likewise, William S. Burroughs dubbed Carroll "a born writer."



Forced Entries (1987)

As he reached the end of his teens, he moved within one of the most exciting arts scenes ever to develop in America. In the 1970s, the period he writes about in *Forced Entries* (1987), he hung out with Beat guru Allen Ginsberg and worked for artists Larry Rivers and Andy Warhol (he even appeared in two Warhol films), lived with Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe, and was rubbing shoulders with people like William Burroughs, Bob Dylan, and the Velvet Underground. He can, in fact, be heard between songs on the Velvet Underground's legendary *Live at Max's Kansas City* album--he was holding the microphone.



Jim Carroll and Patti Smith

After publishing *Living at the Movies* in 1973, Jim fled New York and headed to California to finally kick his epic heroin addiction. He spent several years enjoying solitude, writing poetry and . . . song lyrics. He had toyed with the idea of working with a band for some time and thought it would be interesting to write songs for other artists to perform. But in 1978, Patti Smith came to California on tour with her band, and Jim accompanied her to San Diego. A conflict arose with her opening act, so she appeared on stage and introduced Jim as "the guy who taught me how to write poetry." Jim came on stage and rapped/ranted his lyrics with Patti and her band behind him. The crowd went nuts, and a rock star was born.



Living at the Movies (1973)



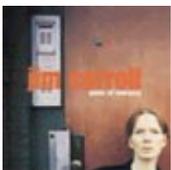
The Basketball Diaries (1978)

Jim hooked up with the Bay Area band Amsterdam and together they became The Jim Carroll Band. They played San Francisco's clubs with great acclaim, so when Jim returned to New York to sign contracts for the re-publication of *The Basketball Diaries* with Bantam, he brought a demo tape with him and was "discovered" by Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards. *Catholic Boy* was released on Atlantic in 1980, followed by *Dry Dreams* in 1982 and *I Write Your Name* in 1984.

His three- album contract with Atlantic fulfilled, Carroll embarked upon a 14-year vacation from rock 'n' roll, but he had left his mark. His legendary voice and vision have kept him firmly planted on the American landscape as a cultural icon and world-scale artist.



Dry Dreams (1982)



Pools of Mercury (1998)

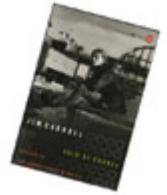
He returned in 1998 with *Pools of Mercury*, which offers the darkly beautiful lyricism we expect from a seasoned poet, set like a gem in the musical craftwork of producer Anton Sanko (producer of Susanne Vega and composer for films including Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia*), Tristan Avakian (Biohazard, Mariah Carey, Virgin 2.0), Frank Vilardi (Celine Dion, Jewel, Susanne Vega, The Roches), Erik Sanko (Lounge Lizards, John Cale), Lenny Kaye (Patti Smith Group guitarist and producer for Suzanne Vega), Robert Roth (Truly), Gordon Minette, and David Torn. Released concurrently with *Void of Course*, a new



I Write Your Name (1984)

collection of poetry, *Pools of Mercury* is an intense combination of new songs and music-backed spoken-word pieces, including "8 Fragments for Kurt Cobain."

A best-selling author of six books, Carroll has inspired a new generation of writers, including Danny Sugarman (*Wonderland Avenue*) and J. O'Barr, whose graphic novel *The Crow*, was made into a film starring Brandon Lee. Yes, Carroll's influence spreads to film as well. In the 1980s he appeared in the James Spader, Robert Downey, Jr., vehicle *Tuff Turf* (1984) and Ron Mann's two *Poetry in Motion* movies. His writings directly inspired author Irvine Welsh, whose novel *Trainspotting* became a blockbuster film in 1996; Welsh acknowledges Carroll in his 1994 book *The Acid House*, also adapted to film in 1998.



Void of Course (1998)



The Basketball Diaries, starring Leonardo DiCaprio (1995)

Likewise, Carroll inspired Harmony Korine, author of the critically-acclaimed screenplay for the controversial film *Kids* (1995). Finally, in 1995, Carroll's own work was adapted in two major films: Curtis's Charm, produced by Academy Award nominee Atom Egoyan (*The Sweet Hereafter*, 1997), and *The Basketball Diaries*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Mark Wahlberg. The *Basketball Diaries* film was a long time in the making: director after director bought the film rights throughout the 1980s, and the role of Jim was coveted by just about every member of the "brat pack." Shortly before his death, River Phoenix was seen carrying around a worn copy of *The Basketball Diaries*, vowing to get the lead part.

Carroll's audience extends around the globe. His books have been translated into 20+ languages, including Japanese, Korean, Italian, French, Spanish, German, Norwegian, Dutch, Czech, Russian, and Swedish. Likewise, his work is widely anthologized. His poetry and prose are included in collections such as *Poetry* magazine's 90th anniversary *Poetry Anthology* (2002), the *Paris Review's* 50th anniversary anthologies of poetry and prose (2004), Penguin's *Portable Reader* (2003), Norton's *Postmodern American Poetry* (1994), *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry* (1999), *The Angel Hair Anthology* (2001), *The Fourth Sex: Adolescent Extremes* (2003), *American Childhoods* (1987), and Anne Waldman's three *World* anthologies (1969, 1970, 1991). Carroll's music is included on a variety of compilation albums such as *Sedated in the 80s* (1993), *New Wave Dance Hits: Just Can't Get Enough* (1994), and *Naked 2000* from Boston's legendary WBCN radio.



The Basketball Diaries, Norwegian Translation

As a musician, he has combined forces with many of the heavy hitters in the business. His songwriting credits include collaborations with artists as diverse as Marcus Miller of Boz Scaggs, Blue Oyster Cult, 7 Year Bitch, Pleasure Thieve, Ray Manzarek (The Doors), and Sonic Youth. He has performed with Keith Richards, Patti Smith, Richard Hell, Marianne Faithfull, Ray Manzarek, Robert Hunter, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs.



Kerouac: Kicks Joy Darkness (1997)

He has recorded with Pearl Jam, Rancid, Lou Reed, Danny Barnes, and John Cale, and he joins some of the biggest names in music on compilations like *Kerouac: Kicks Joy Darkness*, *Back to the Streets: Celebrating the Music Of Don Covay*, and *Home Alive: The Art of Self-Defense*.

Not surprisingly, Carroll has had a tremendous impact on contemporary rock music. Many young rock artists look to Carroll as a mentor, including Pearl Jam and Screaming Trees; even Carroll's own musical hero, Pete Townsend of The Who, has credited Carroll with influencing his work. For the *Basketball Diaries* film soundtrack, "People Who Died" was remixed by producer Thom Wilson (The Offspring, T.S.O.L., the Vandals, the Dead Kennedys), and Carroll re-recorded his song "Catholic Boy" with Pearl Jam. Meanwhile, Rancid invited Carroll to write part of their song "Junky Man" and record it with them. "Junky Man" earned Carroll a gold record. He also collaborated with Truly on *Fast Stories . . . From Kid Coma*. Carroll's songs have been covered by artists diverse as Marilyn Manson, the Drive by Truckers, and 7 Year Bitch. In 1999, a multi-band, 20-song Jim Carroll Band "tribute" album, *Put Your Tongue to the Rail*, was released by Genus Records in Philadelphia.



Put Your Tongue to the Rail: The Philly Comp for Catholic Children (1999)



**The Book
of Nods
(1986)**

Carroll has kept his finger on the pulse of American culture. In 1986, he appeared on MTV, reading from his second poetry collection, *The Book of Nods*, and between sets at the 1993 Lollapalooza, concert-goers watched Carroll read his poetry in a spoken-word video directed by Bob Dylan's son Jesse, proving that poetry and spoken-word have an audience with the video-generation. Following Kurt Cobain's suicide, Carroll appeared again on MTV, this time reading his now-legendary "8 Fragments for Kurt Cobain," which he also published in *The New York Times* on New Year's Day, 1995. Meanwhile, he has also occasionally published prose pieces in *GQ* and the *New York Times*.

The media have continued to seek him out as well; recent appearances include *Now with Bill Moyers*, *The Today Show*, and *Politically Incorrect*. Dennis Miller interviewed him in 1992, in 1995 Carroll appeared on *Good Morning America*, *Extra*, and *Entertainment Tonight*, and in 1997 he was prominently featured on PBS's documentary *Lou Reed: Rock 'n' Roll Heart*. Carroll's audience continued to grow throughout the 90s. On the poetry-reading circuit over the past decade, Jim's shows never fail to attract standing-room-only crowds, and in recent years it has not been unusual for unfortunate fans to find themselves shut out of overflowing auditoriums. Carroll has inspired a whole new generation of budding poets who, even if they've never heard of The Jim Carroll Band, see him as The Poet of their generation. Amusingly enough, in *Entertainment Weekly's* "Cool Issue" of 1995, Lewis MacAdams noted that "at book signings with Leonardo DiCaprio, . . . it was Carroll the crowds clamored for."

In 2002 and 2003, Carroll recorded three spoken-word albums: a dramatic reading of Jack Kerouac's previously-unreleased screenplay *Doctor Sax and the Great World Snake*, collaborated with banjo-genius Danny Barnes on a reading of William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and recorded two Sherlock Holmes stories. Currently he is at work on a novel, tentatively titled "The Petting Zoo," scheduled for publication by Viking Penguin in 2005.



**Carroll
reading in
Seattle
(1998)**

Photo by Tom Wear