

**"I COULD GET MY SHOOTING EYE BACK," SAYS JIM CARROLL** in a voice from the Borough of Lost Souls. "But that first step, man, that's the first thing to go." Carroll, at 44, still has the wounded-fawn cheekbones and red hair of the immortal adolescent. Thirty years ago, he was already a god

in his small New York universe, a basketball star, literary prodigy, and fledgling heroin addict. That boy has been mummified in celluloid in the film version of his memoir, *The Basketball Diaries*, with Leonardo Di Caprio playing the stoned angel in a blazer and rep tie.

The actual Jim sits today in a Madison Avenue coffee shop, over rice pudding and apple-cinnamon tea, and looks back on his glory days with toneless eyes of battleship gray, eyes that look like they have seen three lifetimes.

"I was always such a fuckin' gunner," he says. "Y'know, if they had a three-point line back then, I woulda scored, like, seven more points a game. But see, I wasn't a natural one-step leaper. I didn't have spring. But I worked really hard with, like, weighted spats and stuff. So by my sophomore year, I could dunk a ball, like, backwards, take off from the foul line. After a while, they'd have a guy just sitting there for me. Y'know?"

That was in 1966. Carroll was an all-city guard for Trinity, sparring with legends like Vaughan Harper—the Felipe Lopez of his day—and "the Goat," Earl Manigault, on the playgrounds of Harlem. By night, he was traversing the city in a hormonal search for significance, pulling off wild stunts and minor crimes with pals like Pedro and Herbie, and using his basketball-star status to score with girls from Park Avenue to the Grand Concourse. And, amazingly, he was getting it all down on paper. Jack Kerouac said that at 13, he wrote better prose than 89 percent of the novelists in America ("I'm so sick of that fuckin' quote, man," says Carroll). It was a world without gravity.

Carroll is on his second coffee shop and it's only 10 A.M. He's just met with a few friends from Drugs Anonymous and is stopping off before continuing an epic walk to the Fifth Avenue office of his lawyer, ex-wife, and friend Rosemary Carroll. A few minutes ago, he was walking down Lexington Avenue when a guy in Chuck Taylors, maybe 25, stalked him for a block before interrupting, reverentially: "You're Jim Carroll! I just heard this voice. . . ."

"It's, like, I call up stores, and the person on the other end of the line says, 'Is this Jim Carroll?'" Carroll says in his characteristic pinched whine, equal parts Edith Bunker and William Burroughs.

He wears a denim work shirt, blue watch cap, and black sunglasses. Flecks of gray have pushed into his thin, incongruous beard. Tiny folds of skin gather under the eyes, though no one can see past his black-framed sunglasses. And he's talking incessantly, allowing each story the freedom to ramble.

Carroll is talking ball again, wagging his wrist in a dribble motion. "So it was the day we were auditioning Patrick [McGaw], who plays Neutron in the film, and they were short a guy for three-on-three. It was freezing, y'know, down on Thompson Street, with ice all over the side of the court, like where your hands get all cracked, like, when you're a kid, playin' outdoors in winter? It was me and Marky [Wahlberg] and James Madio versus Patrick, Leo [Di Caprio], and Bryan [Goluboff], the screenwriter. And I was *pa-thet-ic*. I go up for this little jump shot, with Leo guarding me, and he's got no leaps at all, and he comes in and *blocks my shot!*" He shakes his head. "I hate them for making me do that."

"That's the thing about this project, the biggest downer," Car-

roll says. "I had that moment. I'm not going back to try to recapture it. I had that one chance. . . ."

A world without gravity. Twenty-five years ago, *The Paris Review* published his teenage diaries over his strong reservations; he saw himself as a poet. But the diaries themselves are poetry of a sort: *He's down dealing on the hottest corner in the city, like a furnace that street, can feel narco heat waves through your sneakers.*

"I think they saw the diaries in *The World* magazine, published by the Poetry Project. They told me Plimpton wanted to see them," Carroll says. He says that Truman Capote's editor at Random House, Joe Fox, wanted to publish the diaries as a book, but Carroll was adamant about doing a poetry collection. He finally sold the rights to Bantam in 1979, insisting on paperbacks only. "It was the perfect book for the time, the punk scene, but I

thought it would be out-to-lunch to publish it as this \$19.95 hardcover." Carroll estimates the book has sold around 500,000 copies, and Bantam did a study that showed six people read it for every one who bought it.

*The Basketball Diaries*, which Carroll wrote between the ages of 13 and 15, is a panorama of winos, preppies, hustlers, and fools. It's New York picaresque—*Oliver Twist* with a habit. Carroll published poems in *Poetry* when he was still shooting jumpers against Riverdale High. In the seventies and

early eighties, he played rock and roll and almost made it big.

Now, with the arrival of the long-awaited film, comes Carroll's unsolicited midlife retrospective. Carroll sighs, a little weary: "With the records and everything, I've had my time above-ground. Y'know?"

JIM CARROLL WAS AN IDEA FIFTEEN YEARS IN THE MAKING FOR HIS parents, Tom and Agnes Carroll. They had tried to have kids well before Tom's wartime tours of Iwo Jima and Saipan. They'd given up when Thomas Joseph Jr. was born in 1949; James Dennis ("from Dionysius") followed a year later.

Carroll spent his early years in the East Twenties, a tough neighborhood at the time; at 13, his family moved to the more middle-class Irish enclave of Inwood in upper Manhattan. That was the first year he shot up. "I think the main reason I started using heroin was that everyone else was always going out drinking, and I hated drinking," he says innocently. He hated Catholic school, though, and as a freshman used basketball and good grades as a ticket to the affluent Trinity School on the Upper West Side.

His father was a hard-assed war vet whose own father had run a Harlem speakeasy for Dutch Schultz. "My old man would listen to the music I was playing. Phil Ochs, and say, 'What the fuck is this *Phil Ouchs* guy? What is this goddamned Communist shit I'm hearing?'" Carroll says. "Y'know, his bar was this real cops-and-construction-workers redneck bar, and he'd have to listen to them go, 'What the hell is with your son with his long hair? You know, I used to read about him in the sports pages, scored 40 points; now he's got hair down to here.' And then Smitty, the

# Lord Jim

Poet, hoop star, and junkie,  
was an original  
source of downtown cool.  
Now, with the release of  
*The Basketball Diaries*,  
the prodigal returns

By Alex Williams

postman from our building, the loudmouthed bastard, starts saying, y'know, 'Your son gets all this poetry stuff in the mail; I mean, what in the hell is that?' Because that's the take in any neighborhood, in the Jimmy Breslin sense. Poetry is sissy stuff. Anybody who writes poetry is a fag." Carroll laughs. "Which I found out is absolutely true when I got out on the scene."

By the time he was a junior in high school, Carroll was traveling down to open poetry readings at St. Mark's Church, swallowing his fear, and turning heads. He impressed poet Ted Berrigan as well as influential literary editors.

He tried college, attending Wagner in Staten Island "for a year, as far as the draft was concerned." He adds, with disbelief, "My dorm roommates, like, they thought the biggest thrill was to go down and see the Johnny Carson show." He was gone within weeks, and spent even less time at his next school, Columbia.

In 1973, Carroll published his first poetry collection, *Living at the Movies*, and moved to San Francisco with a girlfriend and his methadone. From there it was up the coast to the art colony of Bolinas, where he met Rosemary. "I learned to like being by myself. Maybe too much. But that was the first time I discovered a writing routine."

He might have stayed on that path had it not been for a night in San Diego in 1978. Jim was hanging out with Patti Smith, an old girlfriend, before a gig. There was a scuffle involving roadies, and Smith booted the opening act from the bill. In a pinch, she suggested Jim open the show, just get up and speak-sing some poems, as he had done for her before. Her band would back him, just riff. "I was like, 'Uhhh . . .'" says Carroll, eyes wide with mock terror. "I didn't even like rock and roll that much." The gig lasted seven minutes. But the Jim Carroll Band was born.

"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; and all of a sudden, the pure young poet comes back, and I've got this deal for the paperback of *The Basketball Diaries*, and I'm hanging out with the Rolling Stones."

The single "People Who Died" was his rock-and-roll masterwork, a Ramones-style guitar grind molded around a terse catalogue of the victims he knew in his New York adolescence. "There was that line, *G-berg and Georgie let the gimmicks go rotten/died of hepatitis in upper Manhattan*. It was actually five of us that shared that needle, and three of us died from it. I just say 'G-berg and Georgie' because of the scan," he says. "G-berg, yeah, like Goldberg. The guy's name wasn't Goldberg; he was a Puerto Rican guy, but everyone said he looked Jewish."

Carroll's album *Catholic Boy*, which came out in 1980, put him on the commercial radar. Within two years, Carroll's group was opening for the J. Geils Band in hockey arenas. "There were always these girls pushing to the front to sock their tongues into your mouth," he recalls.

The fact that the next two records didn't move was no great tragedy. "These guys were always saying, 'The minute you get onstage, it's great, no matter how much you're hurting.' But that didn't work for me. There were some nights I did *not* want to get out there," he says.

He moved back to New York in 1986, and split amicably with Rosemary (two years later, she married Danny Goldberg, who is now chairman of Warner Bros. Records). He published a collection of poems, *The Book of Nods*, which even Carroll admits

wasn't totally successful. "Rock and roll kind of screwed up my voice, poetically. I found myself having this 'Beat' voice in my poems. It was like this self-fulfilled prophecy, because everybody was calling me this rock poet, this Beat poet."

Carroll moved back to Inwood, two blocks from his old building. His mother had died, and he had made peace with his father, who was reduced to visiting her grave every day. He also wrote a sequel to *The Basketball Diaries*, which he called *Forced Entries*. The book was a journal of tawdry, Warholian downtown New York in the early seventies.

CARROLL ARRIVES AT ROSEMARY'S OFFICE. HE'S THERE TO VIEW A short film by a worshipful NYU student based on the final, cathartic passage of *Forced Entries*. Carroll's got a headache, so he asks a secretary for some Tylenol. He takes four, then wanders into a nearby conference room.

Cyril Connolly once said, "Whom the gods wish to destroy, they first call promising." Carroll sums it up a little differently: "I was always the young guy. And when you're successful when you're young, it leads to an arrested adolescence or something, y'know. And there's that ecstasy period in your life as an artist. Every artist goes through this. I tried to get it back at first with music, and got, y'know, that adrenaline. But," he says cautiously, "there's a time when you switch into a more sober period."

Carroll knows that after the film hype fades, he'll finally have time to work on two novels that he says "just came to me three or four years ago. Like a gift." One is about a miracle, two priests, and an investigation by the Vatican. (He's been brushing up on the Gnostics.) The other is about a young star painter who walks away from art in a spiritual crisis. There are no drugs, and the painter is a virgin. "These are straight, linear novels in the third person. My editor was shocked. He was like, 'Jim! These are money books.' But if I don't get to work on these things, boy, I am betraying a gift; I mean, that's what I would define as a sin."

It helps that Carroll has finally achieved a quiet writer's ritual. "It's like I've been so jubilant. I just eliminated that need." Carroll rises every morning around 4:30 A.M., when he does his best writing. And he's shaken a nasty TV habit: "After that afternoon nap, it was always *Oprah* time. . . . So I got rid of cable and my VCR, but I found I was watching, like, infomercials instead of movies. But these days—" He pauses, indignant. "To me, late-night movies are old black-and-white movies with Cagney and Bogart, but today, old movies are like *The Sting II* with Jackie Gleason."

During the summer, he often teaches at Allen Ginsberg's Naropa Institute. He lectures and reads at colleges, maintaining little contact with the downtown New York he helped define, although he recently went to a viewing of *Diaries* at Rosemary's place with Lou Reed and Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore and Kim Gordon. "It moves well," he says. "It's hard for me to really register on it because of the personal attachment."

Carroll has been clean of heroin since the early seventies. He still has an occasional margarita, although he has never liked drinking. "I can't go for that complete-abstinence thing. I mean, I obviously have an addictive personality, especially for heroin. But I haven't smoked grass in like eight or nine years. I mean, I *wish* I could still smoke grass. But New York is just so speedy, it's so fast-paced. I mean, the phone's going to ring any minute and someone's going to lay a big trip on me, and I'll spend the first hour paranoid." ■



Master and pupil:  
Carroll coaches  
Di Caprio on the set.