



Saturday, September 19, 2009

[Eight Fragments for Jim Carroll](#)

I

Unlike your average published poet, Jim Carroll was a high-school basketball star in New York City in the 60s. It's how he got a scholarship to a posh Catholic school (there are such things apparently) and how he was, as mentioned in *The Basketball Diaries*, excited to be playing in a national all-star game because [Lewie Alcindor](#) from the neighborhood would also be playing. He certainly would have been a starter in college had he not had other plans. Like heroin.

II

Carroll makes one of the best arguments for drug education. In *The Basketball Diaries* he mentions thinking that pot was addictive while heroin was not. He did say no to drugs, just the wrong one.

III

His first rock album, *Catholic Boy*, is one of the greatest punk rock records ever released. Half of the songs are awesome (*People Who Died*, *Catholic Boy*, *It's Too Late*, *Nothing is True and Three Sisters*) and the rest are okay. I love how in the title track he lists how he has had all the sacraments including [EXTREME UNCTION](#), because he's that much of a badass. The album is so perfect that there was no place to go but down. While he recorded another three discs, none is considered to be nearly as good.

IV

People Who Died has poetic lyrics in the best sense, not in the bullshit poetry-slam sense. This makes it really fun to sing. For instance take this couplet:

G-berg and Georgie let their gimmicks go rotten
So they died of hepatitis in upper Manhattan

The repeated Gs and Rs in the first line and the repeated Ts in the second line provide the rhythm, while rotten and Manhattan are actually perfectly rhymed if you say them as Carroll does without the

annoying vowels between the Ts and Ns. It also tells you a lot about the particular situation once you figure out that gimmicks means heroin paraphernalia.

V

Good as Catholic Boy is, *The Basketball Diaries* is really Carroll's biggest accomplishment. The diary was written while he was still in high school and published when he was 30 in 1978. It is an endlessly re-readable book, mostly because it's really a collection of dozens of perfectly-crafted anecdotes. His follow-up diary, *Forced Entries* about living in Manhattan in the early 70s is also a great read.

VI



The Basketball Diaries was optioned for film repeatedly from its release to its actual production in 1995. I suspect he made way more money from all the film options than from anything else he ever did.

VII

The [movie](#) fails for two reasons: it was predictably turned into an anti-drug message and almost every single character has a bigger presence than star Leonardo DiCaprio. It's hard to suspend disbelief when the guy who's a hoop star/published poet/junkie is about 5' 5", looks about 12 and comes across as a wimp. Among the people who come across better than DiCaprio in this movie are Lorraine Bracco (Melfi, sure), Bruno Kirby (a character actor), Ernie Hudson (another one), Mark Wahlberg (weird, but it was the first hint that he wasn't totally useless), Juliette Lewis (what?!) and Jim Carroll himself (his cameo is pretty awesome actually.)

VIII

There is a good argument to be made that Jim Carroll was the last of the American popular poets (Jewel doesn't count.) As far as poetry goes, [this](#) is his best known piece.

Posted by El at [6:22 AM](#)  

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