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TOM DEIGNAN

‘Basketball Diaries’ writer Jim Carroll’s wild Irish-American life

By
Tom Deignan

Jim Carroll seemed to have a problem with elderly Irish women. Then again, Jim Carroll had lots of problems.

Carroll, the author of the proclaimed memoir “The Basketball Diaries,” died this week. He was 60 years old.

On the surface, Carroll’s life seemed far from the typical New York Irish Catholic life. He did not become a public servant, a cop or firefighter or teacher.

He rebelled against his religion, became a voracious abuser of drugs at a very young age and went on to become a poet and punk rocker.

And yet the ingredients of Carroll’s youth which inspired his most famous work could not have been more Irish.

You could, perhaps, say he was a self-hating Irishman who believed the pillars of his youth – church and family – were stifling.

None of which changes the fact that he was heavily shaped by church and family, and the broader forces of Irish New York, in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Forget, for a moment, his most famous work, 1978’s “The Basketball Diaries,” turned into a chaotic 1995 movie starring a very young Leonardo DiCaprio as Carroll.

Think of a more obscure Carroll work, the autobiographical song “Catholic Boy,” about a

suffering child “redeemed by pain/not joy,” who nevertheless grows up to be a “Catholic man.”

Carroll, like it or not, forces you to realize that we cannot put narrow definitions on who is and is not Irish American.

James Dennis Carroll – born on

the Lower East Side, raised in the heavily Irish upper Manhattan enclave of Inwood – lived a wild Irish-American life.

Which is not to say he loved all things Irish Catholic. Start with those poor old ladies.

When he used to visit his cousin in Inwood, young Jim lamented the prevalence of “Irish Catholic old biddies.” So it’s not surprising that he’s less than thrilled when the family actually moves up there.

“Hallways in my new building and each park bench filled with the chattering old Irish ladies either gossiping or saying the rosary, or men long time here or right off the boat huddling in floppy overcoats in front of drug stores discussing their operations, ball scores or the Commie threat,” Carroll writes, in the famous staccato prose which would earn him praise from fellow radicals such as William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac.

Carroll’s portrait of ethnic New York a generation earlier – the rage, the violence, the racism, the strict Catholic Schools – is a reminder that some things change, and some things don’t.

By the time he attended high school, basketball and drugs became two of Carroll’s three great passions.

The other, of course, was writing. He may have disliked the Catholic schools he attended, but by most accounts at least some teachers encouraged young Jim to write.

The work Carroll had already written by the time he was 13 was hailed by famous Beat writer Jack Kerouac as better than “89 percent of the novelists working today.”

Carroll’s father and grandfather before him – no big surprise here – were in the bar business.

Jim’s dad was not a presence in his life, however, and – again, not surprisingly – the streets became Carroll’s close friend.

Along with a band of other toughs he roamed the city, from Inwood to the Staten Island Ferry, drunk, high, brawling and all the while, writing, writing.

He eventually earned a scholarship to the elite Trinity High School on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. He was one of the top basketball players in Manhattan and, at 18, Carroll published “Organic Trains,” his first collection of poems.

But this wild Irish child never calmed down.

Inevitably, Carroll hits rock bottom, finds himself losing friends to drugs and violence.

Carroll is eventually turning tricks in Times Square. He flees New York, for California, to finally kick his drug habit and get married.

And that’s just Act One of his life.

He later recorded numerous albums, continued publishing fiction and poetry. One song that touched a nerve was “People Who Died,” about the many friends Carroll lost along the way. The song was released in late 1981, the same year John Lennon was shot and killed.

Now that we’ve lost Frank McCourt, Ted Kennedy and Jim Carroll, the song, and much of Carroll’s work, should be appreciated again.

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