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Last Flight of the Phoenix

By ALEX WILLIAMS
Published: September 25, 2009

IT'S not easy to come up with a second act when your first act was being Jim Carroll.

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Michael Zagaris

FINAL SHOT Jim Carroll, here in the late '70s, soared to stardom young, with his book "The Basketball Diaries" and his punk band. He was finishing an autobiographical novel when he died.

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[Jim Carroll, Poet and Punk Rocker Who Wrote 'The Basketball Diaries', Dies at 60 \(September 14, 2009\)](#)

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He was the author of "The Basketball Diaries," a cult-classic memoir of his drug-fueled misadventures as a teenager in the 1960s; he then became a celebrated downtown poet; and then, the star of his own hit rock band.

Mr. Carroll had lived a panoramic New York youth that his fans had turned into legend.

But by the time he died of a heart attack this Sept. 11 at 60, Mr. Carroll, who had once hung out with the [Rolling Stones](#) and [Allen Ginsberg](#), no longer bore much resemblance to the downtown cover-boy with the chiseled cheekbones and flowing red hair.

His once-powerful athlete's body had been weakened by pneumonia and hepatitis C, said Rosemary Carroll, his former wife, who had remained a close friend. At times, circulation problems in his legs prevented him from leaving his apartment. His trademark hair was flecked with gray, and often tucked under a wool beanie. His cheekbones were hidden behind a white beard that plunged to the collar of his T-shirts.

Mr. Carroll had moved back to Inwood, in Upper Manhattan, to the same building where he had

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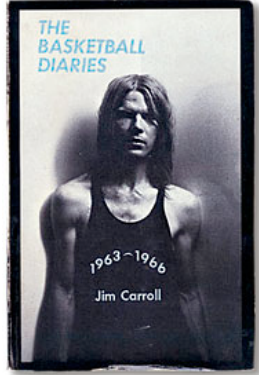
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Stephen Spera

ATHLETE, ADDICT, ARTIST Jim Carroll at Balducci's last winter.



The first edition of "The Basketball Diaries."

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Godlis

Mr. Carroll singing "People Who Died" with Keith Richards at Tramps in 1980.

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The "Catholic Boy" album cover.

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grown up. "Jim would often sit home with these heavy curtains drawn shut," said Martin Heinz, a friend, one of the few to maintain contact with him in the last months.

But Mr. Carroll did have a purpose. He was trying to finish his first novel, tentatively titled "The Petting Zoo," an ambitious book about an art-world prodigy of the 1980s, Billy Wolfram, who is driven by early fame into seclusion, where he suffers psychological and spiritual crises. It didn't take much to see the autobiographical thread.

In his teens, Jim, a scholarship student at the elite Trinity School and fledgling heroin addict, was a high-school basketball star who shot jumpers on the same courts as Lew Alcindor. The journal he kept between the ages of 14 and 16 — dark comic accounts of ducking class to cop drugs, steal cars and hustle in Times Square — earned the praise of [Jack Kerouac](#) and later became "The Basketball Diaries."

He became involved in the downtown poetry scene, receiving praise as a new Rimbaud. In his late 20s, he tried rock 'n' roll, nudged by his old girlfriend [Patti Smith](#). He was soon jamming with Keith Richards, and formed the Jim Carroll Band, whose first release, "Catholic Boy," has been described as the last great punk album.

"Jim was really in love with the concept of his own phoenix-like rise, which had happened repeatedly in his life — bottoming out, then transcending his negative circumstances with an undeniably brilliant work of art," Ms. Carroll said.

A "brilliant work of art" is what Mr. Carroll's ardent, loyal fans were hoping for in his novel, and what the writer himself must have passionately wished for. A successful novel might have meant that he would not be marginalized as an aging "punk poet," as he was in some recent obituaries. Given his health, it might have constituted his most unlikely comeback yet.

But Mr. Carroll, who had specialized in street-rap diary entries, poems and song lyrics, found adapting his literary voice to long-form prose challenging. "He definitely wrote a lot and tossed a lot," said Betsy Lerner, his agent.



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David Shankbone
Mr. Carroll at the Brooklyn Book
Festival in 2007.

And “he worked irregularly,” she added. “Sometimes it was a struggle to pick up the thread again, but once he did, it would be amazing. He’d have these tremendous flights. He was still very much in the old Romantic school, I guess.”

“I always used to tell him, ‘It’s the much anticipated’ ” Jim Carroll novel, Ms. Lerner added. “Then it was the ‘long-awaited.’ Then it was ‘ten years in the making.’ ”

By the time he died, the book was in its final edits, close enough to completion to publish posthumously, perhaps by the fall of 2010, said Paul Slovak, his editor and the publisher of Viking.

In his last years, Jim Carroll did venture out, if infrequently, to Narcotics Anonymous meetings (he had been sober since the ’70s), and joining friends for a “breakfast club” at a Chelsea coffee shop.

At these gatherings, Mr. Carroll was not the scathing street punk described in recent obituaries, but rather a raconteur and yarn-spinner in the grand Irish tradition. His stories — about Greek philosophy, old movies, his youthful adventures on the streets — invariably spun off in epic digressions.

“It would often take three or four breakfasts to get the end of a story,” recalled Mr. Heinz, 48, his friend and breakfast club regular.

There, Mr. Carroll sometimes discussed his ambivalence about his time in the spotlight. And in private, Mr. Carroll’s thoughts on fame and his life could be searing:

“My self-sabotaging tendencies in all aspects of my life, along with the validation needs you referenced, go without saying,” Mr. Carroll wrote in a 2005 message to Mr. Heinz. “There are deep seeded reasons for both, but the latter is also an outcome of the way you are spoiled and coddled by managers, women and media et al when you are on top, and the quickness with which everyone scatters when you recede a moment.”

During the last breakfast club meeting on Sept. 4, Mr. Carroll seemed in good spirits, Mr. Heinz said. He recounted tales from what he called his happiest period, in the 1970s, when he was living a simple writer’s life in Bolinas, Calif. He had gone to escape heroin, as well as the amphetamine pace of the New York creative scene, recalled his friend Anne Waldman, the poet, who visited him there.

To Mr. Heinz, Mr. Carroll looked gaunt, even by Jim Carroll standards. At 6-foot-3, he was so stooped that he seemed four inches shorter. The outline of his skull was clearly visible beneath his cheeks, Mr. Heinz said. His arms looked like skin over bone.

He did eat regularly, his friends said, but could not keep weight on. He was deteriorating physically, even as friends took him on weekly trips to the grocery store. Ms. Carroll, an entertainment lawyer now married to the music executive

Danny Goldberg, hectoring him about seeing a doctor (he hated doctors, but finally relented).

Mr. Carroll seemed acutely aware that he was aging beyond his years, his friends said. A few years ago, he ended a relationship with a much younger girlfriend, telling her “you can do better,” Mr. Heinz recalled.

As his health declined, he made fewer public appearances. When he did, some fans expressed shock over his condition. Two years ago, Mr. Carroll was invited to read passages of “The Petting Zoo” at the Brooklyn Book Festival. Mr. Carroll seemed lost onstage, fumbling through pages of the manuscript. “There’s typing on both sides of the page,” he said, according to an eyewitness account on a blog called the Ephemera. “No wonder I can’t find what I’m looking for.”

As he had so often, he saved himself with humor. After the awkward reading ended, one witness recalled in a blog comment, Mr. Carroll shouted: “I don’t even know what I’m doing here. I’m from Manhattan, man!”

Money struggles were another distraction, friends said.

He was still living off a 2003 book advance in the low six figures, and the small royalty checks continued to trickle in. (His hit song, “People Who Died,” was used in [Steven Spielberg’s](#) “E.T.,” for example.) “He would sit and do his banking on Friday,” Mr. Heinz said. “There was always a variety of checks for \$12, \$24, \$48.”

THE need for a cheap apartment in part led Mr. Carroll home to Inwood in the summer of 2008, in spite of his history with the neighborhood. In “The Basketball Diaries,” Mr. Carroll used the nosy old ladies on its park benches and the reactionary hard-hats in its bars as a comic foil.

Jim’s underground appearance and lifestyle back then caused a lot of family turmoil, said Tom Carroll, his brother and only surviving member of the immediate family.

“Our father was a bartender in a conservative Irish neighborhood and had to listen daily to disparaging comments made by his customers about Jim such as ‘druggie’ and ‘hippie,’ as well as referring to Jim as ‘his daughter’ because of his long hair,” Tom Carroll wrote in an e-mail message. “In addition to their heartbreak about his drug use, this was a significant source of tension between Jim and our father.” (In fact, Jim’s hair in high school was shorter than [Paul McCartney’s](#) — “but still too long for an Irish-bar crowd,” Tom added.)

But by the ’90s, he said, father and son had patched things up. And by the summer of 2008, his childhood address at 585 Isham Street in Inwood might have seemed like a peaceful place to write.

THE focus of the ground-floor apartment was the desk, a padded cart beneath it to elevate his aching leg. There, he plowed through plastic bins of sliced pineapple, a reward for a session of hard work.

The only decorations were a poetry event poster and a photo-triptych of [Kurt](#)

[Cobain](#). For months, boxes of books remained unpacked and the windows were bare. “He said that sometimes neighbors would smile at him, and he was just sitting there in his underwear,” Mr. Heinz recalled.

Certainly, the neighborhood held a lingering power for him. The strict Irish-Catholic culture there had shaped him, after all, even as he rebelled against it. “The family was gone, but he was somehow coming back,” Ms. Waldman said, adding, “There’s a lot of the poetic there, of coming full circle, landing, as you’re pulling back from life, and finding sense and sanity and comfort in that. He had a real sense of fragility. I think he knew his days were numbered.”

This August, Mr. Carroll canceled multiple appointments to see Ms. Lerner, his agent, citing doctors’ appointments. The last time she had seen him, a year before, she had listened to hours of rambling, if hilarious, digression. She finally persuaded him to sit at his computer and discuss the novel’s third and final section. The other two were largely finished. The book was close. Near the end, however, Mr. Carroll receded again. He stopped returning Ms. Lerner’s e-mail messages. He seemed to be “grappling with the last questions about life through this character,” she said.

Mr. Carroll was alone the day he died. A neighbor peering into his window apparently saw him slump to the floor and called 911, Tom Carroll said. (“Classic Inwood,” joked Tara Newman, a friend who also grew up there.)

In the final passage of “The Petting Zoo,” Billy Wolfram, accompanied by a mythic raven, succumbs. He is also alone, and too young to die. But his death is not without ecstasy.

Finally, a last sigh of consciousness rocked him gently on the deck of an old schooner ship. Billy’s body, dark blue like the storm clouds preceding the storm, shuttered and his eyes closed dull and loosely. Sensing young Wolfram had given up the ghost, the raven glided back down beside the dead artist, whispering a last demand.

“It’s time your eyes remain shut, Billy Wolfram. Now is the time, so get on with it. Take that single step and fly.”

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