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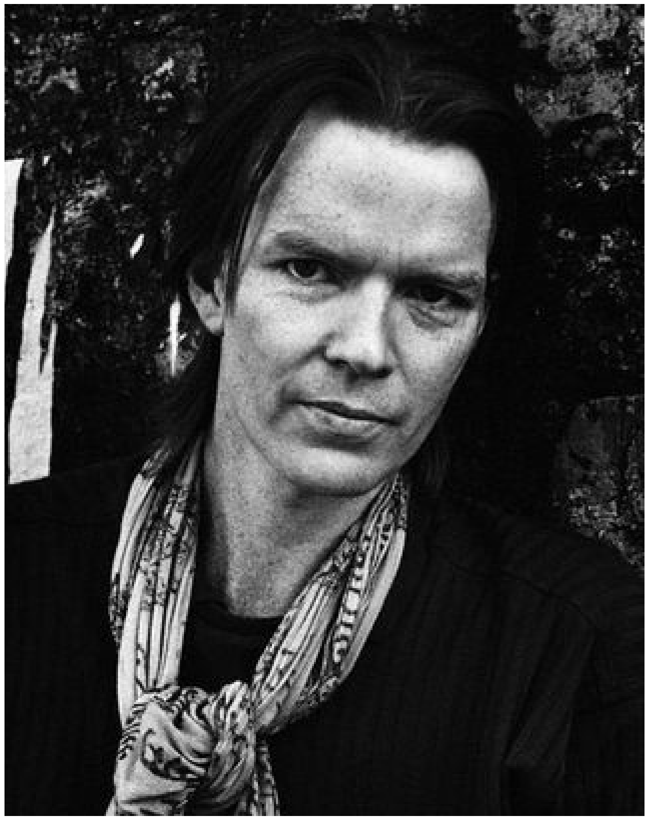
screenwriter & playwright in LA

MY INTERVIEW WITH JIM CARROLL

Here's an interview I did with Jim Carroll back in 1992 or 1993. It ran in Creative Loafing's Atlanta and Tampa editions. Wish I could find the photos I shot of him for this piece, but they're buried in storage somewhere.

The influential punk poet rocker, best known for his cult classic memoir The Basketball Diaries, died last week of a heart attack.



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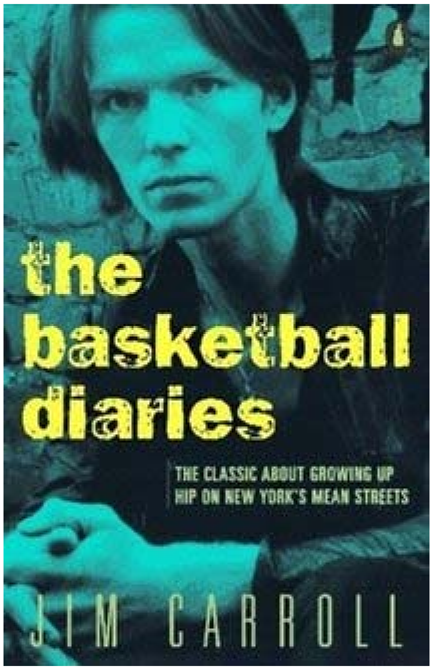
Almost twenty years since the last spike went into his arm, former junkie Jim Carroll looks like he's still kicking his heroin habit. Quivering against a chill no one else in the room can feel, he shifts endlessly in his chair and slurps lukewarm coffee between endless ruminations, musings and dirty jokes. His pale skin is highlighted by the black garb he's chosen for tonight's reading, a wardrobe that hides his body in the weak spotlight and gives the illusion of a disembodied head floating around the stage, spewing words and images of loneliness and rebellion.
Carroll's on a promotional tour for his new CD, Praying Mantis (Giant Records). And while this spoken-word effort does not mark the poet's eagerly-awaited return to the surprising rock and roll career that started with Catholic Boy, it should serve to remind fans of Carroll's respected literary roots.

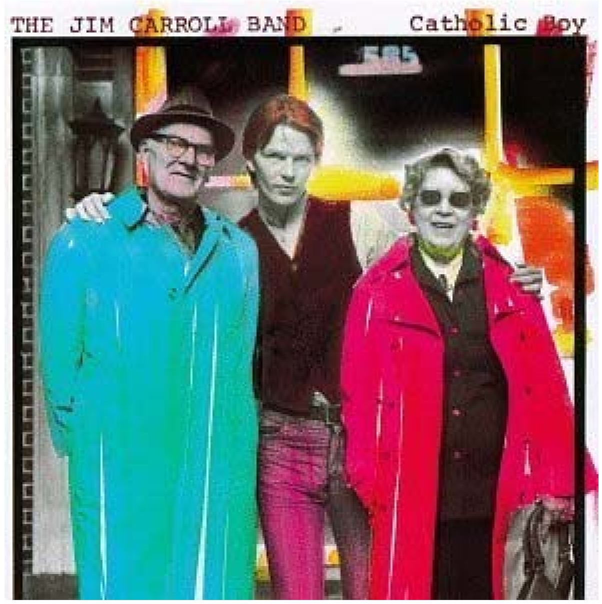
Carroll became a cult figure with the publication of The Basketball Diaries (1978), a compelling memoir that details his years as a heroin-addicted trick-turning teenager in the early 1960s. Laced with dry humor and a surprising sexual frankness, The Basketball Diaries is an underground classic that firmly established him as a writer to watch.



"I consider The Basketball Diaries to be a great tool against illiteracy, man, because you know, so many kids have told me that it's the first book they ever read, or the older kids tell me it's like the first book they read since Ivanhoe in the fifth grade for a book report," Carroll says in his breathless, twitchy manner of speaking. "And it gets people into reading books again. Because you just pick it up at someone's house and read a couple of entries, and each one's like a short story, so then you wanna keep reading it. When it was out with Bantam, they did a survey and they found out that for every copy that was sold, about seven or eight people read it. I think it's a book that a lot of people go out and read on their own. And it's in the curriculum of a lot of colleges now."

Colleges teaching Carroll? Like it or not, he's now been acknowledged, however begrudgingly, by mainstream academia. That's a far cry from the treatment he received in the 1970s when he was kicking the junk habit and hanging out with Patti Smith, whose foray into rock would later inspire Carroll's own musical ventures. Though Carroll's work appeared in respected publications such as The Paris Review, Poetry and Transatlantic Review, his counter-culture image was something that always held mainstream acceptance at bay.

Carroll's recent reading at Florida State University, for example, was packed with students, mostly from the alternative scene. Yet the college's esteemed writing faculty, many of whom pride themselves on their regular appearances at Tallahassee readings, were nowhere to be found. Nor was the event even sponsored by the writing department. Many claim that the last-minute scheduling was something only the student government had the resources to move on, but there's still the sense of academics gathered elsewhere, drinking cheap beer and arguing literary theories, purposely not mentioning tonight's reading.



That's fine with Carroll, 41, who feels more of a kinship with younger people: their worries, their dreams, and especially their music. Carroll's first album, Catholic Boy (1980), spawned a monster college hit, "People Who Died," whose shocking lyrics describe the true stories of people in Carroll's life meeting their ends in various and sundry ways -- everything from drug overdose to suicide is described in graphic detail. The lyrics are thrown irreverently over a happy, driving rock beat, and it's a true jaw-dropper when heard for the first time -- which, apparently, happens over and over, as the song is perennially resurrected for up-and-coming generations.
But Catholic Boy offers much more for those who listen past the most popular track. It's a strong mix of punk-flavored influences marked by Carroll's precision-tuned lyrics about urban alienation and Catholic guilt (or distinct lack thereof). Two more albums followed, Dry Dreams and I Write Your Name, and while both have their strong moments, Carroll's first remains his best and is easily ranked as one of the best rock records of the 1980s.

But writing pulled him away from jamming, and produced some interesting results. Carroll's books, Forced Entries, Living at the Movies and The Book of Nods, all display steady maturation and an increasing depth in the subject matter of Carroll's prose and poetry.

Praying Mantis is a CD that captures some of Carroll's best work, recorded live during various readings. It's an intimate glimpse of Carroll, whose off-kilter, unassuming personality comes through clearly in his rapport with the audience. It's also the perfect antidote for people who can't break through a poem as it sits on the printed page. Praying Mantis lets you listen to the words for what they are, which is the true litmus test for any writing.

In "A Child Growing Up With the Sun," Carroll writes: "I spent my youth's desires like a peculiar currency." When his raspy, strained voice delivers such a line, there's a direct line linking the emotion to the poet, especially to anyone who has the faintest clue as to the dark desires of Carroll's youth.

"For Elizabeth," a haunting ode to a deceased friend, finds Carroll circling familiar subject matter as it offers a hallucinatory vision of children in the hereafter. Elizabeth was one of many immortalized in Carroll's song "People Who Died," and here he returns to her death with a startling, angry image:

> This place where I have put you now,
> It is a cursed season, an awkward
> line, a flawed circle. A snake on fire
> devouring what, tomorrow, it will itself become.

Often, as in the new poem "To the National Endowment of the Arts," Carroll's attraction towards the humorous and the sexually explicit find itself matched evenly with current events. In this morally threatening poem, Carrol declares:

> It's a fact that before his death
> Robert Mapplethorpe placed thirty-six custom cameras
> with automatic timers set to last up to nine years
> discreetly in various bedrooms
> of your board members
> of your congressmen
> of your senators
> of your cabinet
> of your fantasies
> your well-kept hidden lust and impotence.

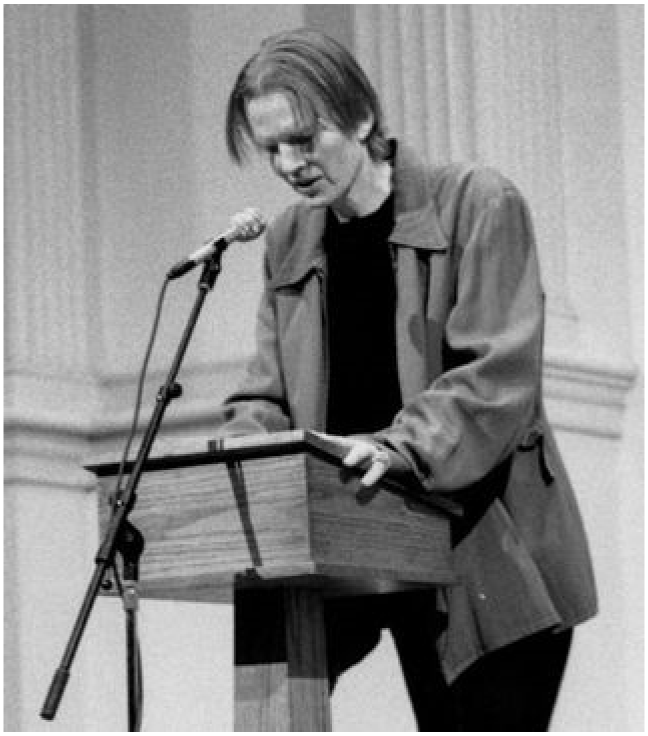
Delivered matter-of-factly, this short rant works with the effectiveness of a wry witch's curse upon the conservative establishment it so eloquently targets. Like all curses and spells, the veiled implications are easy to shrug off at first, but the possibility lingers -- quite nicely -- that the "heat lightning from his grave" will illuminate the hypocrisy so abhorred by Carroll (who, incidentally, has never bothered to apply for an NEA grant).

There's a fatalistic edge to be found in Carroll's work. Thankfully, it's tempered with some wickedly funny barbs at every established social and political institution, including those with which Carroll sometimes finds himself aligned. "Tiny Tortures," a prose selection from Forced Entries, relates how Carroll filled his allotted three-minute time slot at a silly, pretentious performance-art gathering. "I had already dismissed the idea of boiling a three-minute egg," he notes with absolute deadpan. "It just didn't seem to have the necessary edge." A captured cockroach and can of Raid, however, floors some of the patrons.

Then there's a selection called "The Loss of American Innocence," an ad-libbed 14-minute excerpt from a novel-in-progress, where Carroll tells his responsive audience about a somewhat true story involving John F. Kennedy and certain masturbatory rites of passage straight out of Philip Roth's notorious novel, Portnoy's Complaint. It's lewd, crude and pretty funny.

Carroll's reading style counts for a lot here. Many listeners may feel uncomfortable with his voice at first, which sounds strained and forced. But Carroll uses these qualities to absolute effect, and they afford his words an urgency, a paranoid energy that draws one into his work.

Praying Mantis is also worth noting because this is the first of two efforts Carroll has signed to do with Giant Records. And he says the label wants some music for the second one, much to Carroll's half-hearted chagrin. "Once every three months I think about doing a record," he says, "and then I watch MTV for five minutes and it's, 'Aw, fuck this!'"
But now, having signed the dotted line, Carroll twists in his chair and admits he's looking forward to getting back into the studio with collaborator/producer Lenny Kaye, who since the I Write Your Name album has since produced Suzanne Vega, among others. He's even been working on some song lyrics that will hopefully match up with some of the arrangements Kaye has reportedly been laying down.



Indeed, Carroll seems to be picking up a second wind of sorts, juggling so many different projects that he can hardly keep track of them all. Does it help that he's off drugs now? Obviously so, he says. Consider this ramble: "I can't even smoke grass anymore. I haven't had a joint in seven years, and I miss it, I think grass is a good drug. I don't include it in any anti-drug thing. But I can't smoke it in New York, it's too paranoid, it's too fast there. When I was [kicking] in California, it was great, it was so slow, I was in the country with my dog. The only thing was, sometimes I'd get earthquake paranoia."

Also in the works: a screenplay about Irish-Catholics in New York City, written in collaboration with Matt Dillon, who for years toyed with the idea of starring in a film version of The Basketball Diaries that, sadly, never came to fruition. "His manager was a little squeamish about him doing too unseemly a movie," Carroll explains, grinning, "and then he does Drugstore Cowboy."

Carroll acted as Dillon's unofficial consultant for the Cowboy role, answering the actor's late-night phone calls concerning the behavior and slang of needle users. "He had another friend who was still on junk, and he was actually going copping [buying drugs] with the guy, going through all that, which I thought was stupid," Carroll says. "And he was shooting up water during the filming. He never did consumate the final...you know."

Carroll falls silent for a while, staring into his brown coffee. Then suddenly he snorts with laughter "Method acting," Carroll sighs, rocking back and forth and shaking his head. "DeNiro woulda been strung out, totally."
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