

poet Jim Carroll gives readers a dose of the divine

"I never liked coke when I was young. I didn't like doing speedballs. It was like putting applesauce on a really good pork chop. I was a purist, you know?"

That's Jim Carroll talking. Jim Carroll, legendary diarist, dope fiend, rock star, poet, basketball player and prodigal son of New York come home, at the ripe old age of 48, to produce the best—and most transcendently sauce-free—work in his 20-year career.

Genius, needless to say, is no easy act to sustain. A fact to which Carroll himself testifies in "8 Fragments for Kurt Cobain," a beautiful, devastating poem that appears in his new collection of poetry, *Void of Course* (Penguin), and shows up, spoken word style, on *Pools of Mercury* (Mercury), his electrifying new music-and-poetry CD. Listen:

Genius is not a generous thing
In return it charges more interest
than any amount
of royalties can cover
And it resents fame with a bitter vengeance

Pills and powders only placate it a while
Then it puts you in a place where
the planet's poles reverse.
Where the currents of electricity shift

Your body becomes a
magnet and pulls to it
despair and rotten teeth,
Cheez Whiz and guns

Ostensibly addressed to Nirvana's lead-eating superstar, the vicious wisdom imparted in these lines might just as well come embossed atop every contract handed to up-and-coming hipsters with a taste for the hard stuff and an insufficiency of grace to survive the struggle between creativity and destruction that wages behind their eyeballs. It's a battle, for better or worse, that Carroll has chronicled and survived for these many years, and no conversation with the Sultan of St. Mark's would be complete without revisiting the narco-battlefield, source and inspiration for so much of the blood-dipped wisdom to be found in his work.

Asked about the relationship between, as they say, writerly inspiration and the fruit of the poppy, Lord Jim is more than candid. "Well," he replies, his tone somewhere between amused and weary, "we're not stupid. I mean, you don't do heroin because it sucks. It does produce some kind of euphoria—at first. It slows down the landscape so that you can just see the bullshit for what it is, you know? The problem is, after a while it gives you an excuse to not do anything. That little voice just says, 'Why even bother working? Everything's cool the way it is.' And that sneaks up on you very quickly. You still think

you're producing. You might scratch down some shit here and there, you know, but that's about it.

"The difference working sober—especially in this new book of poems—is that the writing has an element of sentiment, something that didn't used to be there." He pauses, then adds, as if anybody with an IQ over 60 would expect to find a Carroll poem between the "Get Well" and "Happy Birthday, Gramps!" cards at the local drugstore, "And I don't mean sentiment in the Hallmark sense...." Which is, in a way, too bad, since plucking the love poem "Long Distance" out of the mailbox might well transform the recipient in ways the hacks at Hallmark could but dimly comprehend:

Speaking to you on the phone
I can't lift my mind
Up off the carpet
While it is filled with the weight of
your breath and lips

I feel the desire as I feel the void
I feel the distance dissolve like
The curling black smoke of rubber burning
Leaving a paw-shaped print on the ceiling

As ever, the boy from New York City is incapable of writing a word that doesn't scorch the page.

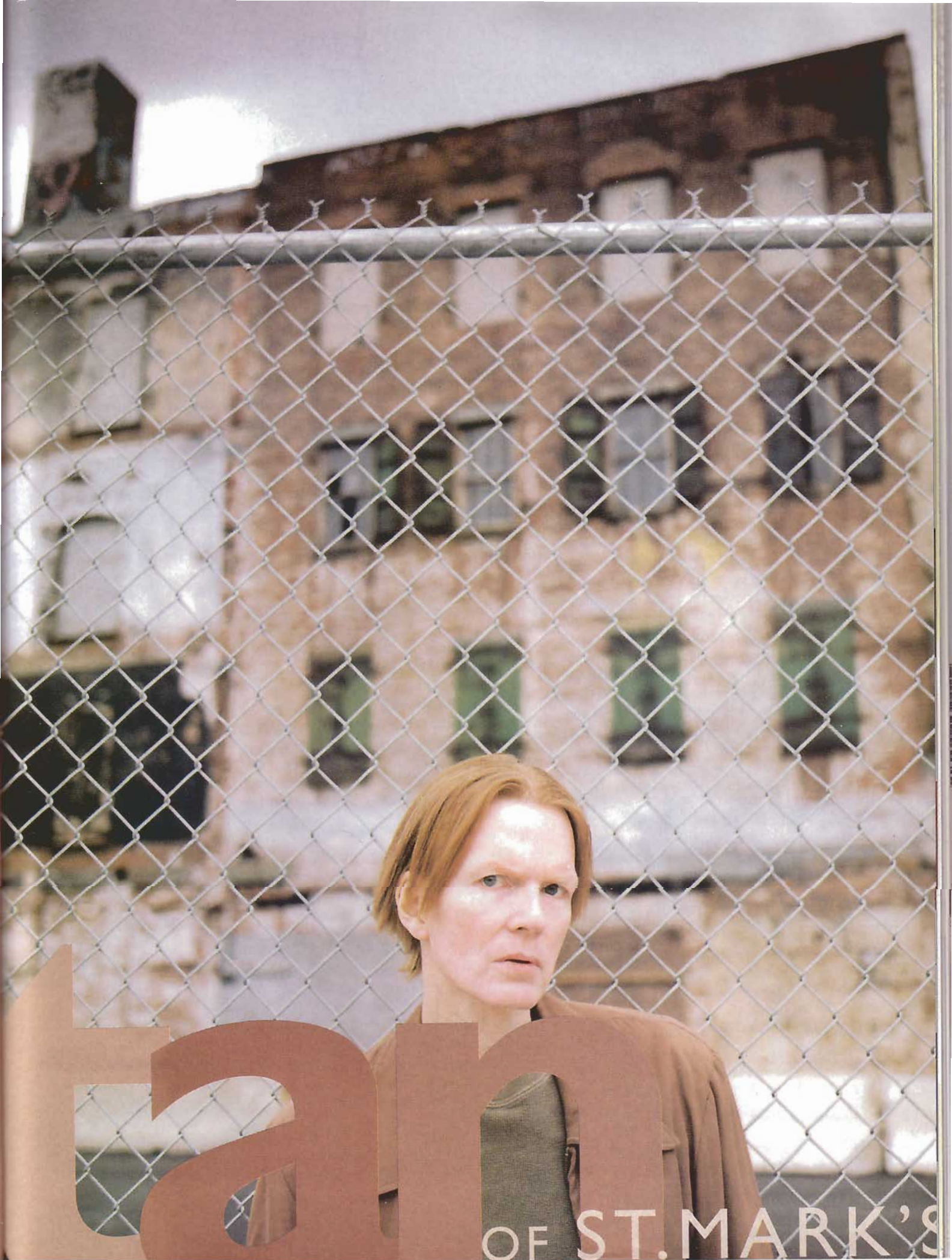
And there it is. Way back in the bad old days, when our hero was trying to kick the bad shit by sipping methadone out in Bolinas, California, he used to stop at the Mission San Rafael after getting his daily dose. It was there, passing a quiet moment in Catholicland, that he had a revelation that changed everything: "I looked at the Stations of the Cross and stuff and I thought, Man, that's, like, punk rock. I mean, Jesus is taken, he's scourged, he has a crown of thorns, he's whipped and he's crucified, he sticks his head into a veil and leaves his image on it. God, that just gave me complete comfort."

Comfort, perhaps, may not be the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Carroll's work. But maybe it should be. "I once asked John Ashbery why he never used obscenities in his poems," he confides. "And he said that life was obscene enough. What he wanted out of poetry was a way to escape from life."

What Jim Carroll achieves, in premillennial America's minefield of lightweights, is a realm of raw truth and eloquent sobriety that cooks up the pain of being human and injects the reader with a dose of the divine. Get hooked. ★ PHOTOGRAPH BY IMKE LASS

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