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## People Who Died

By David Stampone | Published Wednesday, Sept. 23, 2009

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“San Diego will always have a special place in my heart as the place I began my career in rock ‘n’ roll,” expressed the late author Jim Carroll 20 years ago. It was in an interview this reporter did for SDSU’s *Daily Aztec*. Carroll — a published poet in the *Paris Review* while still a teen, who later wrote of his high school days as a jock and street-hustling junkie in his acclaimed *Basketball Diaries* — gave several San Diego readings in those years, from SDSU’s Backdoor to a tiny downtown dive called Saigon Palace. By then, Carroll had wound down his band-fronting, highlighted by his punk-pop single “People Who Died.”

James Dennis Carroll, 59, died on September 11, 2009, in his native Manhattan — reportedly by heart attack at his desk. His close friend, rocker-poet Patti Smith, told the *New York Times*, “ ‘I met him in 1970, and already he was pretty much universally recognized as the best poet of his generation...sophisticated and elegant.’ ”

Smith first brought Carroll to a microphone as a band rocked behind him at San Diego’s California Theatre on May 15, 1978. Smith convinced a visiting Carroll to perform after the original opener was scrapped. A bootleg of that entire Patti Smith show exists, complete with Carroll’s set.

Smith addresses the lively crowd at the start, explaining the evening’s improvised lineup: “There’s a guy here who taught me how to write poetry ten years ago, and we’re gonna do somethin’.... In one minute, we’re gonna have Jim Carroll.”

Robert P. Laurence gave the show a mixed review in the *San Diego Union*: “Backstage, onstage, and in front of the stage, chaos reigned most of the night, delaying the start of the concert for an hour and a half and contributing to an atmosphere of near-violence that Smith herself seemed to encourage, then wave away. As a performer, she seemed unable to make up her mind whether to be a poet, a rock ‘n’ roller, comedian, or demagogue.”

In his Jim Carroll obituary last Monday, concertgoer Tom Yamaguchi blogged about that night. Smith, who had fallen off a stage the year before and broken her neck, “decided the best way to avoid another injury was to allow fans to stand directly under the stage.... [It] did not sit well with the fire marshal. He threatened to shut down the concert.”

And the backstage drama? “What happened was, the opener was Les Dudek, this California guitar dude [arguably most famous for dating/backing Cher],” explained Carroll. “His roadies had fought with Patti’s roadies...so she kicked him off the bill. And then she said to me, ‘Jim, c’mon...’ ”

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