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This One Is For You, My Brother: Remembering Jim Carroll

By Todd Totale
September 15, 2009



Jim Carroll **died on Monday** while working at his desk at home.

It may not mean anything to you, but it bums my shit. Carroll was one of those life-altering authors for me. A friend recommended *The Basketball Diaries*. I was awestruck. I went back to the same friend for more. He recommended the follow up, *Forced Entries*. I loved that one even more. I seldom re-read books after I've tackled them, but Carroll's work has been visited many times over.

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About five years ago, I was reading *Forced Entries* during a time when my ex-wife and I were battling. I had the copy in the bathroom, which happened to be a favorite retreat of my wife when she got home from work. She would use our bathroom to smoke cigarettes and nod off in a narcotics induced haze, occasionally forgetting about the lit cigarette until it had already burned a hole in the carpeting. There was more than one time in which I would come home from work and would find her in the bathroom, alone and oblivious. Her cigarette ash would sometimes be as long as the cigarette itself, precariously dangling to the filter and frequently breaking off from the rush of air that fanned it when I opened the bathroom door.

Our fights were segments of irrationality, filled with accusations and devoid of logic. I'm not suggesting that I was an angel in any of our downfall, but I can tell you that much of her anger towards me was forged from illogical events. And when she had her mind focused on something, the fallout tended to be even zanier than the actual incident.

On one particular night, she had taken my cell phone—unbeknownst to me—and retreated to the bathroom to investigate my call history. Noticing the frequency of one particular number, she looked for a writing utensil and a piece of paper to document down her evidence. Lacking both, she ripped out a page from the copy of *Forced Entries* that sat on the toilet tank and wrote down the offending number in the white space of the page using an eyeliner brush.

I was angrier at the vandalism to my book than the lack of trust she displayed.

Here's where it gets weird: during the initial phases of our relationship, Jim Carroll made his debut. I hopped into her car along with two other friends seeking a

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rumored rave that was supposedly going to feature **Moby**. We had already confirmed with Elektra Records earlier in the day that he wouldn't be attending; evidently, nobody from the rave had bothered to provide Moby's team with the necessary technical information for the event. The rave was going to be held on a farm in a neighboring county and we figured that even if he wasn't going to appear, the fact that they had even been in contact with him meant that their second-tier line-up should be worth the hour-long trip. With a case of Bud Light and a fresh mix tape, we headed towards the rave with pathetic directions and a sense of adventure.

After logging a few miles of gravel road, we found the disorganized mess. A shirtless man at the gate demanded that each person pay \$10 to get in and, for some reason, wanted us to open up the car trunk. When I asked why he needed to search the trunk of vehicle, especially since we planned on leaving it as we walked to the event, he made some vague reference to nitrous oxide tanks.

He noticed our cooler of beer in the trunk and advised, "This is a non-alcohol event."

As he dug around the trunk, I surveyed the rave. I noticed a squirrely looking guy dancing solo to the music coming from a pair of congenial p.a. speakers. A DJ in his late teens had his gear set up on an unadorned flatbed and was busy seeking out a new track with a small Maglite perched in his mouth for illumination. The generator powering the equipment was almost as loud as the p.a. system and the other paying patrons—who barely numbered a few dozen—walked aimlessly around the dancing weirdo, probably wondering why they had forked over \$10 for this thing.

"Let's go." I advised to my companions, making an executive decision that we would not be attending any rave on that evening.

The rest of the night couldn't have been any better. I attempted to impress my future ex-wife with my musical knowledge and every bit of worthless information really seemed to be capturing her attention.

The familiar chords to Jim Carroll's "**People Who Died**" began emanating from the speakers and I began to tell our foxy driver of Carroll's books, poetry, and musical endeavors.

She did a remarkable job of keeping her shitty Chevy Corsica in between the lines of the highway, as three of us began singing along with Carroll's chorus of "These are people who died! Died!"

At the most awesome moment of synchronicity, we passed a cemetery. This required an immediate change of the words to "Those are people who died! Died!"

I was granted the final line of "This song is for you my brother!" at the end of the track before one of the passengers—the only one who didn't seem to be partaking in our Jim Carroll karaoke—barked in a loud voice "Pull over! I've got to take a piss!" We found a dark, dirt road off the highway and our quiet friend quickly exited and immediately began walking down the road, away from the car.

"What the fuck is his problem?" I pondered aloud.

"Oh shit!" my other friend reminded us, "His brother just died last month, man!" There was a moment of deep silence as we pondered our insensitivity before we all gave way to hysterical laughter. Here we were carrying on with a litany of death chants, totally oblivious to the fact that this young man's older brother had been blindsided on his BMW motorcycle just weeks prior to our rave journey.

To make peace, we began to incorporate him more into the conversation when he came back from what seemed like a twenty-minute long piss. We even kept the music volume to a minimum and, more importantly, the recitation of random lyrics that could damage the heart of the unsuspecting passenger.

I'd like to think that Jim Carroll would laugh at that story, and I'd like for him to know how sacrilegious it felt knowing that someone had used one of his books as scratch paper. They were more than just words on paper to me and the act reinforced something I knew I had to do: leave. I tell people that it was a therapist that first planted the seed in my head the notion to let go, but it could very well have been an unconscious understanding to use Jim Carroll's own phoenix rising tale as inspiration.

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These two stories I've shared are just brief fragments, minor musings on Carroll's role in a pair of events. The real impact came from reading his work—or listening to it, on certain occasions with some of his excellent spoken word material—and a true appreciation can only be achieved with the required amount of solitude.

And now that Jim Carroll has found an infinite solitude for himself, this may be as good as time as any to devote some of your own to examine his incredible legacy for yourself.

To quote one of his own, "Nietzsche said: 'What does not kill me, only serves to make me stronger. My version is: 'What does not kill me, only serves to make me sleep until 3:30 the next afternoon.'"

Sweet dreams, Jim.

Video: [Jim Carroll Band - "People Who Died"](#)



Jim Carroll: [iTunes](#), [Amazon](#), [Insound](#), [wiki](#).

By Todd Totale, September 15, 2009 | [Permalink](#)

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Nice piece, Todd. Now I have to find a copy of "Forced Entry."

• [jaimoe0](#), Sep 15, 2009 11:56PM [✉](#)

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