Jim Carroll, escape artist
A writer comes back from the edge

By Joseph Menn
Contributing Reporter

Jim Carroll appreciates the value of an accessible metaphor.

Here, then, is one for this moment in his life: Jim Carroll is on the way back from the edge, and he is as compelled to describe his recovery from heroin addiction and the narcissism of the New York-Andy Warhol scene as he did to describe the way he climbed there from the streets.

Carroll knows a gripping image when he sees, or hallucinates, one. He doesn’t have to look beyond his own brilliant and tortured life for the material that now fills a second novelistic diary, two volumes of critically acclaimed poetry, and three influential New Wave rock albums.

Raised in a tough Irish neighborhood on the upper West Side of Manhattan, Carroll first injected heroin into his “virgin veins” at 13. He lied, cheated, stole, hustled. He also played first-rate basketball, earning a scholarship to an old-money prep school where he sold drugs and fell in love with poetry.

Through it all – the deaths of teenaged friends, brief stays in jail, flirtations with death – the fragile-looking, intense Carroll kept an anecdotal diary of his adventures and his growing up. “The Basketball Diaries” was published in whole only after Carroll established himself as a poetic prodigy in the ’60s. It is the unique record of a wise-ass kid who needed to write discovering why and how he would.

Even before the appearance of his first book of poems, “Living at the Movies,” when he was 22, Carroll was an integral part of the grandeur and high camp that defined the New York artistic scene of the ’60s and early ’70s. Adorned with long, light red hair, wandering blue eyes and a crucifix, Carroll took the wrong drugs at the right parties and hung out at Warhol’s club, Max’s Kansas City, where Lou Reed and the Velvet Underground played two times a night, six days a week.

The 36-year-old Carroll, in Boston last night to read from his
While "Forced Entries" is being marketed as a sequel to "The Basketball Diaries," Carroll says he sees it more as a novel. The events are based on real experiences, but most of the book wasn't written as it happened. He describes listening to the Velvet Underground, for example, when they had actually broken up some time earlier. The entries are compressions and distillations of what he felt and saw during that time.

Talking to Carroll, his technique is easy to understand. He jumps around, figuratively and literally, swooping down and capturing one epiphany or incident and then rising up out of certainty, almost directionless until an idea strikes him moments later. "I don't have a photographic memory; it never helped me in school when I was studying for an exam. But I have a great memory for images, even for something that happened a year or two earlier. I'm always amazed by that."

If Carroll's current reclusive life and his time-distanted new work represent a rescue of his body and spirit, then he is a kind of escape artist. He escaped being a fourth-generation bartender; he escaped the streets; he escaped the nouveau riche. He escaped the "what you see is what you get," skin-deep art of the Warhol Factory crowd, and he always will be escaping drugs. "I tried to escape the street rhythm of 'The Basketball Diaries' with the erudition of poetry," he says.

Two of Carroll's favorite images from "Forced Entries" embody his perverse attraction for the counter-life he is both living and escaping. "One of the strongest things there is the anonymous sex in Times Square, the feeling that you have to uncage something within yourself every two months. I say it dissipates like a bottle of uncapped perfume."

And the final, dominant metaphor is a huge abscess on the inside of his arm, filled with subhuman yellow and green slime, a post-addiction relic he purges a full year after quitting heroin.

What comes across as almost supernatural in Carroll is the success of his drive, unwavering since puberty, to express himself by any means necessary. In "The Basketball Diaries," Carroll evolves from simple -- though well-written -- braggart about early bouts of drugs, sex and crime to refined explorations of the psychology of those around him. He begins to address the reader directly, assuring him of the veracity and intensity of his experiences.

The shyness and stage fright of his first poetry readings have never left him. But Carroll observed how others got their messages out, and music had a particular appeal for him -- initially the politicized folk music of Dylan and Phil Ochs. Although many of his friends were hippies, he couldn't understand why they didn't fight back when construction workers tarred-and-feathered one of their number at a concert. "I had too much of the street still inside me," he says. Things changed when punk rock came to America in the late '70s, "I immediately felt more of an affinity with punks." Carroll allowed then-girlfriend and poet-rocketer Patti Smith to talk him into going onstage for the first time in San Diego one night when she couldn't perform. Backed up by Smith's band, he rapped half-poetry to an enthusiastic crowd, and in the early '80s he released his first record, "Catholic Boy." The songs on the bestselling album are sharp, funny and at times scary as they are creative. A poor singer, Carroll says he had to use his voice as a rhythm instrument. He willingly simplified images from his poems to make them more accessible, and concentrated on the emphasis in his phrasing of lines like "It's too late/ To fall in love with Shar- on Tate/ But it's too soon/ To ask me for the words I want carved on my tomb."

Carroll remembers Warhol complimenting him on one song in particular, a semi-truthful speed-feul hit called "People Who Died." It begins: "Eddie sniffing glue/ He was 12 years old/ Fell from the roof on East two nine/ Cathy was 11 when she pushed the plug/ 26 reds and a bottle of wine."

His next two albums were more reflective, and less popular with rock fans than with critics. Then he turned back toward poetry, publishing "The Book of Nods" last year. Lately he has been collaborating with ex-Door Ray Manzarek, producer of the Los Angeles Band X, and he has three songs on an upcoming album by Pzo Scaggs.

Carroll continues to grow as he searches for new ways of expression. "Forced Entries" shows a broader perception and a more contained, more careful questioning of life. He is at work on another first-person novel from a rock-and-roll point of view, and may have chapters on archetypal bands from different genres: "There are some observations I'd like to make" on heavy metal and hardcore punk groups. He says he may dub one "English, pretty-boy band" Sirhan Sirhan, after the popular Duran Duran.

If Carroll is getting over something, his sense of perspective has improved: He is over it. The metaphor of pulling back from the edge is a rock-song first approximation to his life and work, but Carroll prefers a more abstract and honest version. "In California, I converted that hunger for literary trivia that I had, I turned knowledge into wisdom by being by myself."

His book is not a documentation of an era of ferment, as Penguin Books calls it. "Forced Entries" records Carroll's "obscure rite of passage" as he turned his knowledge of sophisticated, vacuous New York scene-making into personal, life-saving wisdom.
Jim Carroll: Making his way as an escape artist

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new sequel to “The Basketball Diaries,” said in a hotel-room interview yesterday that he doesn’t see much of Allen Ginsberg or Bob Dylan or the other people he knew then, except for Reed, a close friend. But the new book, “Forced Entries: The Downtown Diaries 1971-1973,” talks about those days and his mind-and-body escape to a temporary retreat in Northern California, where he kicked heroin and worked on his writing.

The title is a pun on the difficulty of getting off hard drugs and continuing to write diary-like entries. “The words were moving like parked cars, or the cars in those NYU student films, moving all over the place too fast,” Carroll says. He doesn’t dwell on the physical pain — it’s been done before. But writing around it was a struggle, he says. “You don’t forget pain like that. Even when I was retyping [the book], it was a catharsis.”

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