Clad in black, Jim Carroll stalks the New York rock-club stage like a caged panther. The years of drug abuse—the trips, the hustling—have taken their toll; the expression on his gaunt face is at once a smile and a sneer. Over a rush of blaring guitars, Carroll sings an epitaph for his friends from the '60s, called "People Who Eat." "Teddy, sniffing glue, he was 12 years old. He fell from the roof on East two wine. Cathy was 15 when she pulled the plug. On 26 reds and a bottle of wine. Bobby got leukemia, 14 years old. He looked like 63 when he died. He was a friend of mine." Not since Lou Reed wrote "Walk on the Wild Side" has a rock singer so vividly evoked the casual brutality of New York City as has Jim Carroll, a 25-year-old poet- turned-rocketeer. When a New York deejay, Dave Herman, recently played "People Who Died" for the first time, the response from listeners was overwhelming. Featured on Carroll's forthcoming album for Rolling Stone Records, that song has propelled him from underground status in a literary circle that included Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and various minions of Andy Warhol. His national attention as a "contender" for the title of New York's new poet laureate.

Basketball: Carroll knows whereof he sings. He spent his boyhood hanging out on many of New York's meager streets. The son of an Irish-Catholic bartender, he sampled speed, cooked cough syrup, LSD and cocaine while still in grade school. By 15 he was a junkie who supported his habit by darting pincushes and hustling homosexuals. But he was erratic at basketball and, when he wasn't shooting up heroin, he was shooting hoops with another playground legend, Lew Alcindor, whom he

Carroll: Songs about life on the edge..."40 East McGraw Ave/ Jim Carroll Music/all rights reserved"

claims to have taught the sky hook. He was also serious about writing. Between his 12 and 15, he chronicled his squalling coming of age for an autobiographical novel called "The Basketball Diaries." His terse wit, with its archly contorted naïveté, transformed a tale of teen-age rebellion into a contemporary classic. After "The Diaries" was excerpted in literary magazines, Jack Kerouac wrote, "At 13 years of age, Carroll writes better prose than 99 per cent of the novelists working today." Carroll became a poet of some renown at 22; his third volume, "Living at the Movies," was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

Habits But he grew tired of the poetry scene—"You don't get rich writing poetry"—and of his artsy friends' romantic obsession with his heroin addiction. As he wrote in "The Diaries," "You just got to see that junk is just another to 5 p.m. in the end." In 1974, he moved to northern California and kicked his eight-year habit. Now, "The Basketball Diaries" has been re-issued (Random Books $2.50) and he has metamorphosed from poet to rocker, following in the footsteps of a former girlfriend, Fatti Smith. Says Carroll: "Poets today are all intellect, ya know? But rock can strike at the intellect and the heart, like a wind in your veins or a fist tightening under your chest. When Henry Miller wrote about Rimbaud, he called this 'the inner register.' With an alter ego could feel the force back in his blood.

Filled with imagery that is spiritual, sexual and violent, Carroll's debut album, "Catholic Boy," is something the daubed poet would understand. Like his best known predecessors, Smith and Reed, Carroll isn't much of a singer. But his songs of a city morally gone to seed have raw power. "(City of) Piss and (City of) Night" describes a surreal world populated by hookers, pups, drag queens and thieves, stinking with fantasies of Sodom and Gomorrah. Another depicts a young girl with "incorruptible poison and nihilist charm [who] gets her sleep through tubes in her arms." In the title track he sings:

I was born in a pool, they made my mother stand...And I spit on that surgeon and his trembling hand...I was a Catholic boy, I was redeemed through pain and not through joy.

Now back in New York with his wife, a lawyer, Carroll is clearly a survivor. To some, his songs will sound like glorifications of the decadent, and indeed Carroll is carrying on the beat traditions of celebrating lives lived on the edge. But, he insists, "I don't want to glorify junk. Susan 'bombers' who tell me that a junkie has a unique charm, come up and start life over. But I want kids to know that it's not fun to indulge yourself at the bottom unless you're planning on one helluva resurrection."