





the Catholic Boy confesses

JIM CARROLL

by Clarice Rivers

JIM CARROLL has been causing a stir on the literary scene ever since the publication of his *BASKETBALL DIARIES* — when he was sixteen. He is also the author of numerous books including *THE BOOK OF NODS* (a collaboration of prose poems with PATTI SMITH) and *LIVING AT THE MOVIES*, for which he was nominated for a PULITZER PRIZE.

CARROLL has now opened a new chapter in a career filled with coincidences and deserved good breaks. CLARICE RIVERS spoke with the street wise, super-sharp poet about his latest endeavor, the release of his fabulous first album, *CATHOLIC BOY*, available on ATCO Records and Tapes.

CLARICE RIVERS: quote a line from a poem in your book *Living at the Movies*, "gliding towards some future," it could suggest that when you left New York seven years ago to live in Bolinas, California, that you were gliding towards some future in rock and roll. Or did your leap from the more tranquil life of a writer to center stage performer happen overnight?

JIM CARROLL: No, it didn't happen overnight. I never really thought about rock and roll. I liked it in a certain way. There were only a few people I liked though. I could listen to anything that the Velvet Underground did and after they split up, what Lou Reed did. I really didn't listen to

CLARICE: When was that?

JIM: That was about two years ago.

CLARICE: Describe how Patti Smith, an old New York poet friend of yours, got you on stage singing for the first time, singing your own lyrics.

JIM: Patti had to do a show in San Diego so I went down there with her. She asked me to open up the show because she didn't like the opening act. She decided to bag them. We hadn't rehearsed anything. She just told the road manager that I could open the show instead, and her band would back me up. I said what I'll do is I'll just go out and read the lyrics I'd been writing because I had those memorized. I went out on the stage and it was incredible, because for the first time in my life I was having fun on stage. I never liked giving poetry readings. But there was this incredible energy from these kids in the audience and there was this incredible energy coming from the music behind me. This was my first taste of really doing it and liking it, having all this energy and having these kids to perform for — not just some kind of stuffy college poetry audience. It was great and I decided after that that maybe I could do it myself and perform myself. I thought that I could write the music myself and kind of fit it to my own vocal limitations. I always knew that no one, no matter how technically limited you were as a singer, nobody could sing a song as well as the person who wrote it. So I figured I'd

JIM: That night I didn't. Instead of me and Patti giving the reading, it was just Patti, which was fantastic since Patti had twice as much time and it was the start of her working with music.

CLARICE: So actually, it was almost the start of your thing too. It seems like it was a certain fate. . . .

JIM: Yes, it was very ironic. It was like, dare I say it, karma. Because it came back on me and Patti gave me the shot later on.

CLARICE: Can you describe the *Basketball Diaries*, just published by *Bantam*?

JIM: The diaries took place from the ages between thirteen and sixteen. They weren't written day by day. You can pick the book up and begin anywhere. I only wrote the diaries on days when something interesting enough happened to write about. Each one is like a separate short story. You can skip around or read it from cover to cover and it has two different effects.

CLARICE: Have you continued to keep a diary?

JIM: Yes I have. I have another book of diaries planned. I don't think it will pick up from where the other one leaves off. I think there will be about a two year gap and then I'll start up again.

CLARICE: So you have it planned and you have all the diaries written?

JIM: No, I don't have them written, but

most popular songs. It's accessible to kids and it has a lot to do with the *Basketball Diaries*.

CLARICE: How many people that were friends of yours have died?

JIM: A lot. A lot of the kids I graduated with from Catholic grammar school went to Viet Nam. Forty kids graduated with me and eleven of them died there. It's an incredible percentage. Also, a lot of my friends from when I was young died or went to jail or got into drugs and died. I got into drugs at the same time and fortunately. . . . This song is about that. It's like an elegy but it's not sentimental. It just lists the people who died, how they died, how old they were and that's all.

CLARICE: You don't feel like crying when you hear it?

JIM: No. It's really up.

CLARICE: Do you need emotional stability to really work well or do you thrive on turmoil at home?

JIM: Well, I think you need both. When I left New York I was cut off from all the turmoil, excitement and adventures of the City. It was at the right time because I was just burned out. I enjoy having a nice place and just having things quiet and peaceful. It's still that way even now in New York. I don't like to go out to clubs at all. I've been kind of making the scene in that sense for the first time since I've gotten back. I can't really sus-

York, after my last book of poems had been published. When I was living in the country outside of San Francisco I spent the first four years practically a total recluse. I was learning to enjoy boredom for the first time in my life. The highlight of my day was going down to the post office to get my mail.

CLARICE: Those four years were you working on poetry?

JIM: I wrote two books and another book of poems. Towards the end I worked pretty much on writing rock lyrics. I wrote a book of prose poems and a book of short stories which is the one I'm interested in now and which is all finished. The book of poems has also been completed. I think I might take this book of poems which has about 60 pages and the best of some of my old poems and make that a book.

CLARICE: What else?

JIM: I had three dogs because when I was growing up in New York my parents would never let me have a dog. I was always bringing home stray dogs and they'd make me kick them out. So I had these terrific dogs and we'd go for these long walks along the coast every day. Then I'd come home and work a lot and it was actually one of the happiest times of my life.

CLARICE: What happened then?

JIM: I started to write songs for other groups. I wrote some songs with Patti Smith in mind. Of course, Patti writes most of her own songs. I wrote some lyrics together with Allan Lenier from the Blue Oyster Cult, who wrote the music. At first I was just sort of writing for other people. I didn't start listening to rock and roll anymore than I had before, which was practically nothing. I liked rock and roll and I liked the idea of poets working with rock and roll, so I decided that I was going to maybe give it a shot, but I really didn't think too seriously about it until I saw Patti when she came out on a tour there.

musicians, four guys who were working as a band for years together, but who were looking for a direction because they weren't getting anywhere. They were fantastic musicians but their songs were a bit like the Sixties.

CLARICE: They needed a leader?

JIM: Exactly. They were willing to do it. In fact, they thought it would be fun even though we weren't thinking too seriously in commercial terms at this time. This was about a year and a half ago. I told them that instead of giving a poetry reading I'd just do these songs with this band. We rehearsed for a couple of weeks, wrote the music to it, and it worked out quite well. It was a fantastic feeling and I was really enjoying performing for the first time. I also saw the potential that it had for a poet to reach an audience which usually wasn't that interested in poetry.

CLARICE: Patti ignited the idea you already felt about livening up poetry readings?

JIM: Exactly. Patti gave me that chance in San Diego when she asked me to do the show with her. The first time she ever did a poetry reading with Lenny Kaye, this famous reading at St Mark's Church, where she played with music behind her for the first time, that was the night I was supposed to give the poetry reading originally with her.

CLARICE: You didn't turn up?

JIM: No. I got arrested in Rye, New York, while I was visiting this friend I grew up with who had moved up there. For some reason there was this big crack-down by the local police on all these high school kids there who were into drugs. They had this raid on my friend's house that morning because he was one of the dealers of hashish at this school. I was still in high school then or just out of high school and they threw me into jail. I had to stay overnight.

CLARICE: Did you let anyone know about it?

would be half-fictional and half-autobiographical.

CLARICE: Do you have any idea what you'd call this one?

JIM: No. I've had a few different ideas. I like to work in three-year sections of diaries. The next one would be from the time I was nineteen to twenty-three. And maybe from there the first six months of being in California, because one of the big parts in this basketball diary is the change from just being a street kid, and going to Catholic and public schools, and all of a sudden getting a scholarship to this very posh private school with wealthy kids, for the first time, and meeting all these wealthy girls and going out with them. I needed a switch like that. The switch from leaving New York and going to California and dealing with that whole kind of California mellow-hot-tub-bullshit which I never could stand. But I stayed out there anyway, because I was always by myself. I just kind of used the landscape.

CLARICE: You call your album Catholic Boy. Why?

JIM: I wanted to call it *Dry Dream* because I really don't like the kind of attitude of rock and roll that is so dominated by the sexual image—it's a kind of cock rock. I really wrote songs with that in mind, to try and do just the opposite. So rather than a wet dream these songs are dry dreams.

CLARICE: The trend of the moment?

JIM: The subjects are limited—you know about love. Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy screws girl, girl screws boy, boy can't get into a girl's pants. I don't like songs like that. They're boring. There's nothing spiritual about them.

CLARICE: Do you have a favorite song on Catholic Boy?

JIM: They vary. I have different favorite songs for different reasons. I like *People Who Die* because it's one of our

so I just like to stay home and read and work. That state is okay to write in, but then you want a period of turmoil and excitement, intensity and variation to draw on.

CLARICE: I wasn't thinking so much about the turmoil of going out to clubs, I was thinking about your personal life now. You're married now.

JIM: One is much more inspired when things are tense with one's wife—when there's turmoil and friction going on. There's much more to draw on for lyrics, poems or anything. You're more inspired to do it out of rage and anger and things like that that are going on. But then when you're actually writing the work and polishing it and dealing with style you want quiet and peace. You need both.

CLARICE: Do you miss that sort of New York school of poetry that you were with? Like having friends that you can just drop in on?

JIM: They're still my friends and I always think of them as my friends. I don't miss that scene at all. I think poetry readings are pretty boring. Some of my old poet friends are a bit suspicious of what I do. I was always thought of as this pure poet who didn't publish that much who was kind of a recluse and very much into hard drugs. I had the image of not being in poetry for what one could get out of it.

CLARICE: That's why it's such a total switch for you to be doing rock and roll and heavy publicity?

JIM: Yes. All of a sudden I got the money from the paperback book sale of the diaries and a record contract. They thought I was selling out.

CLARICE: Do you think there's a certain amount of jealousy in remarks like that?

JIM: Absolutely. And also I'm sick of poets who just write for other poets. They just deal with the intellect rather than the heart. □