

# THE TRANSFORMATION OF JIM CARROLL

Is Jim Carroll, streetwise poet, athletic Catholic Boy, being pushed into the vacant position of rock 'n' roll martyr?

By Laura Fissinger

**E**ven unorganized religions need their martyrs. Didn't Jim Morrison make a spectacular sacrificial lamb? And Janis a great Joan of Arc? Heck, they don't even have to be dead. Grace Slick was a *lot* of fun when she was drinking. Iggy's self-mutilation phase is holy legend, passed on by Those Who Were There in nostalgic tones. At Johnny Thunder's gigs (when they happen), the rubbery grey of his skin prompts respectful speculation about how long the barely living Doll will be with us. If and when he finally destroys himself, the weighty post mortem reevaluations will be quick in coming, and someone else with lots of talent for music and little talent for living will become the new candidate for canonization, everybody needs someone to live for their sins.

Some of the faithful are currently gunning for Jim Carroll, up until recently an ex-funkie poet with a cult following and a year to maintain existence on this plane. Now he's a rock lyricist/songwriter/singer on a meteoric rise, with all the mandatory equipment for rock martyrdom: the tragic life story, the personal charisma, and the big Gift "People Who Died" is the single that started the buzz, even before *Catholic Boy*, Carroll's debut LP was released. In the tradition of friends and influences Patti Smith and Lou Reed, both the 45 and the album are built on grisly, lyrical poetry dancing with abandon to the 4/4 beat. "People" lists casualties from Carroll's pot-holed, drug-riddled adolescence over hard rock that sings at fifty paces:

*Herbie pushed Tony from the Boy's Club roof*

*Tony thought that his rage was just some goof*

*But Herbie sure gave Tony some bitchin' proof*

*Herbie said 'Tony, can you fly?'*

*But Tony couldn't fly — Tony died!*

*T-Bird and Georgie let their gimmicks go rotten*

*and died of hepatitis in upper Manhattan*

*Sly 'n Vietnam took a bullet in the head*

*Bobbie OD'd on Drano on the night that he was wed*

*They were two more friends of mine I miss 'em — they DIED.*



Jim Carroll creates no-frills musical poetry of bleak yet powerful images.

Carroll is a transformer, chanting and moaning his litany into something infinitely more palpable than symbols made of sounds. His no-frills band breathes right along with him on this and most every track — almost as if Carroll were opening his mouth and having it *all* come out of there: the words, the guitars, the bass, the drums, the keyboards (and saxophone on the epic "City Drops Into the Night"). It's a mainstream, Stonesish sound, straightforward and unpolished, that recalls fellow New Yorkers Reed, Smith, Tom Verlaine and David Johansen at various points in their careers. But Carroll's edition is more life-affirming; he stays away from dirge-like jams on minor chords, choosing instead to give simple, strong melody an importance equal to the lyrics, his voice hanging desperately on to both. Sometimes the singer gets lost, hiding temporarily in roaring block chords that suggest an

idealized version of heavy metal, bludgeoning ears with focused intensity and finesse ("Wicked Gravity"). Unlike the commerciality of Smith's last work, *Wave*, *Catholic Boy's* "normal" rock rarely dilutes the complex satisfaction offered.

On the title track — another instant classic — Carroll makes a sort of salvation out of dogma and guilt:

*I make the angels dance and drop to their knees*

*When I enter a church the feet of statues bleed*

*I understand the fate of all my enemies*

*Like Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane...*

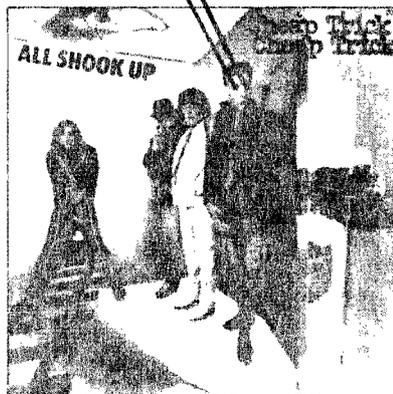
*Cause I'm a Catholic Boy*

*Redeemed through pain, not through joy*

In the style of his aforementioned

*continued on next page*

# CHEAP TRICK'S "ALL SHOOK UP" NO ONE IS SAFE FROM ITS EFFECTS.



"ALL SHOOK UP," THEIR NEW FULL-LENGTH ALBUM FEATURES THE PLAYFUL SINGLE, "STOP THIS GAME," PRODUCED BY GEORGE MARTIN, ON EPIC RECORDS AND TAPES.

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peers, curb-side realities are mixed with the sorts of thoughts that float by in pictures right before sleep, making those vague and common shapes new, newly understood, and soaked with mystery. From "Nothing Is True," a tribute to the desperation of a life with only charnel-houses for certainties.

*She got special tools to keep things tight  
That robbed her eyes long ago of light.*

*Nothing is true  
She told me—it's all permitted*

The best poetry always builds a bridge between conscious and subconscious. Carroll's a poet, alright, but he leads us through a minimum of dishonest verbiage to get there. He's fond of talking about what Henry Miller calls the "inner register." "That's what's screwed up about poetry nowadays, man, it's just an intellectual trip. A good poet has to write and affect the intellect, *and* be able to affect a virtual liberate. And that's what made me want to go into rock and roll. Kids may not be able to get the images intellectually, but they get them right off through the heart and that's much more important. They want something. They don't want a goddamned message or anything like that, they want a door opened. Not anyone to lead them through and show them around, just somebody to open the door through images, saying 'there's something out there, man. There ain't much time left, you're born out of this insane abyss and you're going to fall back into it, so while you're alive you might as well show your bare ass.'"

Such high aspirations and low-key drama are, of course, perfect grist for the martyr mill. It's a life-script big enough to serve as a screen onto which all manner of private demons and protected fears can be projected. And that screen is, too often, where art and artists get lost. The art and the things the artist becomes a receptacle for get too tangled up to judge separately anymore. The value of the art becomes obscured, a matter of doubt — frequently before the martyr makes the final exit, and almost always afterward. The problem for those preparing the stake is that Carroll's demons seem to be at bay right now. Worse, as he rides them to fame he's also doing what he can to keep them there. The man's going to make an unwilling icon.

The saga practically sounds ghost written. Carroll was born in 1950, to an Irish Catholic bartender in Manhattan. Much of his adolescent decline is charted in "The Basketball Diaries" — the extraordinary athletic ability, the vivid imagination, the love for words. At first, being a bored, smart kid made Carroll do mean things on the mean streets, later on came the monkey on his back. "The funny part is that I thought heroin

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Jim Carroll, cont. from pg. 18

was the NON-addictive stuff, and marijuana was addictive I only found out later what a dumb move it was," reads the passage in the Diaries, written at age 13. Thanks to a few teachers in the private school he attended on a basketball scholarship, Carroll started writing about sports in the school paper and reading poets like Frank O'Hara. After school he got inspiration and support through the St Mark's Poetry Project, in close proximity to poets like Ann Waldman, Allen Ginsberg and John Ashberry. Ted Berrigan took the junkie teenager with him on a visit to Jack Kerouac in Maine, who read part of the Diaries and gave an assessment that's becoming rather well-known "At 13 years of age, Jim Carroll writes better than 89 percent of the novelists working today." His poems began appearing in *Paris Review* and other literary journals. The second

volume of poetry, *Living at the Movies*, was nominated for a Pulitzer prize.

For Carroll, the New York City methadone program turned out to be worse than the junk. No longer a teenager and still an addict, Carroll relocated in California. "There were certain friends of mine, like Ann Waldman, who were always trying to get me off junk. The people that were into my junkie trip were more from the Warhol scene and stuff. They were all very into being self-destructive themselves, you know? In California, the drug programs actually encourage you to get off. They dropped me real slow. I got a lot of support from them. That period was the first time in my life I had a dog, and lived in the country. A dog is kinda the biggest reason I got off methadone. I mean, if I was crying from when I was in pain from kicking it, the dog was so conscious of it. He'd just come up and start licking me." While in

the program Carroll met his future wife, a lawyer. During the ensuing period of discipline and seclusion, she took him to see the front lines of the new wave in San Francisco clubs. "People had encouraged me to do rock and roll for a long time. I didn't like the negativity of punk, but at least I saw how I could get past my technical limitations, because you didn't have to sing well. And after publishing poems all those years and having a very esoteric audience, the prospect of this other audience seemed nice." The band he found had long hair, called themselves Amsterdam and looked to be "stuck in a time warp." Carroll persuaded them to tuck their hair into berets ("I didn't want a 'look I wanted us to look like gas station attendants, maybe") for gigs at bay area clubs. In relative anonymity they did dry runs with the material co-written by Carroll and each band member "I wanted kids to like it, kids into heavy rock and hot guitars." Kids came to jobs and more jobs, eventually mouthing the words to the songs, pressed up against the edge of the stage, the front half of what Carroll calls "the energy sandwich." On a trip to New York to sign some papers with Bantam, Carroll considered approaching Columbia through Allen Lanier with whom he'd been writing some songs, or Arista via old pal Smith. He wound up talking to Earl McGrath, president of Rolling Stones Records, at a business bash. As Carroll told writer Tony Glover "He'd heard I had this band and asked to listen to the tape. He knew my work, he'd been around the poetry and art scenes — he liked the tape and we made a deal. He wound up producing it, and I think he understood what I was doing. He had some literary references that no other record executive would've had." McGrath is now Carroll's full-time manager.

It's at this point in the script that the stage directions call for whispering noises and pointing from the crowd. That's exactly what happened. Even before *Catholic Boy's* release, *People Who Died* started to get heavy play on a surprising number of stations, and the journalists began to line up. Most have come away intrigued. Maybe they hadn't heard much of the music yet, but they could feel the heat. And what copy he made, he looked like a ghost, like he'd been dipped in white wax. He seemed hidden, distant, and as vulnerable as a child. He was bright. He chain-smoked, pulled at his pale red hair, couldn't sit still. He talked non-stop in metaphors and street slang and guileless gestures about anything they wanted to know. Almost "it's gotten to the point where I don't talk about drugs anymore generally, you know? And it's all just so boring now, besides. This guy from *Penthouse* did a real long profile on me, in that many sessions, y'know, you can't avoid it because it's part of my history, and the

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Called to Say" recalls the soulful sophistication of the Temptations, in particular David Ruffin. The ambivalence at the heart of the grand romantic ballad, "Can't We Try" ("...go away/I wish you'd stay" — at the affair's end), is unforced and moving; Pendergrass reveals himself as a genuine crooner. And there is also some tasty "cooking," including two cuts written and produced by Ashford & Simpson. On their "Girl You Know," Pendergrass balances cocksure self-satisfaction and guileless pleasure, and the resulting smoke isn't irritating. — *Jim Feldman*

**Joe "King" Carrasco and the Crowns.** Stiff Import SEEZ28.

Don't listen to this album. Just put it on and start shaking. Carrasco updates the Tex-Mex sound of Sir Douglas and Sam the Sham: drunk and frenzied with a liting two-step beat. Kris Cummings' swirling, sinuous Farfisa sets the tone for rockers like "Susan Friendly" and "Let's Get Pretty" as well as the more Mexican "Buena" and "Caca de Vaca." Carrasco's fuzzy guitar chording takes it into motorbike-like overdrive. His vocals, though, are a bit tame and this LP doesn't have the range of 1978's *Joe "King" Carrasco with El Molino* (Lisa Records, San Antonio, TX). But the pace is just gear-fab frenetic. *Stuart Cohn* 

**Jim Carroll, cont. from pg. 44**

Diaries have a lot to do with it. That's an image they lay on you, you know. But I don't want to dwell on it anymore. Besides, a lot of the songs have references to getting away from junk."

Carroll's voice softens. "I never thought about all this, you know. I thought we'd have some good fans like we've had from the start that would really be into it, but that it would stay kinda cultish. See, the record's starting to do past what anyone anticipated. All the attention feels strange. But I feel like the album backs up any kind of hype."

It does. But can it be considered *apart* from the hype and the doom freaks, that's the question. In a perfect world it would always be possible to pull the hype, the artist and the art apart long enough to see each clearly, to put each in its proper perspective to the others. But this is not a perfect world. Jim Carroll is already being dismissed by many as a druggie delinquent gloried for stupid living habits and questionable talents. They sense that he's being asked to be the life of the party, the new boy to keep romance and justification in the slow, self-imposed exit. Right now it looks like Carroll has declined the invitation — but a lot of the kamakazies look resolute like that when they first arrive. "You just gotta see that junk is just another nine-to-five gig in the end," it reads in the Diaries, "only the hours are a bit more inclined toward shadows." Currently, at least, Carroll is otherwise employed. 

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