



When a poet turns to song: Carroll's key is, "the cold-steel-and-concrete sound of the city."

A Star Is Born

By Chet Flippo

"...Former junkie, poet, basketball legend, Jim Carroll was the hottest ticket in a season when rock's big events were causing yawns..."

LOLA FROM BUDAPEST IS A BIT of a psychic, among other things, and one afternoon not long ago, when she settled into her customary front-row seat in NBC's Studio 3A in Rockefeller Center for the taping of the *Tomorrow* show, she just naturally started divining things and reading life lines and such. Lola from Budapest—that's the way she's billed on her business cards and fliers—offered to hypnotize Tom Snyder when he strolled out to warm up his audience, and he good-naturedly declined. Lola from Budapest adjusted all her parcels and bags and turned to me to check out the old life lines and to ask who would be on the show. Lilli Palmer she knew. Maureen Reagan she knew. Jim Carroll she didn't know.

"Well," I said, "he's sort of a singing poet, a street kid alive with the rhythms of the city. He was even nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for a poetry book and..."

(Oddly enough, a phone call a few days later to the Pulitzer Prize com-

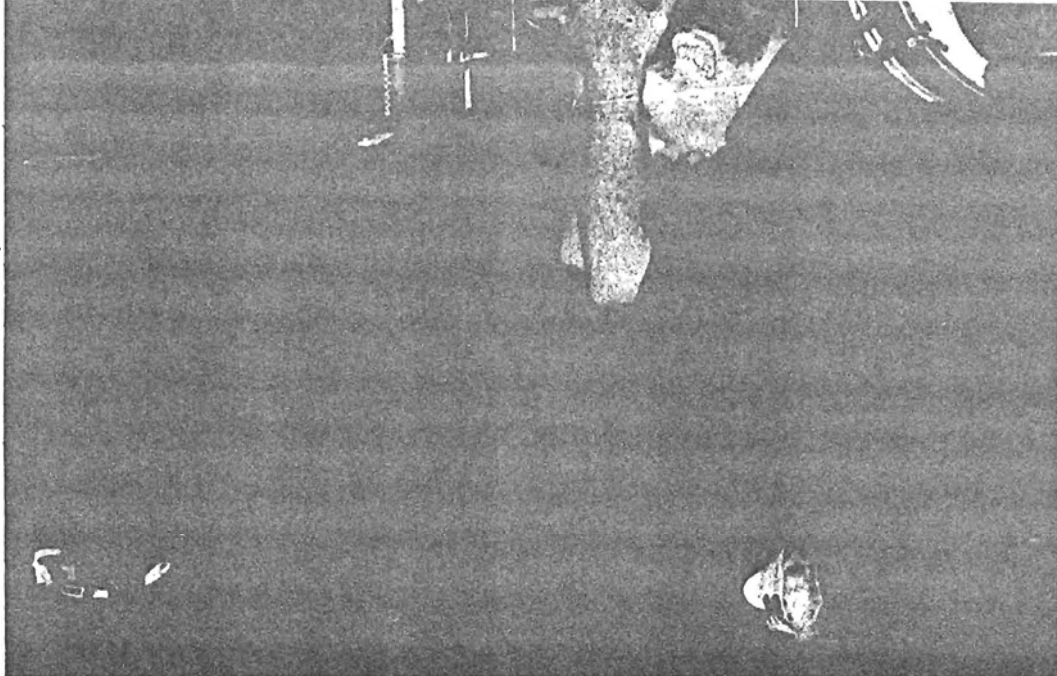
mittee revealed the fact that Carroll as well as his fans only *thought* that he had been nominated for a Pulitzer for his poetry book, *Living at the Movies*. When I told Carroll that I was stripping him of his so-called nomination, he said that "some lady" at Viking Press had written him a letter telling him that Viking intended to enter his book for Pulitzer competition and that he had since lost the letter. So, apparently, has Viking.)

Lola from Budapest cut me off. She was dubious. "I wait till I hear him," she said. As a skeptic, she was a definite minority member of the studio audience, about half of which was young and black-leathered-up-with-silver-chains. I recognized many of the Carroll chain gang from his show the night before at the Ritz. It was only his second New York rock-'n'-roll performance—as opposed to his poetry readings at St. Mark's and such places—but there was no doubt he was the hottest ticket in town in a season when rock's big events, like the Plasmatics' Cadillac explosions, were caus-

ing giant yawns all over town, from Hudson all the way up to 86th Street. Jim Carroll, former teenage junkie, whiz-kid poet, basketball legend who went from Lower East Side asphalt courts to hardwood-floored gyms and prep-school uniforms at Trinity, seemed to be about two minutes away from full-fledged rock-'n'-roll stardom.

Everybody was talking about the republication of his teenage-junkie book, *The Basketball Diaries*, and about his new album, *Catholic Boy*, and that great teenage flame-out song, "People Who Died," from that album that had become an underground-radio sensation even before the album came out, and that had people in radio tip sheets, like the influential *FMQB Album Report*, saying radio things like "'People Who Died' is phono-matic sales stirring rock" and "best new candidate for hot phones."

A young poet whom Ted Berrigan called "the first truly new American poet," who was signed to Rolling Stones Records, and whose New York rock debut, last July at Trax, featured no less



Redeemed through pain: His sources are Catholicism, posh schooling, and cold turkey.

a guest guitarist than senior Rolling Stone Keith Richards (who has a nodding acquaintance himself with the ins and outs of junk) was one hot number indeed.

There can be little doubt that Carroll the poet is a far subtler and sharper persona than Carroll the rock-'n'-roll lyricist. Carroll the poet could write (in *Living at the Movies*), "I sleep on a tar roof/scream my songs into lazy floods of stars . . . a white powder paddles through blood and heart/and/the sounds return/pure and easy . . . this city is on my side," in the poem "Fragment: Little N.Y. Ode." With "Sure . . ." he wrote a devastatingly funny junkie's apologia: "I got/a syringe/I use it/to baste/my 'tiny turkey." Carroll the rock lyricist doesn't come close to such economy of wit.

BUT LOLA FROM BUDAPEST knew none of this. Tom Snyder, who is big on bringing up his Catholic upbringing at any opportunity, picked up on *Catholic Boy* right away and decided that Carroll might pep up an otherwise moribund moment or two.

At the rehearsal before the show's taping, Carroll had been noticeably nervous and had broken out in cold sores. The four Secret Service agents who accompanied Maureen Reagan kept giving him the cold eye, and they pounced on him the first time he went into the makeup room.

Carroll, a rangy, gaunt-faced, six-foot-two character with pale-red hair, nervously paced the sound stage, lighting one cigarette after another. "I'll have a hard time," he said to me, "trying to pretend that it's Snyder and not Danny Aykroyd I'm talking to. I'll just try to steer him away from drug ques-

tions and just quote from *The Basketball Diaries*: 'Junk is just another nine-to-five gig in the end, only the hours are a bit more inclined toward shadows.'"

It turned out Snyder was easy on Carroll and went light on the drug subject and didn't even mention the *Diaries* passages where Carroll spoke of hustling gay men. Snyder talked about Catholicism and patent-leather shoes that reflect up girls' dresses. Carroll was still nervous and kept digging one too white leather jazz shoe's toe into the red carpet of Snyder's little round turntable of a set, just a couple of feet from where Snyder's brown teddy bear sits beside his chair, always just out of range of the camera.

Lola from Budapest liked Carroll at first. "He is beautiful," she leaned over and whispered to me. "He will do well in future. He has sense of humor and is ambitious. Good-looking boy."

Her smile faded a bit as Carroll talked about how he was a product of Catholicism, "redeemed through pain, not through joy," and how Christ's forced march with the Cross and subsequent crucifixion were "just like punk rock."

Snyder assumed his deep-think mantle and asked if Carroll perhaps mightn't think that some people—but certainly not Snyder—mightn't think that such a statement bordered on blasphemy.

Carroll ground his toe into the carpet: "No." He said that since he was six years old he had been looking for a vision, a sign from Christ, but had never gotten close, even that time he invited Christ home to watch the World Series with him and Christ was a no-show, and that he figured that the reason Christ put him on permanent hold was that Christ spent 24 hours a day giving a buzz to all these born-

againers who seem to have a direct celestial hookup. That got a studio laugh, and it also generated several hundred unhappy letters from members of the Moral Majority around the country.

Carroll talked about how basketball had been his great equalizer when he was a disadvantaged kid and how he could go one-on-one against any rich suburban kid and whip him and how he had gotten onto heroin when he was deathly afraid of marijuana because at that time, in the early sixties, everybody said that marijuana was addictive. He squeezed in his nine-to-five quote and then got up and sang "Wicked Gravity," a song "about transcending."

Snyder had been refraining from smoking on camera because it was a national anti-smoking holiday or something, and he raced over to the corner of the studio and lit up a cigarette. Lola from Budapest did not respond to "Wicked Gravity" as enthusiastically as did the chains-and-leather gang, although, it must be said, many normally dressed people who wore cloth seemed to like hearing Carroll's rather emotionless delivery of lyrics about doing it all night without touching, and seemed to like the Jim Carroll Band's cheerful full-speed-ahead attack, very reminiscent of the Stones or Faces on a sloppy good-time night when the sound of rock 'n' roll is a slightly menacing, don't-tread-on-me metallic anthem of the young and free. The music, loose and raucous, had a commitment to the rock-'n'-roll tradition of exuberance and rebellion; the words were biting and cold and totally impersonal, as detached as a commuter who is late for the 6:23 and finds his path blocked by a blathering Moonie. Maybe Carroll planned it that way and maybe he

didn't, but the combination of fire and ice—hardly new, anyway, in any kind of performance and especially so in the arena of rock poetry—provides a conveniently articulated urban sensibility for the urban inarticulate who went into cold storage after Jim Morrison died and who thought Patti Smith was a pale substitute and hid out downtown during disco and Barry Manilow. The no-morals majority of the hard-core New York rock fanatics doesn't mind at all if Jim Carroll sounds a little bit like Lou Reed or David Bowie, just so it's still the cold-steel-and-concrete sound of the city, a sound that provides a personal, alien soundtrack for those who don't fit in—or who like to think they don't fit in.

When Jim Carroll finished "Wicked Gravity," Lola from Budapest's facial expressions seemed to indicate that she was working up a re-evaluation of Jim Carroll. "What is your opinion?" she asked me. I said I thought that the jury was still out and that I liked some of what he did. Lola from Budapest grasped my hand and shook her head: "He has no emotions. He is schizophrenic. Maybe drug addict. Maybe homosexual." I couldn't bring myself to tell her that those were precisely the qualities required to become a rock-'n'-roll star circa 1981 in this town. The requirements are stricter than the college boards.

I WAS VULNERABLE, BUT THEY SAID I was mesmerizing," Jim Carroll was telling me as we walked east on 54th and crossed Broadway after his band rehearsed one afternoon. "Mesmerizing. That was the word. That's what got me into rock 'n' roll."

I remembered a chilling moment from his Ritz show. I was sitting at a balcony table, 30 feet above the true-grit fans packed in front of the stage, where Carroll was half-chanting and half-singing "Nothing is true" ("everything is permitted"), which strikes me as half-baked Nietzsche, but you never know how many people actually chart their lives according to pop-music lyrics. I felt a sudden pressure on my shoulder and turned to see a pale young man climbing up on my table. "Excuse me," he said, "I need to jump off your table here." "Well, why?" I asked, trying to stall him before he or someone he might land on got hurt badly. "That's what he wants me to do," the young man said, gesturing toward the stage. "Well," I said, grabbing his ankle, "he told me he doesn't want you to kill yourself." The young man smiled vacantly and climbed down off the table and patted me on the head: "You're a good man." He wandered off, singing "Everything is permitted."

I didn't even mention that to Carroll as we walked along 54th, the main reason being that he was already nervous enough about even existing as a semi-public person without taking on the burden of the psychos who turn up in the wake of any known face. He'd been visibly shaken by the press of autograph hounds who had trapped him in the NBC lobby after the Snyder show. He's still getting his street-smarts back, he laughed. One of the first things that happened to him when he moved back to New York from California, where he'd gone to kick smack and methadone, was that he got mugged right outside Radio City and the mugger wasn't satisfied with Carroll's \$300 and came back and broke his nose for him.

HE'S NOT QUITE THE SAME cocky young poet who was published as a teenager in *The Paris Review* and had people like Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs cheering from his corner and had Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman as friends. And he had been one of the best basketball players in the city and had been a poor Irish kid who got a scholarship to Trinity and had been a pioneer long-hair-doper-cool-guy-athlete who excited some people because he could dunk a ball backward and excited other people because he could dunk a ball backward while stoned and then write about it. Even though he was a "scholarship guy," a poor kid thrown in with New York's rich, he fit in well at Trinity. He was a certified star basketball player and he was quick-witted enough to bluff his way through classes and he had a street swagger and he took out glamour girls who went to the Professional Children's School, little foxes who were already in show business. Some of his classmates remember that he was as swift a bullshit artist as there was. They still recall that he once wore a fake arm cast to school to get out of baseball or football practice—especially football, because everybody could tell right off that he detested physical contact. And while it says in *The Basketball Diaries* that the book was written between his twelfth and fifteenth years, some of his classmates say it was more or less rewritten and polished between Carroll's fourteenth and eighteenth birthdays, and closer to the eighteenth than the fourteenth.

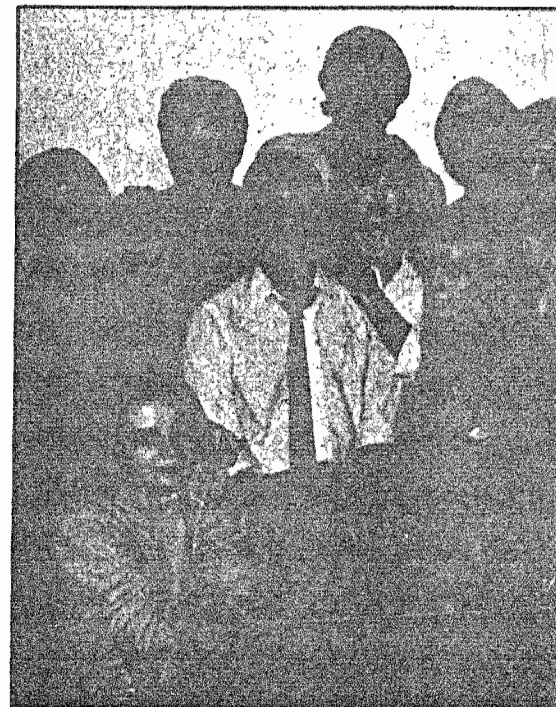
Jim Carroll and I turned up Sixth Avenue and stopped in O'Neals' for a Coke for him and a beer for me. He is off drugs and drinks only an occasional shot of tequila. He still has a rancid memory of the time he had his stomach pumped out after chugging most of a fifth of scotch and then passing out in

the snow up in Inwood Park and almost losing parts of his fingers from the frostbite. What a drag for a young romantic. To this day, the smell of scotch turns his stomach, he said as we slid into a booth at O'Neals'. He lit a cigarette with jerky movements and talked in nervous spurts, looking around the room at nothing in particular.

Why, I asked, has he not identified Trinity in the *Diaries*, calling it instead a "posh private school."

"I thought I'd get sued," he laughed, and he loosened up a little. "As it is, they're all thrilled by it at Trinity. I still go up and see Frank Smith, my Latin teacher."

AFTER TRINITY—CARROLL didn't bother to attend his graduation ceremonies—he did a month of college before dropping out to be a star teenage poet and druggie. Artist Larry Rivers hired him as an assistant,



Carroll, his band, and friends: "You need

and Carroll stretched canvases and sharpened pencils at Rivers's 14th Street studio and lived in Rivers's 91st Street apartment. "I was only getting off three or four times a day [on heroin]," Carroll said, "just to stay high. I wasn't into doing it for a lifestyle, just to write and to nod. At night, I'd go out and hustle, make some money. I wound up just staying up there and baby-sitting Larry's kids. Which was great. I'd walk them down to the zoo and meet my connection at the fountain on 72nd near the boat-house. On a rainy day, I'd meet him at the Museum of Natural History, because he loved those big panoramas.

“...He'd gone out to California to kick smack and methadone, and as soon as he got back he got mugged right outside of Radio City...”

I think heroin makes you like things like that, miniature little landscapes. Junkies tidy up always. So, if you kept a system like I did—I didn't have a partner or old lady to hassle with—I kept everything very neat.

“I loved Larry,” he said after a sip of his Coke and a fresh cigarette. “If there was anybody from around that art scene who had an influence on me, it was Larry. This was a real cool dude. I even started to imitate his walk. He's the only guy who ever had that effect on me in the art world. Frank O'Hara might have—if I'd known him. I followed Frank O'Hara one day when I was first into poetry, followed him home from the Museum of Modern Art, because I knew he worked there. This

the gay guys, which were plentiful, you know, in the older-generation school of New York poets. But I'm sure with Frank I would have wound up in bed. He was an idol.”

Carroll cupped his cigarette in his hand and sipped at his Coke and looked off at nothing. “I was the young protégé,” he finally continued. “They really took me in the way they didn't take in younger poets who came along later. I came along at the right time.”

WHAT HAPPENED, I WONDERED, that made him flee New York for Northern California in 1974 when he thought he was nominated for a Pulitzer?

Carroll looked me straight in the eye. “I knew I was gonna kill myself if I stayed in New York. I was f---ing around too much. See, I was on methadone then and I was starting to buy extra bottles because when you're on a certain dose you can shoot as much heroin as you want and not feel it. The theory of methadone in New York is to keep them on as high a dose as allowed 'cause then you can't feel junk even when you shoot it and you can work; it just gets you straight. You feel it when you're first on the program, but after a month you don't even feel it. But the methadone program in Marin County was like a college dormitory; they really helped you get off junk. It was still real tough. Methadone's an insidious drug, infinitely harder to get off than junk. I kicked junk cold fifteen times; the withdrawal symptoms peak after about three days and last about eight days.

“But methadone is a month of physical torment at the very least. You can't get any sleep to escape it. I hate even thinking about it. But at any rate, I came out of it. And then I just became a recluse. I'd take my twelve-mile hike with my dogs up along the coast.”

Carroll jumped up to get a fresh pack of smokes. I suddenly noticed that the happy-hour crowd around us was leaning in very close to listen.

When Carroll got back I asked why he thought he should go into rock 'n' roll.

He smiled. “When I'd do readings, people would say, ‘Mick Jagger reading poetry—you should do rock 'n' roll.’ I said, ‘No way, man.’ I respected people's singing voices then. Forget it. Even when Patti [Smith] did it. Her lyrics were better than her poems, to

me. But Patti wasn't as accepted and didn't have a reputation in the poetry scene like I did. I was supposed to read with her the first night she did it with music, with Lenny [Kaye] playing guitar behind her, but I got busted in Rye, New York, because I was visiting a friend who had some hash. So I was in jail.

“But my connection with New York in my recluse period was reading about CBGB and punk rock and Television and Blondie and Talking Heads, and one by one they all got signed up by record companies and came out to San Francisco to play the Old Waldorf. I checked them all out. Then Patti came out, and I did that show down in San Diego with her. I got this band together. Rosemary [his next-door neighbor, whom he married] put it in my head about doing this. First, just writing songs, and then thinking, ‘Well, what the hell, I don't need vocal proficiency. I could write songs to my own vocal limitations.’

“So I started to think, ‘Rock 'n' roll!’ When I did the shows with Patti, I saw that it could be done. It was incredible fun, and it was so intense and scary and beautiful at the same time. It was remarkable. What a feeling. It's still that way, you know. I think it's just a natural extension of my work, of the images. By making images just obscure enough to be made personal, I have the street imagery, but you have to have that kind of mythology built into it, because that's what kids understand. I don't like to deal with any subject matter straight out, you know. So, I'm pretty talked out.”

HE TURNED AWAY SILENTLY to the wall while I dealt with the check.

“Henry Miller,” he said. “Henry Miller's study of Rimbaud, which is really a study of Henry Miller, was the big factor for me going into rock—that was it. That whole thing about getting a heart quality out of work rather than just the intellectual quality. A good poet works on both. Miller spoke about the inner register and how a good poet has to affect virtual illiterates as well as affecting people through the intellect, and I figured so many poets are just writing for other poets today. It's all intellectual concrete minimal poetry. There's a school of poets in San Francisco called Language Poets. What the f---k does that mean?”

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was like two months before he died. I followed him in a taxi and he got off at Astor Place and I followed him up to 10th Street and Broadway, right across from Grace Church—you know Poe's poem ‘The Bells’ was written when he was living near there, about the bells in that steeple. But, to me, it's the place where Frank O'Hara's last apartment was. I followed him to his house. I'm sure he didn't notice me. But of course I always got told by poets that ‘Frank would have loved you.’ He seduced every guy on the scene—all the straight guys too. I made it a point never to sleep with any guys in the poetry scene, except, you know,