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# Silliman's Blog

A weblog focused on contemporary poetry and poetics.

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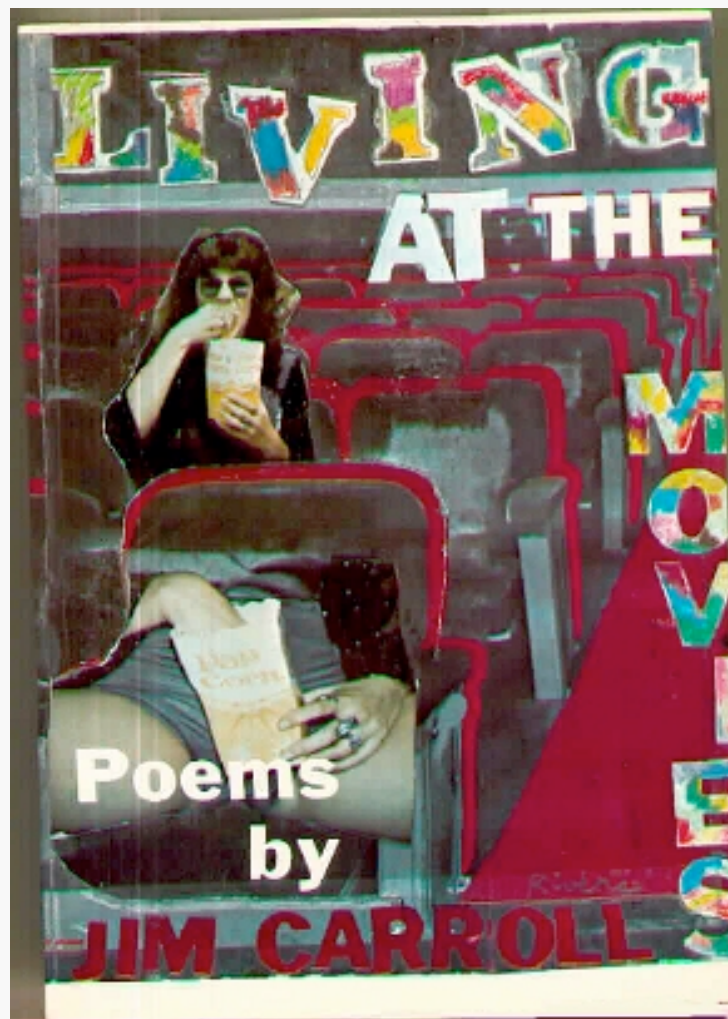
silliman AT gmail DOT com

## Books in Print

### Poetry

The Alphabet

Thursday, September 17, 2009



I only met  
Kurt Cobain twice,

and he was  
certainly not

a people  
person.

Jim Carroll, 1998

If Jim Carroll had any impression of me, it was as a drinking buddy of his one-time Bolinas housemate, Jim Gustafson. This was in the early 1970s, after Gustafson had followed Andrei Codrescu to California from Detroit. There was a period where Jim was working in the City in a car wash down on Lombard & after work he & I would work our way through the bars between his job & the Union Street scene. We'd walk past the location where the Gallery Six reading had taken place in 1955, but neither of us were ever entirely certain of just which building it was. Invariably, we'd eat at one of the establishments & there was often live music to be heard (once even Bonnie Raitt!). After we got tired, I'd head home, walking directly up the Fillmore Street hill & then down Sacramento. Gustafson used to aim to find some woman with a car who would drive him back across the Golden Gate, preferably to her place. I would marvel at how often he was successful at this.

Gustafson invariably described Carroll as fragile, but two readings of his that I still remember hardly felt that way to me. The first was at Intersection, back when the arts program was still in the unused Methodist facility just down from the Art Institute in North Beach. Readings were in the basement & the place really had the Church coffee house vibe to it, as the audience sat at tables that crowded up against what passed for a stage. I have no memory of just whom Jim was reading with, but he was going first & reading works that would find their way into *Living at the Movies*. He mentioned heroin in the introduction to one poem and someone maybe two tables back said loudly, "You were a junky for an an hour & a half, just to get methadone." Without another word or a second's hesitation, Carroll leapt from the stage over the table this rube was at & had to be pulled off the fellow, who may have been quite a bit bigger than Carroll but was caught entirely off-guard. At least some basketball skills never go away, or so it seemed. When they were separated, the heckler was unceremoniously 86'd. After the upended tables were turned back upright & people had retaken their seats, Carroll continued reading as if nothing ever happened.

The other reading was a few years later at Cody's in Berkeley. Whoever was the emcee that night introduced Jim by holding up a copy of the Grossman edition of *Living at the Movies*, noting the cover by Larry Rivers (this may also have been on the cover of the edition Michael Wolfe brought out from Tombuctou *before* the Grossman "first edition" in '73). "This is a book you buy for the cover, but keep for the poems," the emcee said – I wish I could remember if that was Richard Silberg or not – while Carroll's eyes widened & nostrils flared. After the reading, Carroll was still fuming. "I could punch him out. How could he say that about my book?" But no theatrics (or worse) ensued.

So Gustafson's sense of Jim Carroll wasn't quite my own, tho I could see why Gustafson felt protective of him. While there was an undercurrent of anger, what I saw most clearly was Carroll's shyness. And there was no doubt that Carroll always *looked* frail, regardless of his athletic abilities. But what he was not, as I'd been warned earlier, was a naïf created rather out of whole cloth by Ted Berrigan. *Living at the Movies* was a decent book that fit right in with the range of 3<sup>rd</sup> generation New York School poetry. And if Patti Smith's "I met him in 1970, and already he was pretty much universally recognized as the best poet of his generation" mostly makes you wonder what tiny universe she was inhabiting, Carroll himself had none of that hubris. His interviews – with Rolling Stone, Back

Beat or the rest of the rather amazing collection you can find on Cassie Carter's Catholic Boy website – are free of pretension. He's frank about his limitations (and those of others as well), and clear that his influences place him in a context headed up by Ashbery & O'Hara more than the Beat scene he's sometimes associated with just because that's what rock & roll understands as poetry.

I lost touch with Carroll once Gustafson & I stopped hanging out together, well before Carroll pulled the band together and briefly became famous – a rep that ramped up even further once a movie was made of the *Diaries*. For all of Carroll's celebrity, the one major anthology that actually includes some of his work is Paul Hoover's *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, where Carroll is listed as having been born in 1951. Wikipedia until recently had him being born in 1950, before switching to what is apparently correct: 1949. David Shankbone's accounts of Carroll fumbling around aimlessly at the Brooklyn Book Festival two years ago (here & here) suggest that recent years haven't necessarily been as triumphant as some of this week's obit-speak have made them sound. The only event listed in Catholic Boy's roster of tour dates (meticulous for the past 14 years) after the Brooklyn fiasco was the 2008 Poetry Project New Year's Marathon.

Here are some links worth following further:

Lewis MacAdams on Jim Carroll

Tom Clark on Jim Carroll

Michael Lally on Jim Carroll

Organic Trains, 1967

Rolling Stone obit

Washington Post obit

LA Times obit

CNN obit

Labels: Jim Carroll

Link - 9 comments 

### comments:

Ron,

Appreciated this. Yes, we're "Living at the Movies" this week--back rows, spilt popcorn, shuffling feet maybe, but, thanks to Jim, attending ...

My own sense is that maybe the Image of the Public Figure blinded many to the fact that it was all built on that old fashioned thing, the work. Jim did indeed work hard at his work, the writing (which after all did necessarily precede the Public Figure). It did not come easy for him, as it does not to anyone. But I don't have to tell you that. A master must master the palabras. And the proof of success in the

case of Jim's work obviously lies in the complexity and power and reach of its impact.

By the by, as to "generations" and "ranks" and "schools" ( "3rd generation New York School"/"influences place him in a context"), while in the present case I don't disagree with your hierarchies and locations, I continue to fear that moving for the sake of speed and convenience away from a poet's work to "place" her/him in the contexts of "affiliations", "influence", etc., is not of all that much use ever, tends to just switch the captions so as to prevent anything appearing singular, and that goes double when that singular One is still warm in her/his grave. Let's not so much worry about establishing a "position" within a "constellation" of "orbits" as try to gaze for a moment attentively and clearly into the thing itself. Just a question of Method. Some heavenly bodies give off enough light to block out ambient chunks.

As to the report you picked up re. Jim's fumbling and crumbling in late years, maybe best to reserve comment, again, until one has experienced one's own later years in a not-crumbling fashion. It's a hard climb up Cemetery Hill, not easy to do it gracefully, few make it unscathed.

Finally, to sort out my contribution to this general recollection of Jim, it came in two parts, the deeper part, the memoir, is here:

### [Jim Carroll](#)

And also I've commemorated the funeral service (and the "Catholic boy") here:

### [Jim Carroll: Pax Aeternum](#)

I know the restless searchlight will be sweeping ever onward to the next "person of interest", as they say in law enforcement, but for me this one is a Stopped page, like yours the day that Jim photo would not download and everything stopped stock still for a while... perhaps a bit of parable in that.

# posted by  TC : September 17, 2009

Wikipedia still hasn't corrected the date that I suggested was more accurate. I met Carroll when I first started going to St. Marks Poetry Project events and got the impression he was my age then (1948). When I saw him again in Bolinas, he was a year younger than I was. Unless Catholic elementary schools in the 1950s started at age five, he was more likely to be born in 1949 than later or earlier.

I get the impression that a number of people protected Carroll quite a lot.

He's also another example of a rather sad tendency in our culture to confuse genius with agony. Patti Smith is the better musician; and I'd say that while Carroll was an impressive enough young poet, he either

never completely get over the damage done by the drugs or the damage that lead to the drugs, or never completely got over using (I saw a performance of his in Albany in the early 1980s where he was obviously on something and another friend thought he was on drugs at a Poetry Project event in NYC).

# posted by  Rebecca : September 17, 2009

One of many great pages on Cassie Carter's Jim Carroll website concerns Carroll's mid-1990's poem, "Valentine," in which all words were taken from a letter from a magazine (titled *Valentine*) soliciting contributions.

The web page links to the actual letter Carroll received, with his marks on it for the words he used to make his poem.

The poem itself stirs, and I love seeing how it came to be. The URL is:

<http://www.catholicboy.com/valentine.php>

# posted by  Steven Fama : September 17, 2009

WOW.

It seems as though your postmortem "appreciations" have a decided Forrest Gump aspect to them – we see Teddy Kennedy, Jim Carroll, and then next to them, somehow, lurking close to the shadows, Ron Silliman.

Not exactly Forrest Gump, though – more like Forrest Gump with a little shiv in his hand.

I am puzzled by why you would chose to berate someone like Jim Carroll, mere hours after his death. To be fair, you do mention his 'shyness' (an attribute? I don't know) and that he would have "none of that hurbis" (that 'hubris' being the now-famous quote by Patti Smith –"the best poet of his generation") but you don't leave it at that– you have to add "makes you wonder what tiny universe she was inhabiting" and that (again, a compliment?) Carroll was "frank about his limitations" that "only one major anthology actually includes some of his work."

Finally, and perhaps sweetest of all, "recent years haven't necessarily been as triumphant as some of this week's obit-speak have made them sound."

No sh•t, Ron. One look at the recent photograph posted at your site (and others) clearly indicates a lot of pain and suffering in that man, self-inflicted or not. But your catty assessment of his writing and its value comes off as whiney payback aimed at the hip guy in high school who always got the girl, or perhaps better yet – the one chosen first for the basketball team, by an author who was not always blessed by the same good fortunes.

And for the record, I am not a huge JC fan. I do find his willingness to be honest in his expression – whether it is in his work or jumping


over a table to contend with a heckler – pretty refreshing in the present climate of poetic secret handshakes.

More importantly, I do not think he deserves this treatment by anyone, especially at this time.

I am not certain why you think that he might.

I for one would have enjoyed just a photograph and a poem a whole lot more than this.

And then just a little silence.

# posted by  Arthur Q. Bryan : September 17, 2009

full moon  
difficulty  
w the silence

I don't/didn't know his work.. his poems or his music..I may have been in same spot at same time in Manhattan 1970 or so....

lots of rock n roll lots of heroin lots of  
a certain culture that is now romanticized via university and "Walt Disney"

I find that

all art all poetry all music ain't fictive:

it's autobiographical..

don't know why  
there's  
no sun up  
in the sky  
stormy weather ...

or why I yet give a shit!

# posted by  Ed Baker : September 17, 2009

Ron, thank for this piece of writing. Your combination of personal recollections of Carroll with thoughts on his work and the changing contexts in which it's been read form a meaningful tribute to the man. I really can't see how anyone could think it disrespectful.

Some people seem to take great pleasure in taking offense at your posts, with very little reason. Seems a bit silly to me.

# posted by  Cy : September 17, 2009


There is a balance between your posting, Ron, and Tom's comments that gives a simultaneous depth and perspective that is welcome.

Thanks ... to you both and most of all to Jim.

It may have been a bumpy ride, but it was a great one.

# posted by  Issa's Untidy Hut : September 19, 2009

Unstated irony of your post: Carroll survived Gustafson (wonderful poet, a handful of books published, no Wikipedia page) by 13 years. Gustafson born 1949, died 1996. (It took some time of web-searching to find that.) Google books has an essay by Codrescu on Gustafson, which says that Gustafson died of a brain aneurysm.

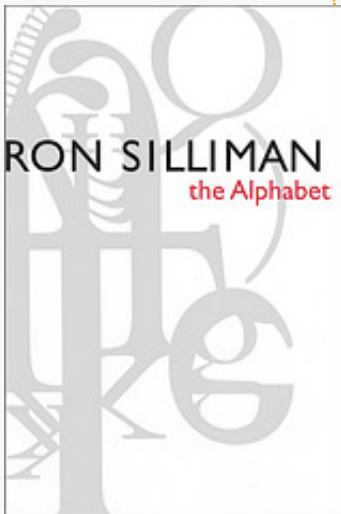
# posted by  John : September 20, 2009

Yes, I knew of Jim's death when it occurred. Tragic indeed.

# posted by  Ron : September 20, 2009

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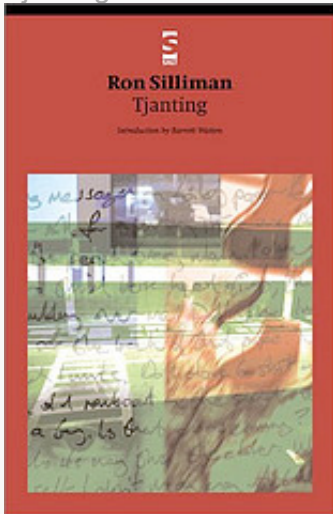
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The Age of Huts (compleat)



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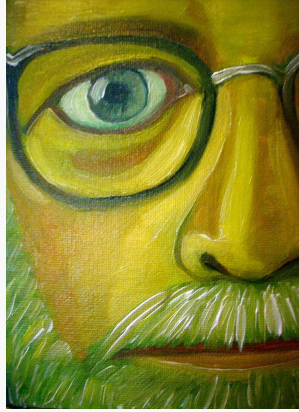
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**Ron Silliman** has written and edited over 30 books to date. Silliman was the 2006 Poet Laureate of the Blogosphere, a 2003 Literary Fellow of the National Endowment for the Arts and was a 2002 Fellow of the Pennsylvania Arts Council as well as a Pew Fellow in the Arts in 1998. He lives in Chester County, Pennsylvania, with his wife and two sons, and works as a market analyst in the computer industry.

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