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Farewell to the Poet With the Snarl and Prickly Pen

Allan Ginsberg wrote in "Howl" that he "saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix"

One of the greatest poets of his generation, Jim Carroll, who died of a heart attack on Friday in New York City, was a clear heir to the Beats. It's there on every teen drug addiction, urban squalor, backroom sex, sports and rim-shot-dripping page of his most famous work "The Basketball Diaries."

No less than Jack Kerouac himself praised the then aspiring writer's manuscript with the assessment that "at 13 years of age, Jim Carroll writes better prose than 89 percent of the novelists working today."

You can hang out with Andy Warhol, Robert Mapplethorpe, Sam Shepard and Patti Smith, like Carroll did, but when Jack Kerouac passes you the torch, you know you're truly on fire.

After several appearances of his verse in the likes of the Paris Review and several books of poetry, "The Basketball Diaries" was published to acclaim and instant mythology in 1978. As much a tale out of its own punk time, the book punctured an underbelly of American life that oozed out a very different telling of high school glory days than most.

Also, in our era of repenting and marketable Augusten Burroughs, lying James Frey and grim Tinseltown drenched Jerry Stahl, the closing of Carroll's book still

cuts through the crap to hit a main vein of truth and consequence.

"Totally zonked, and all the dope scraped or sniffed clean from the tiny cellophane bags. Four days of temporary death gone by, no more bread," "The Basketball Diaries" reads. "Nice June day out today, lots of people probably graduating. I can see the Cloisters with its million in medieval art out the bedroom window. I got to go in and puke. I just want to be pure."

Razor thin, usually in leather, his red hair falling across his face, purity may or may not have come for Carroll, who spent years struggling with his drug addiction, but with "The Basketball Diaries," modern immortality certainly did.

It was no wonder that Carroll caught the attention of Rolling Stone guitarist and junkie icon Keith Richards who got the author a record deal and some further swagger. His first album, 1980's "Catholic Boy," became a hit in all the right circles for the title track, "It's Too Late" and the infectious and disarmingly effortless "People Who Died," where Carroll documented the loves and loss of too many friends who spent too much time getting high in low places.

If Patti Smith was the Punk Poetess, Jim Carroll became the Poet with a snarl and a prickly pen. The follow up, 1982's "Dry Dreams," had nowhere near the impact of the debut but it was no less the distinct voice of an American artist.

Carroll's band broke up in the mid-1980s but the near-rock star writer, with "The Basketball Diaries'" staying-clean sequel "Forced Entries," a new career in spoken word and more verse and collaboration, continued to finesse his talent and craft.

For some in my generation that came of age in 1980s, Carroll was the real deal. He had all of the back alley and basement posturing of the Velvet Underground, Iggy Pop and the Rolling Stones, but he never lost his mind like Ginsberg's crew. With a face like a glacier, Carroll never even lost his cool and, unlike way too many would be poets and accidental icons, he endured.

It was easy to die. Jim Carroll, a multi-tasker before the terrible term was ubiquitous, worked hard, through his own thick and thin, at living.

When the Hollywood version of "The Basketball Diaries" finally came out, after years of options and rumors, in 1995 the best that could be said of it was that it helped launch the career of Leonardo DiCaprio and it put some cash in Carroll's pocket.

That's what we know

But as we mourn a man who never stopped believing in the power of the word and of redemption, one can only hope that some of Leo's fans decided to read the actual book after seeing the movie. And that then they read 1973's "Living at the Movies" and then more of Carroll's cannon.

Because, for me and I know for others, that is the real power of art. The power to live and dream in the lives and through the eyes of others. To see the unseen, hear the unheard and find a bit of the unknown around the corner from the every day.

That is the power of Jim Carroll. He didn't have an easy time of it but he never lost his mind. He did burn though, so very bright.

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