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Remembering Jim Carroll

He was a basketball legend, a poet, a musician, and most of all, a friend. As he would say, 'I miss you more than all the others.'

By Lewis MacAdams

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Jim Carroll, who died Friday of a heart attack at 60 in Manhattan, was a legend by the time he was 13. That's when the poet Ted Berrigan took him to visit Jack Kerouac, who took a look at some of Jim's writing and said, "Jim Carroll writes better prose than 89% of the novelists working today."

But I was drawn at least as much by his basketball legend: a kid who grew up on the Lower East Side -- Jim said his dad had tended bar for bootlegger Dutch Schultz -- who moved with his family to Inwood at the northern tip of Manhattan when the neighborhood was still Irish, got a scholarship to the elite Trinity School, went on to become the only white kid to make all-city, then turned down myriad college scholarships to return to the Lower East Side to shoot junk and pursue the cruel gods of poetry.

He self-published his first book, "Organic Trains," in 1967, when he was still a teenager. It was profoundly influenced by Frank O'Hara, the elegant, witty and tough poet whose seemingly off-handed brilliance celebrated an impossibly sophisticated Manhattan; and John Ashbery; but the deeper monster was Arthur Rimbaud, who illumined the nightmarish corners of the quotidian world.

Everything Jim wrote was laced with a wise-ass sense of humor. His earliest work was championed by a coterie of young poets connected to the Poetry Project on New York's Lower East Side, including Anne Waldman, Lewis Warsh, Larry Fagin, Michael Brownstein and Bill Berkson.

All of us loved Jim's work and were even slightly humbled by it. He was so damn good. He was so damn good looking, a tall redhead with pale, almost transparent skin, and a confident, athletic grace. It took a while for it to sink in that he was often controlled by heroin demons that would follow him for the rest of his life.

Jim lived everywhere and nowhere then. Sometimes he crashed at the Chelsea Hotel, sometimes he worked as painter Larry Rivers' assistant and stayed with him. He was a frequent visitor to Andy Warhol's original Factory, a manufacturing loft on East 47th Street.

I was at graduate school in Buffalo in 1968, hanging out in the student union, when a local asked if I knew where he could score. We were soon on the New York State Thruway, heading to meet Jim. To my eternal shame, I didn't understand what Jim was going through: struggling to kick at the same time he wanted this guy's money so he could score. As usual, heroin won. I can still see Jim that night, his big sneakers slapping the concrete as he raced down a dark street looking for his man.

A guardian angel for Jim then was Patti Smith, who worked at Scribner's bookshop on Fifth Avenue. One day I was there when Jim OD'd. Patti kept him awake, walking him around until he came to.

In 1970, Warsh's Angel Hair Books published Jim's second mimeographed book of poems, "4 Ups and 1 Down." Jim was 20 now, and the work was unassailable, the voice completely his own. "It's true, / you are always too near and I am everything / that comes moaning free and wet / through the lips of our lovely grind."

In 1973, Jim came west to Bolinas, a small town north of San Francisco that was a hotbed of poets. Jim could rarely be found among them. I remember him holed up in a decrepit wood cabin or walking by himself across the mesa wrapped in a serape. It was in Bolinas that he met a tall, beautiful blond, Rosemary Klemfuss, who would later become his wife, and after their marriage was over, a lifetime

friend and protector.

Bolinas publisher Michael Wolfe's Tombouctou Press would publish "The Basketball Diaries," the hilarious, scabrous, miraculous excerpts from the journals Jim kept from the ages of 12 to 15.

Also at that time, Smith persuaded him to join her onstage to read some poems. Soon he started singing with a Bolinas band. Onstage, looking into the ancient distance, Jim was mesmerizing. Keith Richards helped the newly named Jim Carroll Band get a deal with Atlantic. The first release was 1980's "Catholic Boy" ("redeemed through pain. Not through joy"). Annie Leibovitz's cover photo of Jim with his arms around his parents gave permanent lie to the idea that he was some sort of punk. He wrote lyrics with Rancid and the Blue Öyster Cult, but also with Boz Scaggs.

He was at every turn an elegant artist, gifted with extreme moral clarity. He was a true poet, that most thrilling and rare of human aspirations. He died sitting at his desk working.

Though "Catholic Boy" sold relatively few copies, a song on the album, "People Who Died" -- its title taken from a Berrigan poem -- became a classic, especially in Leonardo DiCaprio's humorless portrayal in the movie version of "The Basketball Diaries." A celebration of the violent deaths of a slew of childhood friends, I can remember in the early 1980s working late at WET Magazine in Venice, blasting music to keep awake. When "People Who Died" came on, the entire crew began leaping around the office naming the names, screaming the chorus: "They were all my friends -- and they *died!*"

Jim was naturally a recluse, who never remarried after his divorce, who rarely if ever lived with anyone. One of the last things he told me was how amazed he was that he could afford an apartment in a doorman building.

The names and the way they met their fates in "People Who Died" include kids thrown from the roof of an apartment house, committed suicide "on 26 reds and a bottle of wine," snuffed for snitching on some bikers, took a bullet in Vietnam, "OD'd on Drano the night that she was wed," but the ultimate tribute was for his friend who "got slit in the jugular vein." "Eddie, I miss you more than all the others," Jim would sing, sometimes raising a fist. "And I salute you brother." It's a chorus many are singing today.

MacAdams is a Los Angeles author and poet.

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