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My dirty life and times.

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Redeemed Through Pain

For a bridge and tunnel kid in 1980 New York...check that...for a Catholic bridge and tunnel kid in 1980 New York, Jim Carroll's Catholic Boy was canonical, a bass-charged liturgy of the word - if the word descended from the Beats and Allen Ginsberg, its bearer transfigured into a poetry-pouting punk rocker with an angry hit record. The record's cover hangs framed in my basement rec room, near the Rock Band video game set-up and my 14-year-old's drum kit. Nearly 30 years ago, it was always in the stack on the turntable and the Jim Carroll Band's shows at the Ritz always brought out the punk royalty, from Patti Smith to Stiv Bators to Richard Hell. At least in my (somewhat gauze-wrapped) memory, they were real events and Carroll - who couldn't really sing per se, but still knew how to sell the story - was treated like an archbishop.

And based on that one record, it didn't seem too much to bend and kiss the ring. It was great, from the iconic People Who Died to the title track (which I quoted in a [Lenten post](#) earlier this year).

I was a Catholic boy
Redeemed through pain
And not through joy

Carroll died of a heart attack at 60 last week, and my friend [Gerry Howard](#) has a moving tribute in Slate (via Jim Wolcott):

Cognoscenti of downtown culture knew Jim as a literary prodigy who was publishing his poems and diaries in the Paris Review in his teens. He was a fully paid-up member of New York's hip aristocracy, Lou Reed's peer, Patti Smith's lover, Allen Ginsberg's acolyte, Robert Smithson's friend, permanently welcome in the Valhalla of Max's Kansas City's back room. And I had the pleasure of publishing most of his work when I was an editor at Penguin in the '80s.

Tall, slim, athletic, pale, and spectral as many ex-junkies are, Jim was a vivid presence in any setting. He was a classic and now vanishing New York type: the smart (and smartass) Irish kid with style, street savvy, and whatever the Gaelic word for chutzpah is. The line of succession runs from Jimmy Cagney and Jimmy Walker through Emmett Grogan and Al McGuire. In the '30s they would have cast him immediately as a Dead End Kid—he certainly had the unreconstructed accent for the part, an urban rasp that was sweet music to my aboriginal ears. He came up athletically in an era when New York produced the best basketball players in the country—and a lot of them were white. Despite playing his high-school ball for a Manhattan prep school, Jim could more than hold his own on some of the toughest playgrounds in the city against the likes of Lew Alcindor and Dean "the Dream" Meminger. But his street-kid affect never quite hid his essentially generous and vulnerable nature and his poetic soul.

I love that line about the Dead End Kids and Carroll's place in their ranks. Though a literary darling as welcome in the back room of Max's as any of the downtown cognoscenti, Carroll's work covered a different New York entirely. Still, his death does mark yet another great name leaving a city that used to house voices that stirred many a poetic soul. As [Wolcott](#) says:

"With his passing, another link to the Beats and the St. Marks poetry scene and the Warhol Factory joins the posthumous fraternity of the starry Kerouac night."

Here's a video of the Jim Carroll Band hammering through People Who Died on Friday's (h/t [Dennis Perrin](#)):