

NEW YORK ROCKER, WRITER Jim Carroll

A phone call to Jim Carroll in New York. I thought I was well prepared. I knew both his albums, had read *The Basketball Diaries* and had seen his band perform a stunning concert in San Francisco a year or so ago. I had a page full of questions to ask. What I wasn't prepared for was that Carroll should run away with the whole interview after a couple of questions, leaving me hanging on the phone, pretty much a passive audience. Oh I'd tried to butt in a number of times but his reedy drawl just kept on. I began by asking why he'd changed guitarists in the band.

"I guess they wanted to do something else because we didn't really come to terms anymore. I really like the guitarist I have now — Paul Sanchez. And Lenny Kaye played on one song on *Dry Dreams* but he's been touring with us regularly now and I think he's going to play on this new album we're starting in about a month. Patti (Smith, Carroll's long-time friend and one-time lover, for whom Kaye has always played lead guitar) is pretty much retired now, for a while at least. She's having a child in August."

I ask whether it ever concerns him that parts of his audiences may be more interested in checking out the survivor of his famous drug-wrecked youth rather than in his present work.

"I don't worry about that. It probably happened a lot during the first tour but by now those people must've satisfied their curiosity about that. Now if they come it's because they know my music. In fact I've never really thought about it until just now and you asking. Whatever their reasons, even if it was just some perverse interest in how dilapidated this Carroll person could be. To me, I just think of that character in *The Basketball Diaries* practically in the third person now, it's so much a part of the past. I mean by the time I began to break out with the music in San Francisco and stuff I'd been through this long period of living in the country in California by myself, kind of a recluse after living in New York all my life. That character seems so distant but I guess *The Basketball Diaries* will stay attached to me. I mean it's a book that's very accessible to rock and roll kids. A lot of the kids I've met say it's the only book they've read since books they had to read in school. It seems a lot of kids who go to rock concerts don't read much you know."

"But then kids in New York, a lot of them say they could have written the book themselves. It's their kind of life; it's more

routine to them, especially with drugs being more accessible these days. The only trouble for me is when some kid comes up to me and thinks I haven't changed at all since then. They ask if I want to do some smack and expect me to whip out a bottle of cleaning fluid or something and say, 'Yeah, let's get high.' Most kids are really nice though, just bubbling over with enthusiasm."

Carroll goes on to explain how so many from his rock and roll audience are now turning up at poetry readings he's given. He is very enthusiastic about this and seems both delighted and awed that his new fame has enabled him to do readings with writers who were his own mentors. Writers such as Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs.

"Sometimes it's very disappointing to meet people whose work you really enjoy and finding out that they're assholes. But Ginsberg was never a disappointment. Burroughs was anything but a disappointment. He was all I expected and more. He was like this very cynical, carnival barker type guy. We had an incredible time together in Amsterdam. These people were my idols when I was young."

He begins to talk about the fact that many poets are now combining their work with other media. I keep trying to get a word in to ask about Laurie Anderson but Carroll is in full flight.

"You know Ed Sanders who was with the Fugs (a 60s rock-outrage group) he's doing this far out thing with a synthesizer. He backs himself with what he calls 'the talking tie'. It's this little tie with buttons on it that's transistorized to a synthesizer while he sings. It's fantastic. He has an incredible Smokey Robinson-like falsetto."

He continues on about a documentary that's recently been made featuring some of the figures in this poetry resurgence, a film which, along with the Americans also includes England's John Cooper Clarke. I suggest to Carroll that the notion (which he seems to share with the likes of Ginsberg) of the poet as society's warning device is a very romantic one.

"There's this song on *Dry Dreams* called 'Barricades'. It's the most straight-out political piece I've ever written. I tried within it to have kind of evocative images like:

Trees grow from dead nun's lungs.

"It's dealing with the murder of those nuns in El Salvador but someone who doesn't know that can just connect on the grotesque beauty of the image. It's evocative but not sloganistic. Though I do say straight-out:

I'm not gonna die for Standard Oil

I.B.M. I wouldn't die for them

G.E. not me.

"It's a very good song to do live. It really gets the audience going. 'Some of the Clash songs which are very political to me I really like and admire but they've been a little bit too sloganistic you know. I've always tried to deal not in any sloganeering sense, not with political anecdotes but with the human spirit. The thing I want to do with songs is to make the images open enough for anyone to interpret, connect with in their own way. So you don't need intellectual sophistication to get behind the words I write. I try to write using my head and my heart. I don't want just a stiff intellectual approach or just boring emotional stream-of-consciousness shit. I do want my words to come to people through their own experience the same sort of abstract way that music affects them. At least I hope it happens that way."

"You see I switch moods on this album a lot more. 'Barricades' is very straight-out whereas others are written in character and stuff. Whereas my first album had a lot of accessible rage on it and people caught on to that. Songs like 'Catholic Boy' and 'People Who Died' made it easier for people. Like when I'm doing those songs on stage, if it's really going right I'd be so into it that afterwards I couldn't remember what sort of moves I'd made on stage or anything. People have sometimes used the word 'mesmerising' about when things go right for me on stage."

"On this album my moods were different, my life was different. I wanted to write more in character and not be so hung up with myself. Some stuff is still personal though, like 'Rooms'. And there's 'Lorraine' about a person who kicked junk by getting into rock and roll. But the moods tend to be more pensive or abstract in some way. When I wrote the album I was going through a period of learning and wondering at a lot of things, of just throwing up my hands. I was feeling a lot of anxiety about the past and about the future. I mean even with 'Barricades' — the barricades are everywhere. With the word barriers like the militaristic junk coming out of the White House. I didn't picture the Falklands barricades when I wrote it but they were there by the time the album came out."

"I'm really happy with that album for what it was. It was a moody album and I think those songs were perfectly valid for that. The only regret is that maybe lyrically it was a little too dense for the music. I think on the next album it'll be more

spacious, let the music cook, more straight rock and roll. I think I've woken up out of the malady or whatever it was I was in."

He has stopped momentarily, so I get in a quick one. Does he go about writing song lyrics any differently from writing poetry?

"I was rereading *Living At The Movies* (his 1974 Pulitzer-nominated book of poems) the other night. It made me conscious of two things: that, for the most part, I like it very much again. I'd also like some rock writers to read it because it shows the difference between my poetry and my lyrics. I have two manuscripts, two books of poems ready that I wrote during the period I was in California and it made me feel that I want to get these books out."

I reply that *Living At The Movies* was out of print last time I tried.

"Well Penguin have just republished it over here and kids are reading it. But I guess it won't be as accessible to them as *The Basketball Diaries*."

I ask about the rumours that the *Diaries* are to be made into a film.

"Oh yeah. I sold the movie rights. They want me to work on the music for it and since it's 63 to 66 it would be kind of period music you know. I'd like to work at maybe Dion and the Belmonts-type lyrics and get Willie DeVille to write the music. I've only suggested it to him sort of off-hand so far."

"They want this kid Matt Dillon to play the role. Do you know him?"

I don't.

"He's sort of an American teen idol like Shaun Cassidy or someone. He's always on the cover of *16* magazine and stuff. I met with him. I think he'd be very good. He's better than the parts he's had. But Dillon's manager made it very clear he didn't want his kid's image tarnished by having scenes with him shooting up and stuff. I just thought to myself that they're going to make this into bullshit. But maybe they won't take up the options anyway."

"Whether they'll make the movie totally innocuous or not I don't know. I don't really care. To me the work was the book. My work ended there. If they make a terrific movie faithful to the book that's fine. If they make some really antiseptic version then that's too bad. It would really piss me off for about a day. Either way it would be a chance to get enough money not to worry for a while so I can just write and stuff. I don't really want that person that was me up on the screen anyway."

"Hey, have you seen *E.T.* yet? (Steven Spielberg's new film.) Oh it's great and they use 'People Who Died' in there. It's on the radio when these kids are playing *Dungeons and Dragons*. *E.T.* comes along and chooses this house. (Laughs.) Maybe he was drawn by the song. It made me feel really good because I'm a great movie fan and it's the most wonderful movie I've seen in a long time. I get a credit at the end and everything."

"I mean if they make a movie of my book I hope it comes about in a good way but I got this great pleasure from just having a song, no matter how small a bit it was, in *E.T.* you know. I still look very starry-eyed at movies."

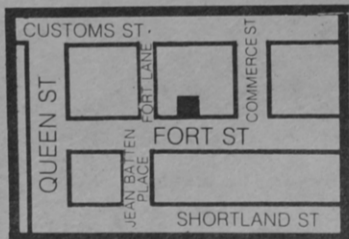
"But it's all been really a fantasy to me. Sometimes it's really hard to believe that it's all happening. For such a long time I just let *The Basketball Diaries* sit and then when it came out it exceeded all my expectations so much. And now with all this rock and roll as well. I mean five years ago the highlight of my day was walking my dog down to the post office in the country to get the mail."

Peter Thompson

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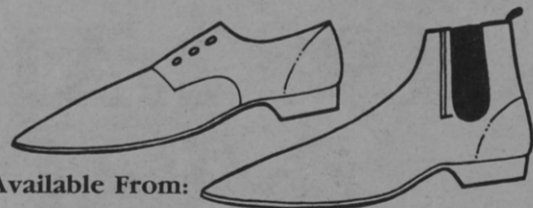
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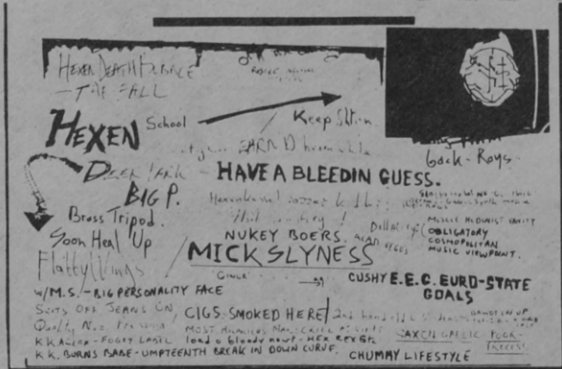
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