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*I Went Down to St. James Infirmary*, by Robert W. Harwood

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Like 2007's *Chasing The Rising Sun* by Ted Anthony and earlier books on *Danny Boy* and *Amazing Grace*, Robert Harwood's *I went down to St. James Infirmary* is the story of a single song. While at first glance that may seem a meagre subject for an entire book it depends entirely on the song and on the skill of the writer. Like its predecessors in those other books, *St. James Infirmary* is a song with a marvellously deep and varied history and, as such, is a perfect candidate for this kind of treatment.

The song is deeply entrenched in early jazz and blues recordings, having predecessors in *Dyin' Crapshooter's Blues*, *Gambler's Blues* and, like *House of The Rising Sun*, may even be traced back to earlier British ballads like *The Unfortunate Rake* and the connection to a British St. James Hospital may go back as early as 1532.

Robert Harwood is also the kind of meticulous researcher that can vividly recreate the earlier historical periods where much of the tale is set. While he may not have the breadth of poetic, far-reaching insight, and emotional scope of a Ted Anthony, Harwood more than makes up for it in dogged persistence and precise attention to detail. He's the kind of researcher who will spend weeks searching through period census records or ship's passenger lists to confirm an immigrant's family surname, as he does with music publisher, promoter and impresario Irving Mills, who managed and was associated with Louis Armstrong's, Cab Calloway's and Duke Ellington's careers and whose copyrighting of the song in 1929 resulted in controversy and a major court case.

Mills is only one of the colourful characters we meet in this highly readable history, however. Harwood also gives us the goods on many others who sang, recorded or arranged versions of the song. We meet bluesman Blind Willie McTell, who Bob Dylan immortalized in his namesake ballad, the more obscure songwriter, pianist and arranger, Porter Grainger, Carl "Deacon" Moore whose

career spanned the dance orchestras of the 1920's transformed into being a radio disc jockey in the 1940's and included film and television appearances in the 1950's and 60's, and Don Redman, a multi-instrumentalist and musical arranger for Fletcher Henderson. Rounding out the cast are minor players like Frank Melrose, a pianist who died a violent death on the streets of Chicago on a Labour day weekend, orchestra leader Phil Baxter, who also had a hit with *Ding Dong Daddy From Dumas*, minstrel show performer Thomas "Daddy" Rice, whose song *Jump Jim Crow* went down in history as the namesake for racist segregation laws, and Emmett Miller, who Nick Tosches covered at length in his book *Where Dead Voices Gather*.

It's a fascinating study and anyone who has an interest in any of the historical figures mentioned above, or in the way songs evolve and are passed along through history will find it an utterly compelling read. This critic confesses to a weakness for this type of book and devoured it with relish over a few days, though it will retain a favourite place in his library and remain a reference for years to come. - by Barry Hammond.

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