

Five years of research led to 'St. James' book

Jon Fear

Jazz and blues fans everywhere know *St. James Infirmary*, a song that had its heyday in the 1920s and 1930s but is still popular today.

Robert Harwood of Waterloo got curious about the song's origins and recently wrote and published a book about it he titled, *I Went Down to St. James Infirmary*.

There's also a subtitle:

Investigations in the shadowy world of early jazz-blues in the company of Blind Willie McTell, Louis Armstrong, Don Redman, Irving Mills, Carl Moore, and a host of others, and where did this dang song come from anyway?

Below, Harwood answers ques-

tions about the book:

Q. Do you recall the first time you heard *St. James Infirmary*?

A. Some years ago I was playing a new CD of jazz vocals and Lou Rawls' voice came through the speakers singing *St. James Infirmary*. This was the first time I'd heard the song and it had



Bob Harwood an immediate effect.

I shot up from my chair, exclaiming, "That's (the Bob Dylan song) *Blind Willie McTell*!" There was nobody else in the room. The Dylan lyrics, "I'm standing by the window of the old St. James Hotel



/ and I know no one can sing the blues like Blind Willie McTell," seemed like part of a puzzle — and that was the start of it.

Q. To use your own words, where did this dang song come from anyway?

A. There is something mythical about *St. James Infirmary*. It seems to have always been here, although in its present state it is perhaps a hundred years old. The late American trombonist Jack Teagarden called it "the oldest blues song I know," but it's also jazz, country, pop . . . it even migrated to modern classical music. A number of people claimed authorship in the early days, but when blues singer Mattie Hite released her interpretation in 1930, the composer credit was to "Everybody" — and that's about as accurate as it gets.

Q. What surprised you most about the song as you studied its history and evolution?

A. The story of *St. James Infirmary* has so many surprises, it's hard to know where to start answering this question. Although it's a traditional song with roots deep in the American soil, in 1929

it became a commercial commodity. Probably the most surprising thing is that it had the resiliency to survive its commercialization and to retain its power and its integrity into the 21st century.

Q. Has doing all the research and writing the book made the song any less special for you?

A. I have spent five years researching this book — which is actually my second book about the song. In the months after I had finished the first book, which I called *A Rake's Progress*, I discovered that much of what I had written was incorrect. That book had followed the well-trodden path, but as I looked more closely at the "facts," the tale started to unravel. Taking nothing on assumption, I re-investigated and wrote this book, which in part is an attempt to correct the record — to place the song in a more accurate historical context. It also uncovers much that was unknown until now.

As a result of writing the book, the allure of *St. James Infirmary* has become more intense for me. I continue to play it on my guitar, and I enjoy listening to its many variations. If I had to point the contemporary listener to an introductory version of the song, it would probably be Van Morrison from his CD, *What's Wrong With This Picture?* As for earlier versions, one of my favourites is the wild, mostly scat/instrumental 1930 recording by Alphonso Trent and his Orchestra.

I Went Down to St. James Infirmary is available online at www.stjamesinfirmary.ca or save on shipping and handling by contacting the author directly at rharwood@rogers.com

In brief . . .

CHILDREN

Too Many Toys

David Shannon

(Scholastic, \$18.99 hardcover)

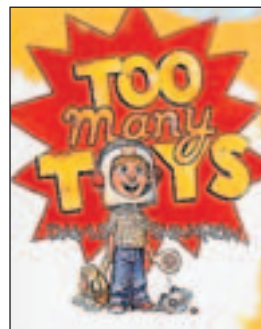
They're spilling out of his closet, stuffed under his bed and cluttering the floor of every room in the house. Clearly, David has too many toys.

And while he loves them all, his parents don't. They are becoming household hazards. First his dad steps on an abandoned Lego block. Then his mom trips over a piece of train track while carrying the laundry.

Mom decides it's time for a toy sort — and David's not a happy camper. Together, they comb the house, haggling over every toy that they find. In the end, there's a cardboard box full of discards set to go out. But in David's mind, an empty cardboard box may be the best toy of all.

U.S. author David Shannon offers a playful take on the importance of childhood imagination and its ability to entertain.

—Brenda Hoerle



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