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ST. JAMES INFIRMARY



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?

Robert W. Harwood



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SONG LYRIC PERMISSIONS

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For my father, Jeffrey Harwood



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INTRODUCTION



“THIS IS THE OLDEST BLUES SONG I KNOW.” So said jazz great Jack Teagarden before a 1941 performance of “St. James Infirmary.” The first time I heard the song, it sounded utterly contemporary.

It was about 2001. I was alone in my apartment, reading while listening to a CD I’d recently bought titled *The Finest in Jazz Vocalists*. Lou Rawls’ voice came through the speakers singing “St. James Infirmary.” I had been a Lou Rawls fan in my teenage years and so I paid closer attention. Rawls began with a mournful preamble:

When will I ever stop moaning?
When will I ever smile?

And then the band picked up the tempo and launched into the main body of the song:

I went down to St. James Infirmary
I heard my baby groan
I felt so broken hearted
She used to be my own.

It was then that I shot out of my chair and exclaimed excitedly, “That’s ‘Blind Willie McTell!’” I can’t explain my exhilaration today, but back then it brought to mind, with a jolt, the Bob Dylan song of that name. It’s not that this Rawls melody was identical to the one Dylan used, but there were similarities. For instance, both songs use the same basic chords—Em, Am, B7 (although Dylan avoided adhering to the three-chord cycle). Hundreds of songs are based on those guitar chords, but it was also in the pulse or the phrasing that the similarities revealed themselves. (I have played these two songs to friends, who often don’t hear the resemblance.)

Dylan recorded his song “Blind Willie McTell” in the spring of 1983 for his *Infidels* album, which was released in November of that year. “Blind Willie McTell” did not appear on the album, however, and neither did several other songs from those New York sessions. In fact, “McTell” appeared on no official Dylan recording (bootleg records were another matter) until 1991, when Columbia compiled a 3-CD set of alternate versions and previously unreleased material called *The Bootleg Series, Volumes 1–3*. This is where I first heard Dylan’s “Blind Willie McTell,” and it was an immediate standout.

“Blind Willie McTell” is a magnificent piece of song craft that touches on, among other things, the slave trade in the United States. But the poetry and the music of the song carry us into broader terrain. Dylan accomplishes this not through conventional narrative, however, but through a series of vignettes, a cascade of images that, coupled with a compelling melody, conveys a landscape of conflict and despair. Its chorus summons the musician of the title: “Nobody can sing the blues like Blind Willie McTell.” Asked why he had omitted the song from his album, Dylan said he didn’t think he had recorded it right. He didn’t perform the song in concert until August 5, 1997, at Montreal’s Du Maurier Stadium, fourteen years after recording it in the studio.

Standing there in my apartment, listening to Lou Rawls, I remembered Dylan’s words near the end of “Blind Willie McTell”—“I’m gazing out the window of the St. James Hotel.” Here, in a song melodically reminiscent of “St. James Infirmary,” Dylan seemed to be paying homage. I found that puzzling and I made up my mind to find out more about “St. James Infirmary.” Little did I know that this was the beginning of a five-year journey.

The history of the song would prove itself to be a puzzle with oddly shaped and missing pieces. In late 2004 I felt I had amassed enough information to publish a small book on the subject called *A Rake's Progress*. I also found, at about this time, an interesting article about "St. James Infirmary." Written by author and "St. James" enthusiast Rob Walker, it was one of a series of letters he had written to friends from his home (at that time) in New Orleans.¹ This was both the most comprehensive and the best-written overview of the song that I had encountered, an engaging reflection and exploration. "Sad song about a man going to see the corpse of his lover," Walker wrote, "and will she go to heaven or will she go to hell ... and whatever the answer, she 'ain't never gonna find another man like me.' Wow. That's beautiful and wrong at the same time." This letter, which he titled simply "St. James Infirmary," puzzled over the identities of Moore and Baxter, two musicians central to the first recording of the song. I had addressed that question myself in *A Rake's Progress* and wrote Rob a letter to pursue it further. We have been corresponding ever since. Rob's letters were published in 2005. In the chapter "St. James Infirmary" he acknowledged my contribution to the Moore-Baxter solution, and referred to me as a "fellow 'St. James' obsessive."

Obsessive? I didn't think of myself as obsessive. But I must have been. For although I had published a small book about the song, I refused to let it go. Too much of the puzzle remained unfinished—too many questions without answers.

It wasn't long before I found that much of *A Rake's Progress* was incorrect. That book had been based largely upon common assumptions about "St. James Infirmary," assumptions that I had more or less treated as facts. Over the next four years I discovered much that has not, as far as I am aware, appeared anywhere else. And so you have, in *I Went Down to St. James Infirmary*, a new history of the song.

This is a book about "St. James Infirmary," its origins and its evolution as one of the most popular, successful, and influential songs in American popular music. It is also a book about the times it sprang out of and the music business in the 1920s and '30s (and, in many ways, today also) and about song ownership.

Chapter 1 discusses the business of music in the early twentieth century, the profitability of adapting old songs for recordings, and the

authorship of the classic blues song “Dyin’ Crapshooter’s Blues.” Chapter 2 looks critically at the generally accepted connection between “St. James Infirmary” and “The Unfortunate Rake.”

The following five chapters follow “St. James Infirmary” through its various incarnations between 1927 and 1931—from its first recording in 1927 through to the controversy that surrounded its copyright. But in doing so, the book looks even further into the past. There is some evidence that “St. James Infirmary” was in the repertoire of minstrel shows long before it was recorded, and so in these pages we encounter the nineteenth-century black-face performers Daddy Rice and Dan Emmett.

Throughout I have included many anecdotes about the artists and businessmen associated with “St. James Infirmary,” including fairly extensive biographical coverage of a few people—Carl Moore and Irving Mills, for example—who were central to its development as a popular song. The book looks at the people and the times in which “St. James Infirmary” achieved its initial popularity and asks, again and again, what happens to a traditional song when it becomes merchandise.

Note

- 1 Rob Walker, *Letters from New Orleans* (New Orleans: Garrett County Press, 2005), 188.

I
DYIN'
CRAPSHOOTER'S
BLUES*


Dyin' Crapshooter's Blues (Porter Grainger)

Jim Johnson gambled night and day
With crooked cards and dice
A sinful man without a soul
His heart was cold as ice
He said I feel so doggone blue
I want to die today
The devil told me what to do
But I ain't had my say
I want you all to know
The way I want to go

I want eight crapshooters for my pallbearers
And let them all be dressed in black
Nine men going to the graveyard
And only eight men coming back
I want a jazz band on my coffin
Chorus girl on my hearse
And don't say one good word about me
Because my life's been a doggone curse

Send poker players to the graveyard
 To dig my grave with the ace of spades
 Have police in my funeral march
 While the warden leads the parade
 I want the judge who jailed me fourteen times
 To put a pair of dice in my shoes
 Then let a deck of cards be my tombstone
 I've got the dyin' crapshooter's blues

Folks, I ain't never been on the level
 Now I'm dying and going to the devil
 My head's aching, my heart's thumping
 I'm going down below bouncing and a jumping
 Don't be standing around me crying
 I want everybody to Charleston while I'm dying
 One foot up and a toenail dragging
 Throw me in that hoodoo wagon
 Oh Mr. Devil, stand aside
 I've got the dyin' crapshooter's blues

IT MIGHT SEEM STRANGE to begin an exploration of “St. James Infirmary” with a chapter titled “Dyin’ Crapshooter’s Blues.” After all, “Crapshooter’s Blues” was first recorded in 1940, thirteen years after Fess Williams and His Royal Flush Orchestra recorded “Gambler’s Blues”—the title by which, in 1927, “St. James Infirmary” was known—and twelve years after Louis Armstrong and His Savoy Ballroom Five recorded the tune under the title “St. James Infirmary.” But just as the songs that went before led to “St. James Infirmary” as we hear it today, so did “St. James Infirmary” spawn children of its own. One of the most revered of these descendants is Blind Willie McTell’s “Dyin’ Crapshooter’s Blues.” In some ways the latter song illustrates the sorts of difficulties that arose when popular music became a commodity; as we shall see, the artist credited with its composition is not the artist who wrote the song. In this respect, “Dyin’ Crapshooter’s Blues” shares ethical as well as musical entanglements with “St. James Infirmary.”

“St. James Infirmary” appeared on the cusp of radical changes in

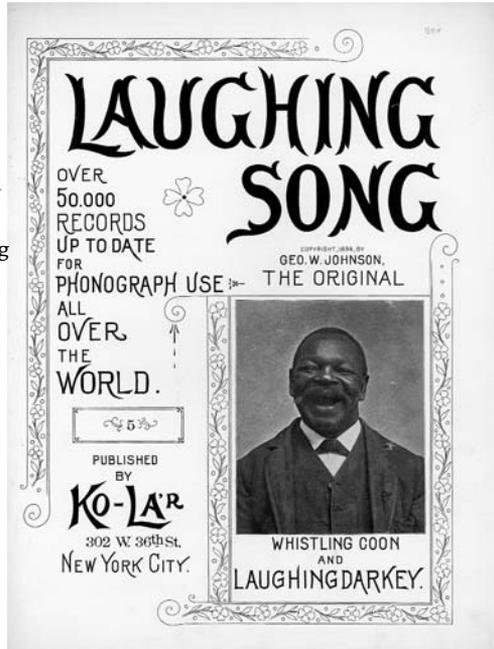
the music business. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sheet music publishers paid entertainers to perform their songs on stage in order to stimulate sales. Even as late as 1920 there were no public radio stations. Record players were just becoming an affordable luxury—even though, at twenty-five dollars for Victor Talking Machine Company's low-priced Victrola, many bought them through instalment plans.

The music industry had grown substantially over the previous thirty years. In 1890 recorded music was a curiosity, primarily experienced via coin-operated machines in parks, county fairs, train stations—places where people were likely to gather in large numbers. Insert the flexible ear tubes, drop a nickel in the coin slot, and you might, depending upon which cylinder was in the machine, hear a Strauss waltz or a popular song of the day—"Listen to the Mocking Bird," perhaps, or "Down Went McGinty." You might hear George W. Johnson's "The Whistling Coon," or "The Laughing Song." Johnson was the first black to be recorded, and one of the first vocalists to appear on a recording. "The Laughing Song" would have drawn lines of curious listeners to the nickel booths. Though the lyrics are silly (and demeaning) and the melody rudimentary, each verse is punctuated by a chorus of hearty laughter that even today is infectious. No doubt many listeners in the 1890s would have burst into laughter themselves, to the puzzlement and curiosity of passers-by. It might well have been worth a nickel to find out what the fuss was about.

At this time phonograph records were wax cylinders. They could not be mass-produced. However, as many as five records could be made at a time by having the recording horn of each machine turned toward the singer's mouth. The recording horn focused the sounds onto a diaphragm. As the diaphragm vibrated, a stylus carved impressions into the wax layer of the cylinder. In order to maintain a consistent recording volume, the singer could turn his head neither left nor right. Even the sound of a hand moving across clothes would be picked up by the sensitive stylus, and at the end of each song the singer would have to remain stock-still, with breath held, until the recording had ceased.

Listening to a recording of "The Laughing Song" today one can't help but be amazed by the seeming spontaneity and sincerity of John-

George Johnson sometimes sang the the “Laughing Song” fifty or more times a day in the recording studio to meet listeners’ demands. (“Laughing Song,” Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Duke University.)



son’s laughter. He recorded for a fee of twenty cents per 2-minute performance, and by 1894 he apparently made and sold over 25,000 copies of “The Whistling Coon” and “The Laughing Song” (sometimes singing the same song fifty or more times a day in the recording studio). As Tim Brooks noted in *Lost Sounds*, “To appreciate what an incredible total this was for 1894, it is necessary to understand the limited scope of the industry in the early 1890s. There were very few phonographs in private homes, so nearly all the 25,000 had to have been sold to exhibitors and coin-slot operators who played them over and over again for a fascinated, paying public. They must have worn out a lot of copies of these two songs.”¹

It wasn’t long before Johnson faced some stiff competition. Noting the remarkable success of Johnson’s songs, Columbia released the same songs in performances by a white store clerk named John Atlee. There were as yet no copyright laws covering recorded music, and even in these early days competition was cutthroat. With the advent of recording, the music business was becoming big money.

disc, which sold at newsstands for fifteen cents. To prevent competition with their higher-priced releases, the Ellington band adopted a variety of pseudonyms—such as the Ten Black Berries or the Jungle Band ... or, for their March, 1930 Hit-of-the-Week release of “St. James Infirmary,” the Harlem Hot Chocolates.

Musicians such as Martha Copeland and Viola McCoy were second-string players on the music scene. The companies did not invest large sums in their recordings. The instrumental arrangements were spare and the sound engineering merely adequate. The recording is a little muddy. Copeland's and McCoy's “Dyin' Crapshooter's Blues” featured only clarinet and piano. The singers are not particularly expressive; it sounds as if they hadn't the time to become familiar with the songs. One can hear this clearly when comparing Victoria Spivey's singing in “Black Snake Blues” to that of Copeland, McCoy, or Henderson. Spivey takes the song leisurely, but with inventive phrasing, sensuality, and depth. The instrumental arrangement is spare, with Spivey on piano and a trumpeter interjecting short phrases. But the sound is well spaced and clear. The Copeland, McCoy, and Henderson versions suffer in comparison. While the arrangements are similarly spare, the instruments are not clearly articulated—the sound is flat and murky. The singing—while at times very good—lacks expression, so the song drifts past the listener without making much of an impression.

A similar comparison can be made between McTell's and the earlier versions of “Dyin' Crapshooter's Blues.” McTell sparkles with personality and wit. Had a major label recorded and promoted it, there's a good chance that he would have had a hit on his hands. “Dyin' Crapshooter's Blues” is an exceptional song. This is not immediately apparent in the 1927 versions where it takes some concentration to hear the song's sad, wry, tragic, and comical elements. McTell's musical and storytelling skills cast a vivid illumination. He breathed life back into the song, revealing a work of art.

Notes

- 1 Tim Brooks, *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890–1919* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 7–8.

- 2 Chris Albertson, *Bessie* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 37.
- 3 Mark Zwonitzer with Charles Hirschberg, *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone? The Carter Family and Their Legacy in American Music* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 84.
- 4 Michael Gray, *Hand Me My Travelin' Shoes: In Search of Blind Willie McTell* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 197.
- 5 Nolan Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 97.
- 6 Nolan Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 98–99.
- 7 Michael Gray, *Hand Me My Travelin' Shoes: In Search of Blind Willie McTell* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 203.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 94.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 211.
- 10 Michael Gray, <http://handmemytravelinshoes.blogspot.com/>.
- 11 Michael Gray, *The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 447.
- 12 Robert W. Harwood, *A Rake's Progress* (Kitchener, ON: Harland Press, 2004), 37.
- 13 Chris Albertson, *Bessie* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 169.
- 14 Smith recorded the songs on February 15 and 16, 1923, at her first sessions for Columbia.
- 15 Much of the census data in this book was found through searches via the excellent genealogy website ancestry.com. Grainger's birthplace was listed on his 1917 draft registration card. I have also referred to census records and ship logs in this and later chapters.
- 16 Albertson, *Bessie*, 170.
- 17 This was Spivey's first release, beginning a long line of remarkable recordings—which included some with a young Bob Dylan on her own Spivey Records.

APPENDIX A
SONG
VARIANTS



BASED UPON SANDBURG'S *American Songbag* and the early recordings of "St. James Infirmary," I have divided the variants of the song into five principal groups:

- 1 "Those Gambler's Blues" (the first version from Sandburg's *The American Songbag*): this was very similar to "Gambler's Blues" recorded by Fess Williams in 1927 and "written" by Carl Moore and Phil Baxter.
- 2 "Those Gambler's Blues" (the second version from Sandburg's *Songbag*). This is notable for its inclusion of the verse:

I may be killed on the ocean
I may be killed by a cannonball
But let me tell you buddy
That a woman was the cause of it all.

- 3 "St. James Infirmary" as recorded by Louis Armstrong in 1928 and copyrighted by Irving Mills in 1929; this became the version we most often associate with the title.
- 4 "St. James Infirmary" as modified by Irving Mills, in which the protagonist shows a more tender side:

I tried to keep from cryin'
 My heart felt just like lead
 She was all I had to live for
 I wished that it was me instead.

He eventually concludes, “I hope we’ll meet again up there.”¹

- 5 The Hokum Boys recorded two versions of the song. The lyrics are reminiscent of the *Songbag* renderings, but each version tells a slightly different story. To me, the songs read like variations of their own, as if the Boys were singing local variants of a traditional song. These variants stand alone, as no other recording uses these lyrics.

THE FOLLOWING CHART lists the twenty-two recordings of “St. James Infirmary” released between 1927 and 1930. I have included only those records manufactured for release in North America (so that, for instance, Spike Hughes’ 1930 recording from London, England is not listed). Similarly, I have tried to avoid listing any of the non-American label numbers. For example, the Harlem Hot Chocolates’ version was also released on the Jazz Collector label in England, but that does not appear in the chart. The evolution—or, if you prefer, devolution—of the song during this period is a purely American affair. As the Gotham/Denton & Haskins suit proclaims, the song was now “an ordinary bit of merchandise” that became, thanks to the efforts of Mills et al., quite profitable. Although it was undoubtedly Armstrong’s recording that brought “St. James Infirmary” into public awareness, it was Mills who kept the momentum going.

The Hokum Boys, Mattie Hite, Gene Austin, and Alex Hill all feature the cannonball verse. In Sandburg’s *Songbag* it is:

I may be killed on the ocean,
 I may be killed by a cannonball,
 But let me tell you, buddy,
 That a woman was the cause of it all.

This verse strikes me as extraneous. It doesn’t make sense, at least not in the context within which it appears. It stands alone, as if

grafted from another song, with no attempt to incorporate it into the story. Gene Austin makes the best job of it by moving the verse to the end of the song, where it serves as a final musing on a fractured state of mind. The verse evokes images of naval warfare and brings to mind the dying comrade in “The Unfortunate Rake” or the later variant “The Young Sailor Cut Down in His Prime.” Still, neither of these songs has a verse remotely like this—and its inclusion is a mystery. One is hard-pressed to imagine a dissolute gambler seeking solace in the navy.

Indeed, only one of the *Songbag* variations makes mention of a gambler. This occurs in the last verse of the first variant. Although both songs retain the title “Those Gambler’s Blues,” absolutely nothing in the second version (aside from the title) give a glimpse of the protagonist’s occupation. We don’t even know if he drinks. In fact, these lyrics betray nothing about the character other than that he might be a sailor and that he is distraught.

Nor does Armstrong’s version overtly mention a gambler (although the Stetson hat, together with the line “so the boys’ll know that I died standing pat,” suggest a man of that profession). In fact, of the twenty-two recordings I have found that were released between 1927 and 1930, only five explicitly mention a gambler. The first of these is, of course, Baxter and Moore’s “Gambler’s Blues.”

The version Moore and Baxter published is the only one that pre-dates (by two years) the printing of Sandburg’s *American Songbag*. The *Songbag* was a prospector’s dream for songwriters and music publishers. But Baxter and Moore undoubtedly based their adaptation on primary sources, upon songs that were extant as part of an aural tradition. Baxter was from Texas, Moore from Arkansas. It’s a good bet (not that I’m a gambling man) that the song they knew came from one (or both) of those states.

Note

- 1 In addition to copyrighting the original song, “Joe Primrose” also copyrighted an arrangement of it on February 11, 1930. Based upon the first copyright, this arrangement is for piano and ukulele. The copyright is for “New matter: New words and music of “Verse” and new words for extra choruses.” The copyright was renewed on February 10, 1958, under the name Irving Mills.

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