

I went down to

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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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.

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**ST. JAMES
INFIRMARY
PART II**


St. James Infirmary (Joe Primrose)

—from the second Primrose copyright (February 11, 1930)
as an arrangement of a pre-existing song

When will I ever stop moanin'?
When will I ever smile?
My baby went away and left me,
She'll be gone a long, long while.
I feel so blue and heartbroken,
What am I living for?
My baby went and left me,
Never to come back no more.

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

I went down to St. James Infirmary,
 All was still as night,
 My gal was on the table,
 Stretched out so pale, so white.
 Tho' she treated me mean and lowdown,
 Somehow I didn't care,
 Now my soul is sick and weary,
 I hope we meet again up there.

I went down to St. James Infirmary,
 Saw my baby there,
 Stretched on a long white table,
 So sweet, so cold, so bare.
 Let 'er go, let 'er go, God bless her,
 Wherever she may be,
 She can look this wide world over,
 She'll never find a sweet man like me.

When I die I want you to dress me
 in straight-laced shoes,
 Box-back coat and a Stetson hat,
 Put a twenty-dollar gold piece on my watch-chain,
 So the boys'll know that I died standing pat.

ONCE IT BECAME CLEAR to Irving and Jack Mills that there was money to be made from song copyrights, they were buying songs from black writers at a great rate and reaping the profits from this newly popular musical form. In the 1920s “blues fever” infected America. It seemed everyone was playing and recording blues songs—and even songs that had no harmonic relationship to the blues were being tagged with bluesy titles.

The music business had become a prospector's potential gold mine. One lucky strike could make a rich man of a pauper. Everywhere there were individuals savvy enough to reap the profits. These profits could be garnered from sales of sheet music (sheet music was still outselling records, though the trend was rapidly reversing), sales of recordings, and residuals received when other performers



As early as 1923 *Billboard* magazine noted that the Mills' catalogue of blues music was "second to none." Irving Mills, about 1925. (Author's collection.)

sold recordings of the copyrighted song. The ideal was to own outright the publishing rights to a hit record. But since nobody could predict which piece of music would capture the public's attention, businessmen were purchasing the rights to masses of songs. Blues singers were brought into the studios and given cash for setting some songs to vinyl. But buying music for cash was not an example of racial discrimination; it didn't matter what colour the performer was. For instance, Tin Pan Alley publishers kept songwriters on staff who received twenty or thirty dollars a song while the company retained all property rights. The copyright law of 1909 permitted this practice of work-for-hire; in response to lawsuits the courts supported the copyright legislation. The same provisions hold true today.

Mills was already becoming a successful music publisher and promoter. Always well dressed, he had a fondness for large cigars and spoke with a melodious voice and a fast tongue. His offices, at 152–154 West 45th Street, were expensively decorated. Musicians hoping to sell songs tramped the byways of Tin Pan Alley. They knew that if no one else would buy their songs, there was a good chance Irv-

ing Mills would. Pianist and band leader Luis Russell said, in conversation with A.H. Lawrence, “When I came to New York in ’27, the first thing I learned was, you could take songs downtown and sell them to the publishers. If nobody was buying there was always Mills; he was good for fifteen or twenty dollars most of the time.”¹ If a songwriter would not sell a song for cash, Mills or one of his office staff might make suggestions to improve it—and then claim co-authorship. Mills took note of the effects of Smith’s “Crazy Blues.” Focusing on “race music”—music written by blacks—he was known to buy, for a few dollars, just about any song that became available. As early as 1923 *Billboard* magazine noted that the Mills’ catalogue of blues music was “second to none.”²

Irving also started writing songs. Later, when he was managing Duke Ellington, Mills shared credit on many Ellington songs: “Caravan,” “In a Sentimental Mood,” “It Don’t Mean a Thing,” “Mood Indigo,” “Sophisticated Lady”: all these bear the Mills name. Here, for me, is where one of the chief difficulties with Mills lies. He was undoubtedly a talented man, with a real ear for music. Nobody worked harder. But it is difficult to imagine Mills making substantial contributions to an Ellington composition. And so one always wonders when listening to a song with Mills’ name on it, how much of the song he actually wrote.

In his book, *The House that George Built*, Wilfred Sheed puts forth the opinion that Mills’ contributions could be significant. Calling him “the unsung songwriter’s helper of the early twenties,”³ Sheed points out that when Hoagy Charmichael arrived in New York with the tune “Stardust” in his pocket, Mills snatched him up. And now “Stardust”:

was in the same hands that had guided [Duke Ellington’s] “Mood Indigo,” and Irving Mills was about to make the same suggestion to Hoagy as to Duke, that they slow their tunes down and get Irving’s house lyricist, Mitchell Parish, to write some dreamy lucrative words. And just like that “Stardust” would prove that Hoagy could actually make money being himself, keep his integrity, and eat his cake too.

Others felt Mills had “cavalierly assumed coauthorship of Ellington compositions that he had no part in creating.”⁴

Mills, I am sure, would assert that his contributions were substantial. In 1981, when he was eighty-seven, Mills spoke about his time with Duke Ellington.⁵ Mills asserted that he was in the studio whenever Ellington was set to record. (Today we'd call it "being in the control booth," but these were technologically simpler times.) Mills supervised the placement of microphones in order to create the right balance. He "thinned out" the arrangements; he felt that Ellington tended to be very dense, and so lost clarity. Or he would get an idea for a melody and Ellington would develop it: "I got a bellyful of melodies, I can give him [Ellington] a phrase of something, and he knows exactly what I mean, what I want."

Mills and Ellington were always busy with tours and concert dates. "It was a very hard life, in the old days. We used to have time not even to leave the theater from early morning until night, to send out to the Variety for corned beef sandwiches, up to here with pickles, and eat in the dressing rooms."⁶ And Mills had commitments with other musicians he was managing, a well as business deals and recording sessions. He managed as many as thirty-six bands concurrently. Pressed for time, they did not have the luxury of musing on a lyric or melody.

Many of the Ellington songs existed first as instrumental pieces. The lyrics for "Mood Indigo" (written by Ellington, Mills, and Barney Bigard, clarinetist in the Ellington band) came together over a number of months. Mills:

Here's what happens: when you're making thirty, forty, fifty numbers a month, you don't have the time to write all the lyrics. So once you get the idea, the story, you turn it over to somebody to write. We used to have Mitchell Parish do that. Mitchell did a lot of that work. That's why we always had three writers on most of the songs. Otherwise it would be very impossible, because sometimes you can waste—you write a song and the bridge, the last punch line, it'll take you a month. Sometimes you just don't get the line. You need somebody. So we always had the third writer in on the song, and you can do them fast."

Mills published his first composition, "Lovesick Blues," in 1922. His co-author was Tin Pan Alley music composer Cliff Friend. Mills

wrote the lyrics—I had little doubt that Mills was indeed the lyricist until I saw the Vocalion record label for the 1922 Jack Shea release: Cliff Friend is listed as sole composer. It is possible that Vocalion made an error, but one does wonder. “Lovesick Blues” first appeared in the 1922 musical *Oooh Ernest!*, sung by the popular vaudeville singer Ann Chandler. The cover for the original sheet music shows a forlorn-looking young woman sitting on an armchair, legs and forearms delicately crossed; a large cameo insert shows Ann Chandler in profile. The publisher, of course, is Jack Mills Inc., and the song was heavily promoted. Later that year both Elsie Clark and Jack Shea recorded it. Shea’s version is a melodramatic vaudeville number sung in the jocular show style of the day. It’s very much a product of the time. Listening to it one can imagine Shea as a kind of Al Jolson imitator, singing the closing lines on bended knee, arms spread beseechingly.

“LOVESICK BLUES” soon found its way to a popular performer on the New York theatre scene, Emmett Miller. Little remembered today, Miller spent most of his life as a black-face minstrel and had developed popular comedy routines based upon his black persona, a character named Slam. Miller’s singing style was widely praised. He had the ability to suddenly jump an octave or more, producing a kind of plaintive yodel—for which he was sometimes billed as “a vocal contortionist.” It was probably a song-plugger who introduced Emmett Miller to “Lovesick Blues,” which became part of his standard repertoire. He first recorded the song in 1925, in Asheville, North Carolina, where he had relocated that year. Okeh Records sent their talent scout Ralph Peer, together with a production crew, to set up their equipment in a top-floor room of the Vanderbilt Hotel. Hopefuls filed through, possibly including the young Jimmie Rodgers. Miller was one of the few songsters who made a great enough impression on Peer to warrant recording. He cut four sides in the Asheville Vanderbilt, including “Lovesick Blues.” Copies of these recordings, once assumed to be lost, survive in private collections.⁷ Emmett Miller was back in the studio three years later, this time with a studio band, the Georgia Crackers, that included Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey. In 1928 and 1929 he recorded a total of thirty-one sides. Many of these



Left: Mills published his first composition, “Lovesick Blues,” in 1922. (Sheet music cover from the authors collection.) Right: a poster featuring Emmett Miller. Miller’s interpretation gave “Lovesick Blues” the shape and texture that, even two decades later, endeared it to the listening public. (Courtesy of Library of Congress LC-USZC4-10004.)

were minstrel skits, but nineteen featured his singing. “Lovesick Blues” was released, but sales were weak. Still, Miller’s interpretation gave “Lovesick Blues” the shape and texture that, two decades later, endeared it to the listening public.

There were many opportunities for Emmett Miller and Jimmie Rodgers to cross paths, especially just before Rodgers made his first recordings for Ralph Peer in August and November 1927. According to the “Take Country Back” website, Miller was performing at Asheville’s Majestic Theater on June 6; Rodgers was hosting a radio program (a job that lasted two weeks), but his show did not broadcast that day. Rodgers had worked in black-face for a time and could have been eager to catch Miller’s performance. Rodgers’ yodelling on his first two recordings is ordinary. It was not until he recorded the first of his blue yodels at the November 30 sessions that he displayed the vocal gymnastics, reminiscent of Miller’s, that would catapult

him to stardom and that he used to such great effect in 1930, when he recorded “Those Gambler’s Blues,” his version of “St. James Infirmary.”

Years later a young Hank Williams also listened to Miller, certainly on records but possibly in a minstrel show. (Miller was still performing in black-face, albeit in increasingly smaller and shabrier venues.) Williams recorded the song in 1949 but had to battle his manager, Fred Rose, in order to get it on wax. At the end of a recording session Williams pulled the song from his guitar case and played it for Rose, who was flabbergasted. His country-music star singing an old Tin Pan Alley song? “That’s the worst damn thing I ever heard,” he swore as he stalked out of the session. But Hank knew better. During stage performances “Lovesick Blues” was greeted with animated applause. As Williams responded to Rose, “You might not like the song, but when it gets so hot that I walk off the stage and throw my hat back on the stage and the hat encores, that’s pretty hot.”⁸ Released on February 11, 1949, the song quickly hit number one on the Billboard charts, where it stayed for sixteen weeks.⁹ This recording of “Lovesick Blues,” complete with Miller-like yodelling, propelled Hank Williams to stardom.

But for Fred Rose there was a legal matter to settle. Williams’ manager had incorrectly attributed the composing credit, and mistakenly thought that he owned the publishing rights. Rex Griffin, an early country singer, had recorded the song in 1929, closely modelled on Emmett Miller’s version. Hank had both this version and Emmett Miller’s in his record collection. This 1949 release was credited to Griffin as composer, with Hank Williams as arranger. Acuff-Rose was listed as the publishing company. When Irving Mills heard about this he sued, and in winning the suit he ensured that the ownership remained with Mills Music. Mills and Rose shared publishing rights for the Hank Williams version of the song (in recognition of the promotional efforts of Rose), but Mills retained full rights to all future versions.¹⁰ The sheet music for this version noted “Words and Music by IRVING MILLS and CLIFF FRIEND. As Arranged and Recorded by HANK WILLIAMS.”

In the depth of the Depression Cliff Friend was nearly penniless and sold all his rights to “Lovesick Blues” to Irving Mills for a reported

five hundred dollars. In 2004 it was one of fifty songs the American Library of Congress added to its National Recording Registry as having significant historical and cultural importance.

“Lovesick Blues” probably made little money for Mills Music at the time. But another early songwriting venture for Irving Mills was more profitable. In 1925 he partnered with Gene Austin and Jimmy McHugh to write “When My Sugar Walks Down the Street.” Austin and McHugh were both members of the Mills office staff. They are examples of Mills’ ability to find top talent. Aside from McHugh and Austin, artists such as Fletcher Henderson, Benny Goodman, Hoagy Carmichael, Glenn Miller, the Dorsey Brothers, and Jack and Charlie Teagarden worked, in one capacity or another, for Irving Mills—usually before they achieved renown. Gene Austin would soon become one of the most popular singers America had ever known. In 1927 he recorded “My Blue Heaven,” the largest-selling record in history before Bing Crosby’s “White Christmas.” In 1930 Austin recorded a song with the all-inclusive title of “St. James Infirmary (Gambler’s Blues).” The writing credit? Joe Primrose, of course!

McHugh would develop into one of the country’s most successful and celebrated songwriters. Before he was twenty McHugh (1894–1969) worked as a rehearsal pianist at the Boston Opera House. He plugged songs for Irving Berlin’s publishing company in Boston before moving to New York in 1921, where he found work with Jack Mills Music Inc. McHugh had been promoted to a manager with the company by the time Gene Austin joined the firm as a songwriter and contact man in 1924. Shortly afterwards, Austin and Mills collaborated on a song titled “Got the Railroad Blues (but I Haven’t Got the Railroad Fare),” which Austin then recorded for Edison Records both on cylinder and 78-r.p.m. disc. This is one of the rare examples of Austin singing in a lowdown blues style. The instrumentation is spare, with piano and a convincing freight-train harmonica. The song is rough and gritty. It sounds as if it had been recorded in an all-night bar while besotted customers sat slumped over their drinks, cigar and cigarette smoke coiling to the ceiling. One could be excused for wondering if Austin and Mills really wrote it or if they “borrowed” it from an itinerant musician. Perhaps it was one of the songs Austin heard among the plantation cotton pickers back home in Louisiana.

There is no indication that this recording made much of an impression on the record buying public.

The compositional collaboration of Austin, McHugh, and Mills on “When My Sugar Walks Down the Street,” recorded in 1925 by the duo of popular singer Aileen Stanley (“The Girl with the Personality”) and Gene Austin, became one of the most successful tunes of the twenties. That same year Mills (lyrics) and McHugh wrote “Everything Is Hotsy Totsy Now.” The song was a smash hit. Mills and McHugh were appearing on radio programs—McHugh playing piano while Mills sang—as the Hotsy Totsy Boys to promote Mills Music. Song-plugging transferred to the radio age. Mills was probably the first to make this transition. Across America everything good would soon be referred to as hotsy-totsy.

Before long McHugh started writing with another Mills employee, Dorothy Fields. Fields is considered the first of the female songwriters and it is a testament to Mills’ nose for talent that, in the early 1920s, he could make this choice regardless of gender. Dorothy called herself “Mills’ \$50-a-night girl,” because she was paid fifty dollars for each lyric she composed. By 1927 she and McHugh were writing songs for stage shows at the Cotton Club. Duke Ellington and His Orchestra (managed by Mills) was the house band. McHugh and Fields left Mills Music by 1930. Both found success in Hollywood and on Broadway and both are now in the Songwriters Hall of Fame

Austin’s departure from Mills Music occurred within a year of “When My Sugar Walks Down the Street.” Mills had sent Austin to select and demonstrate some songs to Victor Records’ most successful singer, Aileen Stanley. She was immediately attracted to “When My Sugar Walks Down the Street” and Austin was invited to provide the vocal accompaniment for her. Impressed with his soft singing style, Victor’s musical director Nat Shilkret offered Austin a hundred dollars a record—with the promise of a contract if they sold well. According to Austin his royalty cheque for his first three months (and first four records) with Victor totalled ninety-six thousand dollars.¹¹ That year saw Austin propelled into a sudden and startling stardom. The new electric recordings allowed artists to sing close to a microphone; freed from the need to project their voices across distance or over the orchestra, they could softly croon their songs. Austin was not the first of the crooners, but he was the first to achieve success with

the style. Later crooners such as Bing Crosby credited Austin with paving the way. But Austin often seemed dissatisfied with the sort of material he was expected to record. His early life, which included a close friendship with a plantation cotton picker named Esau, predisposed him to music popular among blacks. Some 1933 collaborations with Coco Heimal and Candy Candido show off Austin's remarkable skill both as a jazz pianist and blues singer. But narrow repertoire restrictions imposed by Victor meant he was unable to get closer to earthy jazz and blues numbers than sophisticated arrangements of songs like "St. Louis Blues" and "Ain't Misbehavin'." Unlike the 1933 ventures these are delivered in the smooth manner of the crooner. And then there is "St. James Infirmary," where he allowed himself to slip into a more ragged style reminiscent of Jimmie Rodgers (who would record the song six months later).

Gene Austin had a difficult time getting "My Blue Heaven" recorded. He had a personal attachment to the song; Gene's marriage had run into difficulties and, with his wife in St. Louis, expecting to give birth to their first child, Austin felt the song expressed his own hopes for the future. But Victor's musical director, Nat Shilkret, considered it a waste of time and refused to include it in recording sessions. Although Austin finally convinced Shilkret to include it as the final item in a recording session, time ran out and the musicians packed up and left for a performance date.¹²

Austin was not one to give up easily. "I grabbed an old guy with a cello and talked him into standing by. Then I grabbed a song-plugger who could play pretty fair piano. And the third fellow I got was an agent who could whistle—bird calls and that sort of thing. I made the record with those three."¹³ And what a record it was! Although the instrumentation is unusual—even odd—it illustrates the charming and reflective lyric perfectly. The relaxed tempo and the sweet strains of the cello give the song a faint air of melancholy—as if we are caught contemplating an ideal we secretly know we will never achieve:

I'll see a smiling face, a fireplace, a cozy room
A little nest that nestles where the roses bloom
Just Molly and me, and baby makes three
We're happy in my Blue Heaven.

The song resonated with the public, and sales went through the roof. “My Blue Heaven,” an international hit, soon became the best-selling record of all time—and had no contender until Bing Crosby released “White Christmas” fifteen years later. However, tragically, when Austin was finally free to rejoin his wife in St. Louis, with a freshly pressed copy of “My Blue Heaven” under his arm, he received a telegram notifying him of the death of his newborn son.¹⁴

MILLS HAD AN UNCANNY EYE for talent, and he was an astute opportunist. He once bought twenty songs from Fats Waller for a few hundred dollars and later hired Waller to record some of them, meaning Mills received royalties from the sales of both sheet music and records. (Waller had alimony payments to maintain and was in need of cash.)

Thomas “Fats” Waller (1904–43), the son of a truck driver and church organist, was a man of irrepressible good humour and with an intense devotion to alcohol. He learned to play the organ in church and the piano at home. Much of his youth must have been spent in churchly surroundings: his father had a reputation as a lay preacher who would not only lead congregations but preach on New York street corners. As a teenager Fats played the organ in movie theatres to accompany silent movies, much to the distress of his father.

Waller was one of the most talented and naturally creative musicians of the day. Music flew from his fingers like an endless scattering of birds. In 1929 he was approaching the top of his form and, with the lyricist Andy Razaf, wrote the score for a musical revue called *Hot Chocolate*. Many of the songs Mills bought from Fats were written for this revue. *Hot Chocolate* had a successful run on Broadway—219 performances—and featured such luminaries as Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, and Waller himself. (This revue was partly responsible for imprinting Armstrong on the public consciousness.)¹⁵ Armstrong recorded “Black and Blue” (written by Razaf, Waller, and Harry Brooks), one of the songs from the revue, in July 1929. This was two months after the show’s opening at New York’s Connie’s Inn—a venue that, like the Cotton Club, specialized in black performances for white audiences. (The gangster Dutch Schultz was rumoured to be a silent partner.) The song is, for the time, a remarkable state-

ment on the difficulty of being black in a culture of discrimination: “My only sin is in my skin / What did I do / To be so black and blue?” Among the other songs Mills purchased was Waller’s most lasting composition, “Ain’t Misbehavin’,” which remains a pop standard to this day.

Aside from publisher and manager, Mills also acted as a record producer. A kind of Scheherazade of jazz, he developed the practice of recording bands-within-bands—taking some of the musicians from the jazz orchestras and recording them pseudonymously as smaller bands. These bands-within-bands recorded hundreds of sides under names like Irving Mills and His Hotsy Totsy Gang, Mills’ Merry Makers, the Whoopee Makers, Irving Mills and His Modernists, and Goody’s Good Timers (with Mills credited as Goody Goodwin). Sometimes Mills took the vocals, and possibly played violin on a number of tracks.¹⁶ His output was immense. Between 1928 and 1930 Mills was responsible for the release of hundreds of recordings. In fact, during the twenties and thirties, nobody came close to Mills in recorded output—whether it was as a participant or as a session director. And forget the axiom about quantity versus quality—a high percentage of these recordings are stellar works. Of his bands-within-bands sessions, the memberships consisted of some of the finest white musicians available. Many went on to become major names in the history of jazz. Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Hoagy Carmichael, Gene Krupa, Charlie and Jack Teagarden, Benny Goodman, Bix Beiderbecke, and Joe Venuti—all were featured on recordings by the Hotsy Totsy Gang. The Gang recorded “St. James Infirmary” on January 31, 1930, with sixteen-year-old Charlie Teagarden doing the vocals. Two days previously Mills himself, as vocalist Sunny Smith, recorded the song with a group called Ten Black Berries.

Like the names Joe Primrose and Sunny Smith, Ten Black Berries was an alias, one of the names the Duke Ellington Orchestra recorded under. Others included the Jungle Band, the Harlem Footwarmers, and Harlem Hot Chocolates, each for different record labels. This was standard practice. Much is made, in biographical sketches, of the many pseudonyms that Blind Willie McTell recorded under—Georgia Bill, Barrelhouse Sammy, Pig’n Whistle Red, and so on. For McTell the ruse allowed him to record for a number of com-

panies without violating exclusivity agreements. For Ellington and many other performers, though, the rationale was different. It was a way of selling as many records as possible, often for budget labels, without competing with themselves.

Nineteen twenty-six was a significant year for Irving Mills—as it was for Duke Ellington. In November Mills approached Ellington in New York’s Kentucky Club about a contract. This meeting was not the first between Mills and Ellington. Although the Duke had as yet sold no music to Mills Music, he and Mills shared a recording date in 1925; Mills sang on a test recording for “Everything Is Hotsy Totsy Now” accompanied by Ellington on piano.¹⁷ And as a musician with a drive for success, Ellington would have been aware of Irving and the Mills Music building in Tin Pan Alley. Within a month of that 1926 meeting the Ellington orchestra was already recording for Vocalion, using the new “electric” system in which the recording horn was replaced by microphones and amplifiers, ensuring greater fidelity on playback. Mills stipulated that Vocalion use only Ellington songs for these sessions.¹⁸ Mills and Ellington agreed to a contract in which, as partners in Ellington Inc., each owned 45 percent, with the remaining 10 percent going to the lawyer. Mills Music was given exclusive publication rights to Ellington’s compositions.¹⁹ This partnership continued for thirteen years. Through the contract, Mills not only realized profits from the bookings he arranged for Ellington, and from recording and sheet music sales, but he also garnered 45 percent of Ellington’s earnings. Further, Mills shared writing credit on more than sixty of Ellington’s compositions—sometimes, as on “Sophisticated Lady,” with lyricists such as Mitchell Parrish. Many of the Ellington/Mills collaborations were instrumentals.

This might seem a lopsided arrangement, but it wasn’t unusual for the time. White musicians retained a much greater proportion of their earnings—typically paying their agent 10 percent. But this was the twenties, and for Ellington the deal was a good one. A black musician needed a white manager, and Mills was one of the best. He seemed to be tireless. His connections in the recording business and with performance venues were many and deep. He had the savvy to ensure that his clients found regular work—sometimes by promising that a club owner could book a major band only if he first hired

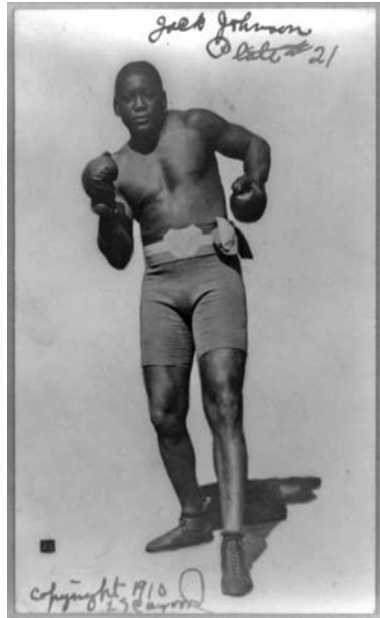
one of Mills' lesser-known bands for an extended engagement. "Irving Mills is the czar of Harlem's musicians," a 1930 newspaper article said. "He owns the Duke Ellington Negro band, and controls almost all the orchestras playing in Harlem's night clubs." Mills, in fact, was so deep in the water of the music business that it was lapping at his chin.

By December 1927 the Ellington band had become the resident orchestra at Harlem's Cotton Club and America was in the seventh year of prohibition. On January 20, 1920 (seven months before "Crazy Blues"), the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, making it illegal to sell alcoholic beverages, was passed by Congress. Prohibition remained the law until December 5, 1933, and the thirteen intervening years became the age of the speakeasy.

ALTHOUGH THE NUMBER SEEMS HIGH, it has been said that in New York alone there were an estimated 100,000 speakeasies—and every neighbourhood was rumoured to have a still in somebody's backyard or basement. (A comparable situation existed in eighteenth-century England. High taxes had placed most alcoholic beverages out of reach of the working class. The invention of easy-to-distil gin changed that, though, as people could now make their own alcohol. One renowned advertisement of the time read, "Drunk for a penny, dead drunk for tuppence—straw free" [i.e., to sleep on]. By 1720, one tenth of the houses in London were gin shops, drunkenness had become the norm, and the crime rate spiralled—probably the result of a combination of cheap liquor and intense poverty).²⁰ Americans were not going to give up their alcohol easily, and those who produced or sold alcohol essentially became criminals. Criminal gangs grew up around the alcohol trade and infiltrated the various bars in which their product was sold. There can be little doubt that the dapper Jimmy Walker, for example—lyricist of the hit song "Will You Love Me in December as You Do in May?" who was also mayor of New York from 1925 until 1932 and who owned several speakeasies—had dealings with gangsters such as Dutch Shultz in order to keep his establishments supplied with booze. An arrangement of this sort must have been true of all the bars during this era.

Former heavyweight boxer Jack Johnson owned one of these night-

A 1910 photograph of the legendary boxer Jack Johnson. He owned the Club Deluxe for several years before selling it to Owen Madden who re-opened it under the name of the Cotton Club. (Courtesy of Library of Congress LC-USZ62-93412.)



clubs, called Club Deluxe. His winning of the heavyweight crown in 1910 had been, to say the least, a controversial matter in the United States. Race riots broke out after Johnson's defeat of the white champion, Jim Jeffries. In Texas, the legislature banned films of his boxing victories over white opponents for fear of stimulating more riots. The search for the Great White Hope began—the search for a Caucasian champion to defeat Johnson (this occurred in Cuba in 1915). But Johnson was a man who refused to play the role expected of him, and he was dogged by controversy through much of his life.

Johnson had owned Club Deluxe for three years when, in 1923, he sold it to a young British immigrant, Owen Madden. Madden had become one of the chief bootleggers in New York and, needing an outlet for his product, he received Al Capone's backing to purchase Club Deluxe. Under Madden's ownership it reopened as the Cotton Club and, catering to whites only (although almost all of its employees were black), became the most famous—or infamous—nightclub in the city. Fletcher Henderson's band opened the club, and it was host to the best black entertainers of the time.

Located on the second floor at 142nd Street and Lenox Avenue, the Cotton Club seated four to five hundred people and featured a vast dance floor and a large stage. The entrance was styled after a log cabin, but the stage décor was fashioned after a Southern plantation mansion. The entrance fee was five dollars, and fifteen would purchase a pint of booze (perhaps a Chicken Cock, which came in a can; open the can to find the bottle inside). The dancing girls had to be beautiful, and Owen Madden dictated that their skin must be light brown. As well as the house band, the club featured nightly choreographed shows featuring songs written by house composers, including Jimmy McHugh and Dorothy Fields from the Mills Music stable. One of the most famous of these composers was Harold Arlen, who, with various lyricists, penned hundreds of compositions including “Stormy Weather,” “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” “I’ve Got the World on a String,” and “It’s Only a Paper Moon.”

Duke Ellington’s tenure at the Cotton Club lasted from 1927 until 1931. When the Ellington orchestra left to perform in Hollywood, the twenty-three-year-old Cab Calloway—also managed by Irving Mills—was brought in to replace him. As with Ellington, Mills took a 45 percent cut, Calloway retained 35 percent. The remaining 20 percent was split evenly between the lawyer and Duke Ellington.²¹ An article in *Time* magazine gives somewhat different figures but points out the disparity between black and white performers: “Mr. Mills’ ‘piece’ of Negroes Ellington and Calloway is 50 percent and 33 percent respectively. From white performers, manager Mills usually gets 10 percent and 15 percent of their earnings.”²²

Calloway was a flamboyant performer who dressed in white tuxedos or zoot suits²³ and wide-brimmed hats. He moved energetically around the stage and sang in an unusual and expressive manner. His performances were exciting song-and-dance routines that few entertainers—then or today—could match. Cab was an immediate sensation. A new song he first performed in 1930, “Minnie the Moocher,” caused such a stir that Mills returned from California, where he was accompanying the Ellington orchestra during the filming of *Check and Double Check*, to arrange a recording session.

“Minnie the Moocher” tells of a woman who “was a red-hot hoochie-koocher” with “a heart as big as a whale.” A bloke named

Smokey took her to Chinatown and taught her “how to kick the gong around” (a euphemism for smoking opium). She then had a dream of marrying the King of Sweden and being adorned with riches. The song ends with the words “Poor Minn!” Minnie proved so popular that she appeared in a number of other Calloway songs—“Kickin’ the Gong Around,” “Minnie the Moocher’s Wedding Day,” “Ghost of Smoky Joe,” and others.

Legend has it that during one of his early performances of “Minnie the Moocher,” Calloway forgot the lyrics and improvised a series of melodic *hi-de-hos*—the audience responded with *hi-de-hos* of their own in a call-and-response, and this became the standard chorus of the song. Soon these chorus calls became a Calloway trademark. He became known as the Hi-De-Ho Man, co-wrote a song called “Hi-De-Ho Man,” and had another written for him called the “Hi-De-Ho Miracle Man”:

Sister Green came to me for my love recipe,
said she’d heard about my miracle plan.
Sister Green is now okay,
takes a treatment every day,
from the Hi-De-Ho Miracle Man!
He’s the Hi-De-Ho Miracle Man!
hi-de-hi-de-hi-de-hi / ho-lo-lo-lo!”

Calloway appeared with Fats Waller, Lena Horne, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, and others in a remarkable 1943 film, *Stormy Weather*. (Irving Mills was credited as Assistant to the Producer and was undoubtedly responsible for soliciting much of the talent. This was the only film Mills became involved with. He found the process too slow for his liking.) Calloway gave an energetic, entrancing stage performance. Earlier in the film he drives to a friend’s house and is greeted by a gaggle of excited children shouting his name. He responds “Hi-de-hi-de-ho!” The children repeat the chant and Calloway answers with “Ho-de-ho!” “Ho-de-ho!” the children shout, echoing the expected audience response to Calloway’s on-stage shenanigans.

Before “Minnie,” Cab Calloway’s signature tune had been “St.

James Infirmary.” He first recorded it on December 23, 1930, about a month before signing a contract with Irving Mills. The song remained in his repertoire throughout his long career, and Calloway recorded it at least three times. Millions watched him perform it on *The Ed Sullivan Show* on February 23, 1964—the date of the Beatles’ third appearance on the show. Three decades had passed since Cab’s heyday at the Cotton Club, but he was still an exciting performer and an exceptional song stylist. Back in the thirties he wanted something more original for his signature tune than “St. James Infirmary” and so was born “Minnie the Moocher”—Irving Mills collaborated with one of his staff writers, Clarence Gaskin, as well as with Cab Calloway to compose the song. Whereas lyrically this is a completely new song, it retains the orchestral arrangement of “St. James Infirmary.”

Actually, it would be a mistake to call “Minnie the Moocher” a new song. It was closely modelled on “Willie the Weeper,” a comical old song about a chimney-sweep with a dope habit and a long procession of drug-induced dreams. Alan Lomax traced it to the days “when the saloon was the first building to be erected in a western town and when you had only to push open the swinging door to enter a national club where whisky came at five cents a throw with all the free lunch you could swallow—taking dope was not regarded as a much more serious habit than drinking or chewing tobacco.”²⁴ Carl Sandburg wrote that one editor received over thirty versions of the “Willie the Weeper” with one hundred different verses,²⁵ so it had certainly made the rounds. It is possible that Calloway’s *hi-de-ho* refrain was not so much an accident as an alternative to the *Tee tee dee dee dee* chorus of the earlier song. Irving Mills himself would agree.

In 1933 Mills spoke with a journalist about the genesis of “Minnie the Moocher.” The article appeared in several newspapers, but the following comes from Jeff Davis’ column “Around the Plaza,” as printed in the May 9, 1933, edition of the *San Antonio Light*:

We’ve been learning all about “Minnie the Moocher,” the biggest song character since Frankie and Johnnie, from her creator and author, Irving Mills, the composer, theatrical agent, and publisher. Minnie, it seems, was created overnight. She comes from the soil, or

rather from the sawdust of the barroom, being a daughter, so to speak, of the famous old song character, Willie the Weeper.

Mills first got the idea when he read the words to Willie the Weeper in an anthology of old American folk music collected and published by Carl Sandburg. "Now, there was a song for you," he said, "and we oughta have one like it, today." He thought of this character and that, and he finally hit on Minnie. He went out into the studios of his music house, the Mills Publishing company at 1619 Broadway, and had one of his fifteen pianists play over "Willie the Weeper" a couple of times and then he went back in his office and closed the door. Two hours later he came out and whistled the tune of "Minnie the Moocher" and a fellow sat down and followed him on the piano. That was the start. Before it was finished, Cab Calloway had injected his catching musical personality into the piece.

Willie was not a Negro and he was not sung of by Negroes. He was a down and out white tramp who, according to the endless stanzas of the old classic, wept as he told his sad, sad story. Minnie is no weeper; she is a somewhat hilarious hop-head, probably of Harlem extraction. Her wedding, you recall, was attended by all the hop-heads worth knowing. And we have the somewhat startling information that he-de-hi and ho-de-ho are peculiar neither to Harlem, Calloway, or this generation; they were incorporated in "Willie the Weeper" as it was sung by bawdy-house guitarists all over the South fifty years ago.

Mills didn't treat "St. James Infirmary" the way he treated "Willie the Weeper." With "Willie" the original song was left alone; with "St. James Infirmary" the song was removed from the public domain.

In the first year of its publication (March 1929 to March 1930), 37,240 copies of sheet music for "St. James Infirmary" were sold at a retail price of twenty-five to thirty cents a copy. In the two years following the release of Armstrong's recording, about 200,000 pressings of "St. James Infirmary" were sold.²⁶ From the time Mills copyrighted the song (in March, 1929) to the end of 1930, "St. James Infirmary" was recorded over twenty times. Calloway's version, produced on December 23, 1930 was the last of these—and by now Mills had a stranglehold on the song, in a number of lyrical variations.



Advertisement for Primrose and West's minstrel show—their shows were renowned for their spectacle, and gradually moved away from the populism of the early minstrel format towards more refined fare. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress LC-USZ62-2659.)

One wonders why Mills did not claim authorship of “St. James Infirmary” under his own name. The Mills name was, after all, attached to over 250 songs and never, but for this one exception, under a pseudonym. (When he renewed the copyright in 1957 he dispensed with Joe Primrose and used his own name.) The only other Primrose in the entertainment industry that I could find was George H. Primrose, a song-and-dance man who first appeared in minstrel shows in the 1860s. With fellow minstrel William H. West he formed Primrose and West's Big Minstrel Company around 1878. Their shows were renowned for their spectacle, and gradually moved away from the crass populism of the early minstrel format and towards more refined fare, featuring ballet, orchestral music, and white-face comedy. In 1889 George Primrose joined impresario Lew Dockstader to create Primrose and Dockstader's Huge Minstrel Company. They travelled the country, toting an immense canvas theatre that could seat 3,000 paying customers. The early Primrose shows featured songs

with titles like “A Hot Coon from Klondike,” “Whar de Watermelon’ Grow,” and “Just Because She Made Dem Goo Goo Eyes.”²⁷ Of the performers they featured, only Al Jolson’s name is familiar today.

It is, of course, only conjecture that the two Primrose names are connected. But I think it reasonable to accept the notion put forward by a lawyer in 1931 that the choice of the Primrose name was “not innocent,” that it was used to give the impression that rights to the song had been obtained from a bona fide composer whose name carried the cachet of the South, from where the song supposedly originated.²⁸

There were two copyright forms Mills could have used when he registered the song. Form E was for new musical publications, and form E1 was for musical compositions republished with new copyright matter. If Mills had registered “St. James Infirmary” using form E1, he would have as much as admitted that the song was pre-existing; the copyright would have applied only to his new arrangement. Anyone could have modified the song because it would have remained in the public domain. Only Mills’ arrangement would have been subject to copyright restrictions.

But Mills used form E. He was therefore saying that the song was new and original and was—in its entirety—protected under copyright legislation. It was generally understood (or assumed) that “St. James Infirmary” originated in the Southern states. The name “Joe Primrose” evokes the flavour of the South. This was a deliberate ruse, meant to dupe the public and competitors into believing that Mills Music Inc. had discovered the song’s original author. We know that at best what Mills presented was a new arrangement of an old tune. “Primrose” was a camouflage designed to conceal the song’s origins and deter other publishers who might have had an interest in it.

Notes

- 1 A.H. Lawrence, *Duke Ellington and His World* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 34.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 32. Mills, of course, was hardly alone in this sort of practice. Bessie Smith never received royalties for the songs she wrote—Columbia simply paid her a small fee for each recording. Nor was the practice limited to white businessmen. Perry Bradford—instrumental in bring-

ing Mamie Smith into the recording studio—would put his own name to a song if he could get away with it. He was also well known for selling the same song to different publishers by changing the title. In fact, Bradford—in his book *Born with the Blues*—wrote that when he originally wrote “Crazy Blues,” it was called—and performed as—“Harlem Blues.” Bradford wrote, “I feared what would happen if the song became a big hit, because I had used the same lyrics three times before.”

- 3 Wilfrid Sheed, *The House that George Built: With a Little Help from Irving, Cole and a Crew of about Fifty* (New York: Random House, 2007), 107.
- 4 A.H. Lawrence, *Duke Ellington and His World* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 276.
- 5 *Oral History of American Music*, Yale University. Irene Kahn Atkins, interviewer.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Nick Tosches, *Where Dead Voices Gather* (New York: Little, Brown, 2002), 63.
- 8 Colin Escott, *Hank Williams: The Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994), 90.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 93.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 92.
- 11 Michael Pitts and Frank Hoffman, *The Rise of the Crooners* (Lanham, MA: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 58.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 62.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Alyn Shipton, *Fats Waller: The Cheerful Little Earful* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 62.
- 16 Brian Rust, *Jazz and Ragtime Records (1897–1942)* (Denver, CO: Main-spring Press, 2002), 1166–72.
- 17 See <http://www.redhotjazz.com/hotsytotsyboys.html>.
- 18 A.H. Lawrence, *Duke Ellington and His World* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 79.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 80.
- 20 Colin Wilson, *Written In Blood: A History of Forensic Detection* (London: Grafton Books, 1989), 37.
- 21 A.H. Lawrence, *Duke Ellington and His World*, 157.
- 22 “Mills’ Music,” *Time*, March 22, 1937.
- 23 Zoot suits were oversize outfits the pants of which featured a high waist, wide legs, and cuffed trousers fit tight at the ankles. The jacket was extra long with extra-wide lapels and almost comically padded shoulders.
- 24 Alan Lomax, *Folk Songs of North America* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1960), 413.

- 25 Carl Sandburg, *The American Songbag* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1990 [1927]), 204.
- 26 Brief for Respondents, AD 736 Gotham Music Service, Inc., and Mills Music, Inc., Respondents, v. Denton & Haskins Music Publishing Co., Inc., State of New York Supreme Court Appellate Division—First Department, 1931.
- 27 E. Azalia Hackley Collection, Detroit Public Library.
- 28 Brief for Appellant, AD 736 Gotham Music Service, Inc., and Mills Music, Inc., Respondents, v. Denton & Haskins Music Publishing Co., Inc., State of New York Supreme Court Appellate Division—First Department, 1931.

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.

Song Variants of “St. James Infirmary”: I–12

Title	Performer	Composer on record label
1 Gambler's Blues	Fess Williams and His Royal Flush Orchestra	Baxter–Moore
2 St. James Infirmary	Louis Armstrong and His Savoy Ballroom Five	Redman
1st Mills copyright March 4, 1929		
3 Gambler's Blues (St. James Infirmary Blues)	The Hokum Boys	none
4 Gambler's Blues No. 2	The Hokum Boys	none
5 St. James Infirmary	George E. Lee and His Novelty Singing Orchestra	Primrose
6 St. James Infirmary Blues	Kansas City Frank and His Footwarmers	Primrose
7 St. James Infirmary Blues	Atlantic Syncopators	None
8 St. James Infirmary	Rube Bloom and His Bayou Boys	Primrose
9 St. Joe's Infirmary (Those Gambler's Blues)	Mattie Hite	None
10 St. James Infirmary	King Oliver and His Orchestra	Primrose
11 St. James Infirmary (Gambler's Blues)	Gene Austin	Primrose
12 St. James Infirmary	The Ten Black Berries (Duke Ellington Orchestra with Irving Mills as Sunny Smith)	Primrose

Lyrical variation	Recording date	City	Record catalogue
1	February 25, 1927	New York	Vocalion 1087
3	December 12, 1928	Chicago	OKeh 8657
5	October 1929	Chicago	Paramount 12897
5	October 1929	Grafton, Wisconsin	Paramount 12919
3	November 6, 1929	Kansas City	Brunswick 4684
Instrumental	November 1929	Chicago	Paramount 12898 Broadway 1355 (as Harry's Reckless Five)
3, 4	c. November 1929	New York	Madison 50047
3	January 16, 1930	New York	Columbia 2103-D
1, 2	January 27, 1930	New York	Columbia 14503-D
3	January 28, 1930	New York	Victor 22298, Bluebird B-5466
1, 2	January 28, 1930	New York	Victor 22299-A, Bluebird B-6863
4	January 29, 1930	New York	Take 1 issued on Apex 41121, Conqueror 7486, Domino 4498, Perfect 15272, Regal 8941, Romeo 1209; Take 2 issued on Oriole 1849; Takes 2 and 3 issued on Banner 0594, Cameo 0194, Champion 867, Jewel 5849, Romeo 120

APPENDIX B
RECORD
LABELS



OLD 78-RPM RECORDS were packaged in paper sleeves, with a circular cutout through which the labels could be read. The label contained quite a bit of information, although the shopper was generally most interested in the name of the song and the performer.

When I started looking for original recordings of “St. James Infirmary,” I was most interested in the name of the song and the name of the composer. When I started researching this book I had assumed that Primrose’s name was stamped on just about every recording of “St. James Infirmary” made after Fess Williams’ 1927 version. I wasn’t sure, though, and went in search of the Armstrong recording. There was no Joe Primrose on that label, just the single word “Redman.” What happened? The result of my attempt to answer that question occupies a large part of this book.

Here are labels from some of the records I have collected while writing this book. Sometimes they tell interesting stories. Sometimes they serve as an excuse for me to chat just a little bit more about this fascinating song.

**A** 1922

“Lovesick Blues” as performed by Jack Shea, one of the first recordings of this song. The writing credit is to Cliff Friend. Irving Mills’ name has been curiously overlooked.

B FEBRUARY 25, 1927

This was the first recording of “St. James Infirmary,” aka “Gambler’s Blues.” Performed by Fess Williams—Comedian—Accompanied by His Royal Flush Orchestra. The writing credit is to Moore—Baxter, who had published the song in 1925.

C DECEMBER 12, 1928

This was the first recording of “St. James Infirmary” under that title. Louis Armstrong

and His Savoy Ballroom Five performed the song, with writing credit to Don Redman. Even though the record was released months before Irving Mills registered the copyright, subsequent pressings gave the writing credit to Irving Mills, under the pseudonym of Joe Primrose. Catalog number 8657 shows it was released through the Race Records division of Okeh.

D DECEMBER 12, 1928

This is an identical recording to the above, but released with catalog number 41180—denoting Okeh’s popular records division. This Louis Armstrong recording was simultaneously released for the black and white markets.

**APPENDIX C
COMMENTS
ON EARLY
RECORDINGS**



NOVEMBER 1929

Kansas City Frank and His Footwarmers

Frank Melrose (1907–1941) is probably better remembered for the mysterious nature of his death than for his music. This is unfortunate, for he was one of the most accomplished jazz pianists of the 1920s and 30s.

The younger brother of Walter and Lester Melrose (founders of Melrose Brothers Music Publishing), Frank learned violin as a child, but gravitated to piano. The Melrose Brothers are best known today as the publishers of Jelly Roll Morton's music. In 1926 Walter Melrose secured Jelly Roll Morton a recording contract with Victor—but stipulated that Morton's earnings be sent to Melrose Brothers Music; Morton didn't receive a penny in recording royalties.

Nevertheless, Morton and Frank Melrose became good friends (Frank was foremost a musician and had little interest in the publishing business). Frank Melrose recorded under the names Kansas City Frank and Broadway Rastus. It is testimony to Melrose's skill as a pianist that the Rastus sessions were long thought to be pseudonymous recordings of Morton's. For the most part Melrose stayed close

to Chicago and preferred playing solo in small venues. He wasn't a heavy self-promoter, and was woefully under-recorded, yet he developed a reputation among fellow musicians as one of the finest jazz pianists in Chicago.

It is likely that Kansas City Frank and His Footwarmers saw little if any action outside the recording studio. Integrated bands were still a rarity; Frank (and possibly his brother, Walter, on accordion) was the only white musician on this recording of "St. James Infirmary." The piece is an instrumental, with peculiar attention paid to slide whistle and accordion. Frank's piano occupies the middle section, but the tone is muffled by Paramount's muddy recording quality.

Frank settled down near Chicago after he married in 1934. He supplemented his income with piano gigs and teaching. By 1940 he had three children to support. He studied metal machining at night and found employment with the Press Steel Company. On August 31, 1941, he spent a night back in Chicago, hanging out with friends, visiting the music clubs, jamming with the bands. They got into a fracas somewhere on the south side. Melrose and his friends parted company. At 7:30 a.m., Labour Day, his body was found on the street—it was so mutilated his wife couldn't identify him, except by the coat he was wearing. Police couldn't determine if he was the victim of a hit-and-run accident, or if he had been battered by hoodlums. Rumours circulated that Frank had seen something he shouldn't have, and that it had been a gangland slaying.

JANUARY 16, 1930

Rube Bloom and His Bayou Boys

While Mills plugged the sheet music and publicized the song, it is possible that his direct involvement with its recording began with Rube Bloom (1902–76). Bloom's first hit song was a piano piece called "Soliloquy," published by Mills Music in 1927. He went on to compose many hits, often with collaborators such as Johnny Mercer, Ted Koehler, and Mitchell Parish. He was inducted into the Songwriter's Hall of Fame in 1982. The six recordings he made between January and May 1930 might have been his only band efforts; he recorded primarily as a piano soloist. Rube Bloom and His Bayou Boys featured several of the musicians then contributing to the Irv-

ing Mills and His Hotsy Totsy Band (as well as the Mills' Merry Makers) sessions—Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, and Manny Klein. Bloom's lyrics are essentially those used by Louis Armstrong.

JANUARY 27, 1930

Mattie Hite

Mattie Hite is a bit of a mystery. Nobody knows where she was born, although New York is generally assumed. Certainly her career seems to have been based in that city. All eight of her songs, from 1923 to 1930, were recorded there (as was a test recording of "Jungle Blues" in 1921). It is known from advertisements that she was performing in New York as early as 1912. She did move around the northern states, though, appearing in cafés and cabarets in Chicago and Atlantic City. It is thought that she was born around 1890.

I have spent many hours trying to find Mattie Hite in the US census records, but could find nothing conclusive. I did, though, locate a likely candidate in a Mattie Hite who was a boarder on 7th Avenue in Manhattan in 1910. She was nineteen years old and listed her occupation as a theatre actress. Her fellow lodgers included an actor by the name of Robert Hill and an actress named Minnie Bell—I could find reference to neither of them elsewhere. This Mattie was born in Virginia. I also found a Mattie Hite, ten years earlier, living with her parents in Petersburg, Dinwiddie County, Virginia. Joe Hite was a forty-one-year-old minister married to Malina, one year his junior. They had two daughters, Mattie and Missie, aged ten and eighteen. Mattie was born in September 1889. Although neither of these results is conclusive, I think it likely that at least the 1910 finding is accurate.

On Hite's record the composition was originally credited to E.V. Body (i.e., "Everybody," meaning the composition was in the public domain). Subsequent releases, after communication from Mills Music, saw both the song title "St. Joe's Infirmary," and the composer credit changed.

JANUARY 28, 1930

King Oliver and His Orchestra

King Oliver (1885–1938) was, of course, Louis Armstrong's mentor. It was said of Oliver as a young man that when he played in New

APPENDIX D
A BIT MORE ABOUT
CARL MOORE



AFTER CARL MOORE parted company with Phil Baxter, probably about 1926, he continued to tour with his own orchestra. He joined Freddy Hamm's very popular Chicago Orchestra in 1929 as drummer and vocalist. Although Hamm was the principal vocalist for the group, Moore—billed as Squint, the Arkansas Kid—became, with his impersonations, jokes, and hillbilly vocal style, a featured headliner of the band.¹

In December 1929 the Freddy Hamm Orchestra released two numbers on Brunswick Records—"Remarkable Girl" and "We Love Us." The latter went, in part:

For you have me and I have you
And then we have each other too
There won't be any other
We love us....

The Coon-Sanders Nighthawks had recorded that song a couple of weeks earlier. Once the most popular band in Kansas City, the Nighthawks were at that time under contract at a Morton Grove, Illinois,

supper club called The Dells, about fifteen miles north of Chicago and owned by Al Capone. The writing credit for “We Love Us” is Joe L. Sanders/Lee Moore. Lee was Carl’s middle name, so it was likely his name on that song.

After Hamm died, in 1934, Moore took over the orchestra, augmenting it with the remnants of Husk O’Hare’s Chicago jazz band, the Wolverines.² They opened at Chicago’s Drake Hotel and remained the featured orchestra for eighteen months, broadcasting live performances over radio station WGN.³ By this time Carl had adopted his “Deacon” nickname, and continued to hone his hillbilly act. He used a small hand organ (which he referred to as his “one-lunger”) when singing some of the novelty songs that were part of his shows.

A 1940 newspaper article about Moore gave this revealing detail about the Deacon’s musical preferences. Calling him “This Clown Prince of Comedy,” the Uniontown *Morning Herald* noted that “he is a riot of fun—any setting will sparkle and re-echo with the quips and jesting of this famous funster. Moore’s impersonations and human caricatures have made the most blasé of distinguished celebrities chuckle.” The article continues:

A native Arkansan, Moore boasts a genuine Southern drawl that’s a real hit with the fans wherever he goes. His nickname of Deacon was put on him by NBC announcers. Besides being a top-notch band-leader he’s the author of such well-known tunes as “St. James Infirmary,” “Ding-Dong Daddy,” and “Bye, Bye Blues.” Moore is a bit unusual among orchestra leaders because of his leanings toward the old songs, which he sings with “a tear in his voice.” The best of his renditions are of “Only a Bird in a Gilded Cage,” “Baggage Coach Ahead,” and “They Cut Down the Old Pine Tree.”

Moore’s love of the old tearjerkers matches perfectly his style of drawling out their words in hillbilly fashion, a style that stamps his band as different everywhere it appears.

Old tearjerkers indeed. “Only a Bird in a Gilded Cage,” popular on vaudeville, was one of the biggest sellers of 1900. It tells the story of a beautiful young woman who, not out of love but for the sake of riches, marries an older man. She is to be pitied, though, for while “she lives in a mansion grand, she’s only a bird in a gilded cage.” At



Carl “Deacon” Moore and Marge Hudson, Carl’s first wife. Marge, “radio’s Blue Bird,” joined the band in 1933. (Courtesy of Marjorie Moore.)

the end of the song she lies buried beneath a tall marble monument, where she must be happier at rest than as a bird in a gilded cage.

“Baggage Coach Ahead” was published in 1896 by the black minstrel Gussie L. Davis. In this song a man is travelling by train, cradling his sobbing young child in his arms. The sorrowful weeping keeps the other passengers awake, and an angry man asks, “Make that child stop its noise, it’s keeping us all awake. Where is its mother? Go take it to her.” To which the child’s father replies, “I wish that I could, but she’s dead in the baggage coach ahead.”

Dating from 1929, “They Cut Down the Old Pine Tree” was a popular country tune. It tells of a young man’s grief when the old pine tree is cut down to make a coffin for his sweetheart.

With the Deacon’s sweet dance orchestra backing him up, these songs would have showcased an enchanting blend of styles. As Bennett describes it, the orchestra usually consisted of “three trumpets and a trombone, three violins, three saxophonists, who doubled on clarinet. The rhythm section comprised bass, drums, piano, and guitar.” For many years Munson Compton doubled as guitarist and tenor vocalist. Carl’s first wife, Marge Hudson, was the female vocalist.



Jonesboro's most elegant venue, the Hotel Noble, about 1940. (Author's collection.)

She joined the orchestra in 1933. Described as “a former artist’s model,” “an exotic beauty of the Spanish type,” “radio’s Blue Bird,” or simply “famous songbird,” Hudson was featured prominently in many of the newspaper ads for the Carl “Deacon” Moore Orchestra. The Deacon’s was one of the most popular of the touring orchestras through the 1930s and early ’40s, appearing in hotels and ballrooms, vaudeville stages, and smaller venues from Ohio to Texas. Their performances were broadcast over radio stations across the country.

As mentioned earlier, Moore recorded four sides for Decca in 1938. The following year he signed with Consolidated Radio Artists, who took over his bookings. Problems arose in late 1940, when he was scheduled to perform at a Greenwich Village club called the Village Barn. Several of the musicians in his orchestra were not members of the musicians union. Margie Moore explained, “the New York union would not allow Carl in with his out-of-town band. So he took over a band already formed in NY. It just so happened that I was married to the trumpet player in the NY band. We traveled for about a year all over the US. Most of it constant movement. My husband had a roving eye and it wasn’t long before I divorced him. In the meantime I had been doing secretarial work for Carl and before long boss and secretary fell in love and got married.”⁴ They were married on May 20, 1941. Shortly afterwards, the band appeared in Carl’s hometown,

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