

About *I Went Down to St. James Infirmary*

by Robert W. Harwood

Infused with humor and supported by meticulous research, this ground breaking book explores the turbulent and mysterious history of one of the most important and influential songs of the twentieth century. *I Went Down to St. James Infirmary* looks at the people and the times in which “St. James Infirmary” achieved its initial popularity and explores what happens to a traditional song when it becomes a piece of merchandise.

The Song

“St. James Infirmary” is the quintessential jazz-blues song of the early twentieth century. Major performing and recording artists have covered it, from Louis Armstrong and Jimmie Rodgers to Van Morrison and the White Stripes. Saturated with ego-driven angst and once considered obscene because of the song’s stark depiction of death and the portrayal of a seedy underworld inhabited by gamblers, pimps, “loose” women, and every sort of rounder, it has been adapted, rewritten, borrowed, stolen, attacked, revered, and cherished. In its heyday of the 1920s and 30s, when recordings and sheet music of “St. James Infirmary” were first packaged and marketed, the public could not get enough of it. Nearly a hundred years later, its allure remains. The song has been shrouded in mystery as well as scandal. Who is the woman stretched out on a long white table? Who is the narrator and why is he, robust and vain, more concerned about his own funeral arrangements than with hers? And there are the questions about the song itself. Where did it come from? To what lineage does it belong? Who was Joe Primrose and how did he gain copyright to a song that had been circulating the country for decades?

The Era

Driven to solve these and other puzzles about “St. James Infirmary,” author Robert W. Harwood toiled for years researching the song, the singers, and the times before and after its stunning success as a jazz hit in 1929. Harwood has now emerged from his isolation, grey with cobwebs and dust, brandishing the fruits of his labors — the story of a song as it traveled from its folk origins and into the recording studios, performance stages, and law courts of America’s jazz age. With a supporting cast of fascinating characters whose stories are as interesting as the song itself, *I Went Down to St. James Infirmary* will entertain and inform the reader as it unravels the riddles of one song while casting light on the production of music yesterday and today.