

Genealogy: Streets of Laredo

By
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Streets of Laredo (aka *The Cowboys Lament* and *The Dying Cowboy*) is one of the most recognized American cowboy/folk songs. It has been recorded thousands of times by as many artists and exemplifies the western culture and way of life that is stamped indelibly on the American psyche. The following lyric is representative of the hundreds of verses and variations.

STREETS OF LAREDO

As I walked out on the streets of Laredo.
As I walked out on Laredo one day,
I spied a poor cowboy wrapped in white linen,
Wrapped in white linen as cold as the clay.

I can see by your outfit that you are a cowboy.
These words he did say as I boldly walked by.
Come an' sit down beside me an' hear my sad story.
I'm shot in the breast an' I know I must die.

It was once in the saddle, I used to go dashing.
" Once in the saddle, I used to go gay.
First to the card-house and then down to Rose's.
But I'm shot in the breast and I'm dying today.

Get six jolly cowboys to carry my coffin.
Six dance-hall maidens to bear up my pall.
Throw bunches of roses all over my coffin.
Roses to deaden the clods as they fall."

Then beat the drum slowly, play the Fife lowly.
Play the dead march as you carry me along.
Take me to the green valley, lay the sod o'er me,
I'm a young cowboy and I know I've done wrong.

Researching a folk song is much like tracing a family tree. Information about modern generations is readily available, yet the search will inevitably lead to distant lands and times long ago where documentation is scarce or nonexistent. Even under the light of serious research the origins of early versions and variations become the stuff of theory and speculation.

The first documentation of the "family tree" of *Streets of Laredo* appears in Ireland around the turn of the 19th century in the form of two songs: *The Bard of Armagh* and *The Unfortunate Rake*. Both tunes carry common lyrical themes and share the melody of the modern version.

The Bard of Armagh is a ballad celebrating the exploits (circa. 1700) of Dr. Patrick Donnelly, a well positioned Catholic priest. The Irish Parliament passed a set of laws in 1697 impeding

Catholics in every aspect of daily life including requiring Catholic clergymen to take the *Oath of Abjuration*. Many dissident bishops and priests fled to remote areas as outlaws and continued to celebrate mass. Donnelly assumed the name of Phelim Brady and continued to minister in South Armagh, Ireland, in the disguise of a wandering minstrel, becoming known as the bard of Armagh.

The Bard of Armagh first appears in written form in 1801. While the words are ascribed to Thomas Campbell who included the tune in a song book, it was most likely traditionalized by then.

THE BARD OF ARMAGH

Oh list' to the tale of a poor Irish harper
And scorn not the string of his old withered hands
But remember those fingers they once could move sharper
To raise up the strains of his dear native land.

It was long before the shamrock, dear isle's lovely emblem
Was crushed in its beauty by the Saxon's lion paw
And all the pretty colleens around me would gather
Call me their bold Phelim Brady, the Bard of Armagh.

How I love to muse on the days of my boyhood
Though four score and three years have fled by them
It's king's sweet reflection that every young joy
For the merry-hearted boys make the best of old men.

At a fair or a wake I would twist my shillelagh
And trip through a dance with my brogues tied with straw
There all the pretty maidens around me would gather
Call me their bold Phelim Brady, the Bard of Armagh.

In truth I have wandered this wide world over
Yet Ireland's my home and a dwelling for me
And, oh, let the turf that my old bones shall cover
Be cut from the land that is trod by the free.

And when Sergeant Death in his cold arms doth embrace
And lull me to sleep with old Erin go bragh
By the side of my Kathleen, my dear pride, oh place me
Then forget Phelim Brady, the Bard of Armagh.

The Unfortunate Rake (aka *St. James Hospital*) appears about the same time and like *The Bard of Armagh* had likely been in existence for some time. Kenneth S. Goldstein writes in the notes

accompanying a 1960 Folkways Record release entitled *The Unfortunate Rake: A Study In The Evolution of A Ballad*, that the oldest published text of *The Unfortunate Rake* (aka *St James Hospital*) was "collected" in 1848 in County Cork, Ireland, "from a singer who had learned it in Dublin in 1790." The following lyric is representative of the song as it would have appeared in the middle of the nineteenth century.

THE UNFORTUNATE RAKE (aka St. James Hospital)

As I was a-walking down by St. James' Hospital,
I was a-walking down by there one day,
What should I spy but one of my comrades
All wrapped up in flannel though warm was the day.

I asked him what ailed him, I asked him what failed him,
I asked him the cause of all his complaint.
It's all on account of some handsome young woman,
'Tis she that has caused me to weep and lament.

And had she but told me before she disordered me,
Had she but told me of it in time,
I might have got pills and salts of white mercury,
But now I'm cut down in the height of my prime.

Get six young soldiers to carry my coffin,
Six young girls to sing me a song,
And each of them carry a bunch of green laurel
So they don't smell me as they bear me along.

Don't muffle your drums and play your fifes merrily,
Play a quick march as you carry me along,
And fire your bright muskets all over my coffin,
Saying: There goes an unfortunate lad to his home.

The location of the ballad at "St. James' Hospital" presents some interesting points for speculation as does the "Unfortunate Rake's" terminal affliction being the result of an encounter with a "handsome young woman" ("pills and salts of white mercury" was a treatment for syphilis). Musicologists often associate the ballad with St. James Hospital in London which was a place where lepers were treated. Even though it was torn down in 1532, the memory of St. James' as a place where people went when afflicted with a loathsome disease is a very old traditional geographic reference. A song about dying in St. James Hospital could be a descendant of one of the oldest songs in the English Language.

Millions of Irish left their homeland in the nineteenth century because of religious persecution, political oppression and famine. In this context, *The Unfortunate Rake* was carried around the world in the true tradition of folk history. There were many versions and variations including

The Sailor (or Soldier) Cut Down in His Prime and a female version called *The Handsome Young Woman* or *Bad Girl's Lament*. When the song arrived on the shores of the United States its evolution took a turn that was uniquely American. One path led west to *The Streets of Laredo* with only slight adaptations bringing the tune to its modern form. Another road led to the Mississippi Delta.

The ballad became a product of the rich musical tradition of New Orleans. The lyrics were adapted, the time signature was changed from three to four beats per measure and the melody evolved into a blues theme. *St. James Infirmary* (aka *The Gambler's Blues*) surfaces around 1900. *The Gamblers Blues* appeared in a published collection in 1920 with composer's credits going to E.V. Body (meaning everybody - author unknown).

ST. JAMES INFIRMARY

I went down to St. James Infirmary
To see my baby there,
She was lyin' on a long white table,
So sweet, so cool, so fair.

Went up to see the doctor,
"She's very low," he said;
Went back to see my baby
Good God! She's lying there dead.

I went down to old Joe's barroom,
On the corner by the square
They were serving the drinks as usual,
And the usual crowd was there.

On my left stood old Joe McKennedy,
And his eyes were bloodshot red;
He turned to the crowd around him,
These are the words he said:

Let her go, let her go, God bless her;
Wherever she may be
She may search the wide world over
And never find a better man than me

Oh, when I die, please bury me
In my ten dollar Stetson hat;
Put a twenty-dollar gold piece on my watch chain
So my friends'll know I died standin' pat.

Get six gamblers to carry my coffin
Six chorus girls to sing me a song
Put a twenty-piece jazz band on my tail gate

To raise Hell as we go along

Now that's the end of my story
Let's have another round of booze
And if anyone should ask you just tell them
I've got the St. James Infirmary blues

The birth of the modern music recording industry dates to the mid 1920s with *St. James Infirmary / Gamblers Blues* among the earliest works captured for posterity. On February 25, 1927 a recording of *Gamblers Blues* was made by Fess Williams and his Royal Flush Orchestra. A short time later in 1928, the definitive version of *St. James Infirmary* was recorded by Louis (Satchmo) Armstrong. The melody is reported to have been taken from a popular tune of the 1920's entitled *When It's Chitlin Cookin' Time in Cheatham County*. While the composer is listed as Joe Primrose (a pseudonym for Irving Mills), there is no doubt that the Armstrong version was plucked from the tree of *The Unfortunate Rake* and is a first cousin to *Streets of Laredo*.

Considering the pliable nature of the oral folk tradition, *Streets of Laredo / The Unfortunate Rake*, with its variations and descendents has weathered the past two to three hundred years remarkably intact. With the exception of the blues/jazz diversion of *St. James Infirmary*, the melody has remained unchanged. Similar lyric content such as the dead or dying comrade or lover remains consistent throughout most versions. Even *The Bard of Armagh*, which is the least similar lyrically, includes the funeral requests of other variations. These commonalities allow musicologists to trace the relationships of the various derivative works although actual chronology and order of descent remain obscured by the mist of unrecorded history.

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