

A VIEW FROM THE ST. JAMES HOTEL

By Michael Ventura

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“Wake up, Mama, don’t you sleep so hard.”

When Blind Willie McTell sings that, I don’t know if the woman he addresses is alive or dead. Maybe he doesn’t know. He repeats the line: “Wake up, Mama, don’t you sleep so hard.”

Next line goes “For I see these old blues walkin’ all over your yard.”

The blues aren’t just inside you or only in your room; the blues are alive, taking names and walking all over your yard.

McTell tells the time: “The big star’s fallin’, Mama, ‘taint long ‘fore day.” But you still don’t know if she’s alive or dead.

It’s like Bessie Smith singing, “My mind is like a rowboat on the stormy sea/ It’s with me right now/ In the morning, where will it be?”

There’s been a lot of that going around in my apartment lately.

“I was in my bed sleepin’,” sings Big Joe Turner, “Oh, boy, what a dream/ I was dreamin’ ‘bout my TV Mama/ The one with the big wide screen.” It seems his TV Mama changes her channels a lot and Big Joe doesn’t know which one’s coming up next.

There’s been a lot of that, too, in my apartment lately.

But the song that sings itself most often within my walls isn’t what a purist would call a blues -- though Jack Teagarden remarked that “Saint James Infirmary Blues” is the “oldest blues I ever heard.”

He’s enough of an authority for me. Born in 1905 in Vernon, Texas, Teagarden’s jazz trombone remains unsurpassed. His vocal style was laid- back, ironic, and resigned, and he sang the saddest images with a sense of humor, as in his great duet with Louis Armstrong on Hoagy Charmichael’s “Rockin’ Chair”:

“Old rockin’ chair’s got me/...Ain’t goin’ nowhere/ ...Just sittin’ here grabbin’, grabbin’/ At the flies ‘round this rockin’ chair.”

When Armstrong repeats the line, Teagarden ad libs, “It sure is bothersome, isn’t it?”

Can’t move from your rocker and you’re grabbing at flies.

The older you get, the hairier that image becomes.

When Jack Teagarden sings “Saint James Infirmary,” he sings it like a man who can’t be surprised: “Oh I went down to Saint James Infirmary/ Saw my baby there/ Stretched out on a long white table/ So cold, so still, so fair.”

The next lines are what we try to say and try to mean when someone we love dies: “Let her go, let her go, God bless her/ Wherever she may be.”

But then comes this: “She can search this whole wide world over/ She’ll never find another man like me.”

A strange thing to say to a dead person.

I’m not sure anyone really believes in death – even, or especially, after you’ve seen a lot of it – because the dead have a way of not dying. Not in your head. They roam far and wide -- in your head, your apartment, your yard. The dead can be hyperactive critters, especially just after they die.

That’s the brilliance of “She can search this whole wide world over.” So cold, so still, so fair, but she’s still moving around in here and out there.

So the song brings the singer straight to his own grave: “When I die I want you to dress me in straight-lace shoes/ A box back coat and a Stetson hat/ Put a 20-dollar gold piece on my watch chain/ So the boys’ll know I died standin’ pat.”

When Big Mama Thornton sings “Saint James Infirmary,” her chorus is: “Let her go, God bless her/ Wherever she may be/ You can search this wide world over/ You’ll never find another gal like me.” Then Thornton adds her variation of a verse that sometimes concludes the tune: “Now folks that you’ve heard my story/ Now that you’ve heard my song/ If anyone should happen to ask you/Tell them Big Mama’s been here and gone/ Tell them Big Mama’s been here and...”

She lets the line fall off. You hear “gone” in her silence.

When we deeply feel another’s death, we also feel our own. That’s what’s all over that song. And that’s what’s been happening in my apartment lately.

My demons come knocking. They make me face myself all over again and there’s always something I never saw before, something demanding a new courage – a courage I may or may not have. That sort of thing can wear you out or wake you up, depending on how you take it.

Josh White and Cisco Houston (to name just two) insist on a festive slant to “Saint James Infirmary.” They want fun at the funeral. One variant goes, “Four crapshooters to be my pallbearers/ Three pretty women to sing me a song/ Stick a jazz band on my hearse wagon/ Raise hell as I stroll along.”

Others, like Blind Willie McTell and Dave Van Ronk, add a reminder of finality: “Roll out your rubber-tired carriage/ Roll out your old time hat/ Twelve men goin’ to the graveyard/And 11 comin’ back.”

Bob Dylan took melody from “Saint James Infirmary” and made it a dirge for the whole world: “This land is condemned/ All the way from New Orleans/ To Jerusalem.” In tribute, he called his song “Blind Willie McTell.”

Image after image evokes slavery, burning plantations, chain gangs, “power and greed and corruptible sin,” until, in the last verse, Dylan locates his point of view: “I’m gazing out the window/ Of the Saint James Hotel/ And I know no one can sing the blues like Blind Willie McTell.”

The Saint James: It’s an infirmary, it’s a morgue, and it’s a hotel where we each have a room that we share with the dead.

In that room, we hear music playing somewhere near -- like the Hot Tamale Brass Band’s “Saint James Infirmary” instrumental that rolls all our stories into one.

New Orleans knows how to do death. Sad songs aren’t enough. They play sad on the way to the graveyard, happy coming back. The happy song is always “Oh Didn’t He Ramble.”

Oscar “Papa” Celestin was Louisiana-born in 1884. Jazz was born just about then, and he grew up with it. We can depend upon the authenticity of Celestin’s rollicking “Oh Didn’t He Ramble”:

“Oh didn’t he ramble/ He rambled/ He rambled all around/ In and out the town/ But didn’t he ramble/ He rambled/ He rambled ‘til the butcher cut him down.”

His song stays upbeat but gets mysterious: “Oh the ram’s horn was so long/ It nearly touched the sky/ An eagle went up to build a nest/ And the young ones they did cry/ Didn’t he ramble.../He rambled ‘til the butcher cut him down.”

Last verse goes: “His head was in the market/ His feet was in the street/ A lady come walkin’ by/ Said ‘Just look at the market meat.’/Oh, didn’t he ramble...”

Death the butcher doesn’t just cut you down -- he cuts you up and sells your meat. Figure for yourself who his customers may be, and why. That lady who “come walkin’ by,” she seems to be saying, “Get on with life now, y’all. What’s for supper?”

England’s Royal Navy also imagines death as the butcher: A casualty count is called the “butcher’s bill.” Lately, I keep hearing a line from the last scene of a man-of-war flick I saw as a kid. The captain says to no one in particular: “I wonder what the butcher’s bill will be today?”

This column was written after a young friend died of a heroin overdose. A day after it was written, Traci Lamar Hancock succumbed to the cancer she fought against with such depth of spirit. Her family faces a mountain of medical bills. Your help would be deeply appreciated. You can contribute at www.traciforgrace.com.

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