



Josh White, St. James Infirmary, 1964

The Madison Public Library website (and maybe all such sites) provides access to thousands of online newspaper archives around the world to anyone with a card. This came in handy lately.

I've mentioned before that my music partner Lou and my guitar-playing pal Paul attended a Josh White concert in Oshkosh in the mid sixties. Interested in pinning down the date and venue of the show, I found articles in the archives of the **Appleton Post-Crescent** and the **Oshkosh Daily Northwestern**. It turns out that White gave two concerts on Sunday, September 27th, 1964, in the Lourdes High School Gymnasium in Oshkosh. One show was at 3:30 and the other at 7:30. We went to the 3:30 show.

The three of us were Appleton High School Juniors at the time, goofing with the prospect of forming a folk music band. I can't remember if I had already bought my 12-string Harmony guitar or if I was still playing my baritone uke, but Lou was pretty good on the banjo already, having learned from Pete Seeger's **How to Play the 5-String Banjo** book, and Paul was able to strum chords on his Gibson LG-2 guitar. Oshkosh is only 20 miles from Appleton, and though I don't think we owned recordings by Josh White yet, we were certainly familiar with the man, probably via my older brother Jeff's **Sing Out!** magazines. Lou still remembers the dress she wore, and I remember the first song on the program: the amazing **St. James Infirmary Blues**, often also known as just **St. James Infirmary**.

Josh White was born in 1914 so he was 50 by the time we saw him. In my geezerhood, of course, 50 seems awfully young, but at the time I was 16 and Josh White seemed a wise old sage, blowing the three of our minds with his music, a few years before *blowing one's mind* was an official concept. I doubt we had much of an idea that Josh White's career had been almost destroyed by the

blacklisting efforts of Appleton's infamous rotten scoundrel, Joe McCarthy. We also were not aware that White toured despite increasing physical problems, and died only five years after this concert, in September 1969.

Josh White had a unique and complicated life, which took him from traveling with country blues street musicians as an impoverished boy to eventually appearing on Broadway. Though he considered himself primarily an entertainer, he was legendary as a political artist and activist. He worked in film, including playing himself in the great Surrealist Hans Richter's film, **Dreams that Money Can Buy** (1947). White became close friends with enthusiastic fans Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, and was the first African American performer to give a command performance at the White House. The Roosevelts are the godparents of Josh's son Josh White Jr., who is continuing in the tradition with his own stellar career as, in his own words, a "Folk/blues, pop, (and) jazz, vocalist, guitarist, songwriter, actor, adult and children's concert performer and recording artist, teacher and social activist."

Incidentally, on Monday, November 16th, fewer than two months after the incredible Josh White (Sr.) concert, Pete Seeger came to the Lawrence College Chapel in Appleton. I didn't think I could become more of a folk music fan, but I was wrong. I remember the goosebumps. Come to think of it, that may have been the night I decided to buy the used 12-string, which I own to this day. I should point out that we were hopelessly behind the times as usual, as the Beatles had already been on the Sullivan show way back in February of 1964, and indeed, September 1964 was the month the TV show **Hootenanny** ENDED its controversial run, which had begun in April of 1963. Michael Cooney has told me that when he heard the Beatles on the radio for the first time that year, he knew that the big folk craze was over. And that's the year Lou and I jumped in with all four work boots.

So. The **St. James Infirmary Blues**. What a song. It reminds me of **Mack the Knife**, with its theme of death and

its minor key. Scores of musicians have recorded some version of **St. James** over the years. The most well known version, for good reason, was recorded in 1928 (!) by Louis Armstrong. But Josh White is the man who really brought it to us that afternoon, in a spellbinding rendition, highlighting its beautiful weirdness.

If you want a new way to feel the deep strangeness of this song, have a look at the 1933 Betty Boop cartoon **Snow White**, produced by Max Fleischer, featuring Cab Calloway singing a wild interpretation of it. The vocal begins a bit after the four minute mark, and it's there that the crazy backgrounds begin to scroll by behind the transmogrifying clown, Koko, who is ostensibly singing the song. It's a Surrealist wonder. This entire cartoon, all seven minutes of it, mostly drawn by the great animator Roland C. Crandall, is archived at the free site, archive.org. Here's the URL:

archive.org/details/bb_snow_white

Based on a centuries old folk song, **St. James Infirmary blues** contains this sad, inexplicable, evocative verse:

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

As Sarah Vowell says in an ingenious essay about the song in the online magazine **Salon**, "Listening to good music is like watching a quiz show without cue cards -- the fun is in knowing that you might not ever figure it out."

Thanks Josh White for the life-changing concert, and thanks to him and all others who over hundreds of years have helped keep the St. James Infirmary song in the mix.

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