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# **Stagolee Shot Billy**

Cecil BROWN



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### Stagolee Shot Billy Cecil BROWN

Although his story has been told countless times--by performers from Ma Rainey, Cab Calloway, and the Isley Brothers to Ike and Tina Turner, James Brown, and Taj Mahal--no one seems to know who Stagolee really is. Stack Lee? Stagger Lee? He has gone by all these names in the ballad that has kept his exploits before us for over a century. Delving into a subculture of St. Louis known as "Deep Morgan," Cecil Brown emerges with the facts behind the legend to unfold the mystery of Stack Lee and the incident that led to murder in 1895.

How the legend grew is a story in itself, and Brown tracks it through variants of the song "Stack Lee"--from early ragtime versions of the '20s, to Mississippi John Hurt's rendition in the '30s, to John Lomax's 1940s prison versions, to interpretations by Lloyd Price, James Brown, and Wilson Pickett, right up to the hip-hop renderings of the '90s. Drawing upon the works of James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison, Brown describes the powerful influence of a legend bigger than literature, one whose transformation reflects changing views of black musical forms, and African Americans' altered attitudes toward black male identity, gender, and police brutality. This book takes you to the heart of America, into the soul and circumstances of a legend that has conveyed a painful and elusive truth about our culture.

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#### Reviews of this book:

In *Stagolee Shot Billy*...Brown revisits the archetypal story of "someone who was willing to defend himself if transgressed against, if his dignity was at stake." Songs about Stagolee have long been a staple of African-American music, with recordings by Ma Rainey, Duke Ellington, and Fats Domino...To analyze the legend, Mr. Brown draws on structuralist and formalist thinkers such as Mikhail Baktin, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Vladimir Propp...But where another scholar might explicate a few symbols and call it a day, Brown has pursued the tale to its origins--a bar fight in St. Louis in 1895, during which a saloonkeeper named Lee Shelton shot William Lyons when a friendly game of cards went wrong.

#### Reviews of this book:

In a St. Louis tavern on Christmas night in 1895 Lee Shelton (a pimp also known as Stack Lee) killed William Lyons in a fight over a hat. There were other murders that night, but this one became the stuff of legend. Songs based on the event soon spread out of whorehouses and ragtime dives across...

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