



Robert Hunter and the Myth of Stagger Lee

Written by Scott W. Vincent for College Writing II at Kent State University Ashtabula

Under the supervision of Professor John B. Stoker

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Scott W. Vincent

John B. Stoker

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As the music of the people, folk music embodies the many stories and cultures of the people who create it and pass it down through the consecutive generations (McQuail, para. 4). Early on, this tradition was strictly an oral one. As such, it was inevitable that each person who staked their claim in it would change the songs to some degree. It might be something simple, maybe the changing of names or dates, or the addition of a few more lyrics. It may be more significant, and the story may be changed to place its characters in entirely new roles. As lyricist for the Grateful Dead, Robert Hunter certainly fell into this latter category. He borrowed elements from many traditional folk songs to craft entirely new works. The resulting songs were familiar in their characters and storylines. At the same time though they often presented these characters and events in entirely new perspectives. Such was the case with his version of the tale of Stagger Lee. For many, Stagger Lee was a true American Hero, a man who answered to nobody but himself and was afraid of no one. He truly embodied the American ideal of freedom without limitation. But in the hands of Robert Hunter, Stagger Lee was reduced to nothing but a “lawless murderer” (McQuail, para. 7). And in the process of his being brought to pay for his crimes, the woman who would bring him down would emerge as the image of the American ideal of breaking through the limitations set on her.

Stagger Lee has gone by several names over the years. Stack-a-lee, Stacker Lee and Stagolee are just a few of the variants (Greil 66). By any name though, Stagger Lee has come to

define a certain type of mythologized hero. Behind this mythological figure is a fairly simple tale which has been told countless times. In keeping with the tradition of folk tales, the details and events vary widely. In Robert Hunter's version of the tale, as in many, Stagger Lee and Billy DeLyon (whose name varies as often as Stagger Lee's) are at a bar, usually gambling. Billy gets his hands on Stagger Lee's Stetson hat, either from winning it through gambling or more simply by just pulling it off his head. He refuses to give the hat back, an argument ensues, and Stagger Lee pulls out a pistol with the intent to kill Billy DeLyon. Billy often pleads for his life, but Stagger Lee has already decided the insult of taking his hat is unforgivable, and he murders Billy DeLyon. The details following the murder are where the most variation occurs. Though he often is ultimately sentenced to death for his crime, the opinion of Stagger Lee varies widely. To some he was a bold hero who wouldn't be trifled with, and he was only defending himself and his reputation when he killed Billy DeLyon. To others, he is quite simply a murderer who deserved punishment for the murder of the innocent Billy. In every version, however, one thing never changes: Stagger Lee is a man above all others (Kanner, para. 15).

Stagger Lee is a man without limits, a man who lives outside the system, a man who answers only to himself. Tony Kullen provides what is possibly the best summary of Stagger Lee's character in his essay, quoting from Julius Lester's description of Stagger Lee in *Black Folktales* as "undoubtedly and without question, the baddest nigger that ever lived" (Kullen, para. 1). Stagger Lee was unstoppable. In some versions of the tale, the law was too afraid to pursue him. Even when the sheriff did catch up to him, it seemed that death itself could not stop Stagger Lee. By some accounts of the tale, upon arriving in hell, he would take the place over (Greil 67). The myth has become an integral part of African-American folklore, for all those who have lived under oppression induced from slavery, prison or economic disadvantage. The

legend has even spoke to poor whites who also found vitality in its myth. “Stagolee was as impulsive, as vulgar, as daring and as adventurous as they wanted him (and themselves) to be” (Brown 1-2). These people all lived under heavy limitations that seemed impossible to break. Slaves were subject to their master’s demands, prisoners were subject to their shackles and chains, and many a poor farmer was subject to the wealthier members of society. To all of them, Stagger Lee was a hero. The myth of Stagger Lee was a fantasy of life without limits for these many people who lived with incredible limits to their freedom every day (Greil 66).

With the advent of musical recordings, the tale eventually found its way beyond the slaves’ field hollers and other oral traditions and into recorded song. The process began in 1923 with recordings made by two white dance bands, Fred Waring’s Pennsylvanians and Frank Westphal and His Orchestra. During the 1930s and 1940s John Lomax and his son Alan recorded renditions of it from prisoners all over the Southern United States (Brown 4). But it was not until 1958 that Stagger Lee finally hit the mainstream consciousness. It was this year that Lloyd Price released his own version of Stagger Lee, which he had developed as a play while serving the armed forces in Korea. Two-and-a-half years later, it would be a number one pop hit for him, a position that held for four weeks straight (Greil 285-6). Price’s version was an uptempo danceable song that celebrated Stagger Lee. In this version of the tale, “Stagolee was a winner” (Greil 67).

Price starts by giving the story a setting, indicating that the night is clear, the moon is out and the leaves are tumbling down (Price). It provides an almost poetic and beautiful backdrop to the violence that is to ensue. As is the case in so many other versions of the tale, Stagger Lee and Billy are gambling. Billy beats Stagger Lee, though there seems to be some dispute between them about that. Billy wins all of Lee’s money and his iconic Stetson hat, and the result is what

it always is: Stagger Lee shoots and kills Billy. Finding himself at the wrong end of Stagger Lee's gun, Billy pleads "Oh, please don't take my life / I've three little children / And a very sickly wife" (Price). The plea does him no good, and Stagger Lee shoots Billy in an incredible display, as the bullet goes straight through him and shatters the bartender's mirror. This very violent scene ends the song, contrasting significantly with the very peaceful opening. Price paints Lee as the hero though, cheering him on throughout the song, "Go Stagger Lee!" (Price). This song is an excellent representation of the Stagger Lee myth, of the man who would not and could not be stopped. Stagger Lee could not lose to Billy. This is the Stagger Lee that is so well known and loved, and this is the Stagger that Robert Hunter would seek to bring down in his own retelling of this old tale.

The Grateful Dead first performed Hunter's version of Stagger Lee on August 30, 1978. The studio recording came a few months later on their album *Shakedown Street*. Titled *Delia DeLyon and Staggerlee* by Hunter, the song was listed on the album as simply *Stagger Lee*. The song became a fairly consistent part of the band's live sets over the following years (Dodd 287). Though Hunter's title for the song did not make it onto the album, the spirit behind it is evident in the lyrics: This is a tale about Delia DeLyon first, and Stagger Lee second.

In Hunter's song, the conflict between Stagger Lee and Billy plays a lessened role than it does in other versions of the tale. As in Price's version, the two men are gambling. Billy throws lucky dice, wins the Stetson hat, and Lee kills him over it (Hunter 56). But the entire conflict is over in the first stanza of the song. Rather than being the main story itself, here the conflict between Stagger Lee and Billy DeLyon serves as a backdrop for the story which Hunter wants to tell. This is the story of Delia DeLyon, the widow of the now deceased Billy DeLyon.

Robert Hunter is not the first person to make mention of Billy's wife in the long line of Stagger Lee songs that proceed his. Usually she is mentioned by Billy himself, who begs Stagger Lee not to shoot him because of her and their children. The children are never named, and it is only in Hunter's version of the song that his wife is given the name Delia (Kullen, para. 2). In most versions she remains an anonymous bargaining chip which Billy employs in an attempt to save his own life. Stagger Lee shows no mercy though, and every time Billy is killed with no regard for the implications it will have on his now fatherless family. In the hands of Robert Hunter though, Delia moves from being an anonymous character to being the protagonist of the story, a position usually held for Stagger Lee himself. In Price's song Billy tells Lee of his "sickly wife," giving the impression of a woman who needed Billy and is sure to become a helpless widow if he is killed. Delia DeLyon is the exact opposite of this image.

After the murder, Delia finds that the town sheriff, Baio, is unwilling to pursue Stagger Lee. She asks him how he can let Lee get away with this crime. This same element is found in Mississippi John Hurt's *Stackalee*, but in Hunter's song Delia seems prepared to go after Lee herself, telling the sheriff, "Baio you go get him or give the job to me" (McQuail, para. 30). The sheriff is afraid of Stagger Lee, and he tries to sweet talk Delia, asking her "How the hell can I arrest him when he's twice as big as me?" (Hunter 56). He further explains he is sure to die if he confronts Lee. Delia is up against a serious limitation. The system that is supposed to bring her husband's killer to justice is unwilling to do so. Delia is undeterred though, and again she makes it clear to Baio that she will bring Lee to justice if she has to do it herself. She asks for the Sheriff's revolver and makes her way to the club where her husband was killed.

The next three lines of the song present a very powerful image of Delia and what she must do as she seeks to avenge her husband's death:

She waded to DeLyon's club through Billy DeLyon's blood

Stepped up to Stagger Lee at the bar

Said Buy me a gin fizz, love (Hunter 56)

One can imagine how calm she must keep herself as she approaches Stagger Lee at "the bar still wet with her dead husband's blood" (Trager 353). Stagger Lee is apparently not acquainted with Mrs. DeLyon, and must assume this is just another woman vying for his attention. He soon discovers though that this is not just any woman sitting next to him.

With Stagger Lee unaware of the true nature of Delia's advances toward him, she waits for her opportunity to strike. As he lights a cigarette, she sees her chance, and shoots him with Baio's revolver. Rather than take a fatal shot, though, Delia opts instead to shoot Lee's testicles (Hunter 56). And in this image, we see just how much Hunter destroys the myth of the mighty Stagger Lee.

The all powerful and macho Stagger Lee, the "baddest nigger ever to live," has his manhood destroyed both figuratively and also quite literally. It is hard to imagine a more biting attack on his myth than to have Stagger Lee disabled in such a painful and humiliating way. As he succumbs to the pain of being shot and bleeds from his crotch, Delia calmly blows the smoke from her revolver. With Stagger Lee disabled, Delia has him dragged back to city hall. She pleads her case before the sheriff: "Baio, Baio, see you hang him high / He shot my Billy dead and now he's got to die" (Hunter 56). Defeated and embarrassed by the widow of the man he murdered, Stagger Lee is hung for his crime and he and his myth both die.

With Stagger Lee hung for the murder, Delia has succeeded in pushing past the limitations that had been set in front of her. As she walks along afterwards, she comes across a band on the street performing *Nearer My God To Thee*, an old hymn from the 1800s (Dodd

286). As she picks up on the melody, she begins to sing along with her own words, singing “Look out Stagger Lee” (Hunter 56). In his essay on the legend of Stagger Lee, Kullen argues that this is proof that Hunter’s Stagger Lee “is not a retelling of the same old story, but a new one, in which Delia sings one of the earlier versions” (Kullen, para. 7). He furthers this argument by pointing out that “Hunter places the song in a time many years after the events are traditionally said to have occurred” (Kullen, para. 7). To Kullen, the change in historical setting by Hunter is irreconcilable except to explain that this is not the same story. However, Hunter’s decision to place the story in a much later period in history could just as easily be attributed to poetic license. Hunter has twisted the story significantly as it is, so why not change the year it occurs in as well? There is some evidence against Kullen’s argument, coming from Hunter himself. In 1997, Hunter was asked to contribute to a television special about the story of Stagger Lee for National Geographic. He performed his “Stagger Lee” for the show, but in this particular performance he changed the year of his story from 1940 to 1895. In an online journal he explained the reason for the change was because it “is closer to the facts of the matter.” He went on to explain that Christmas Eve was not the precise date of the murder though it is the date given in his song, but in this case “poetic license prevails” (Peters 175). Given this, it appears that in Hunter’s mind, changing the year to 1940 is not indicative of this being a different story.

This *is* the same story, except that in this revival of the myth Delia DeLyon is the winner. As she walks down Singapore Street and sings to herself, it is due to her reflecting on her accomplishments. She has achieved the outcome she desired, and the words she sings come to her naturally as she lines them up with the melody she picks up from the band. She is feeling immense joy and satisfaction at this moment. There will be time to mourn at her husband’s funeral, but for now she is celebrating her triumph over the limitations that sought to let Stagger

Lee get away with murder. This is a celebration in the same sense of celebration that had Lloyd Price shouting “Go Stagger Lee!” But Delia does not celebrate Stagger Lee as a hero as Price did, but as a fallen foe: “Look Out Stagger Lee!”

The myth of Stagger Lee is powerful. For many, he represented what they wanted to do: to break through limitations and to live a life unrestricted by outside entities. To them, as Marcus Greil puts it, Stagger Lee was “a stone-tough image of a free man” (Greil 67). In Hunter’s version of the tale though, he is little more than a common criminal; he is a heartless murderer who killed another man over a hat with no thought for the man’s family and deserved to die for it. To those who see Stagger Lee as a hero, the story of Delia DeLyon may seem like a joke (Womack 55-56). But it is far from being a joke. Hunter strips Stagger Lee of his hero image, but in his place he created another hero in the character of Delia DeLyon. Delia faced limitations just as Lee did. With her husband dead, she found the sheriff unwilling to bring the killer to justice. Delia refused to be a victim to circumstances though, and by doing so she reinvented herself as the heroine of the tale, rather than another victim. In doing so, she put Lee squarely in the role of the villain.

Delia DeLyon could have given up and simply decried the unfair circumstances that allowed Stagger Lee to get away with the murder of her husband. But Hunter did not let this happen. Delia could idly mourn the death of her husband and the resulting circumstances, but she takes up a pistol and seeks out his killer instead. And once she finds him, she embarrasses him and brings him to justice. After all she goes through, she still ends with a song of victory. Stagger Lee was without a doubt one very tough man; but Delia DeLyon was without a doubt one very tough mother. For all the might and unlimited potential of the mythological Stagger Lee, he was no match for his final obstacle: the vengeance of a woman scorned. Delia overcame

the bad man Stagger Lee, and in doing so became a true heroine in the spirit of living life without limitations.

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