

Stagger Lee

Lloyd Price

(The night was clear, and the moon was yellow,
And the leaves came tumbling down.)

I was standing on the corner when I heard my bulldog bark.
He was barkin' at the two men who were gamblin' in the dark.

It was Stagger Lee and Billy, two men who gambled late.
Stagger Lee threw seven. Billy swore that he threw eight.
Stagger Lee told Billy, I can't let you go with that.
You have won all my money and my brand-new Stetson hat.

Stagger Lee went home, and he got his forty-four.
Said, I'm goin' to the barroom just to pay that debt I owe.

Stagger Lee went to the barroom,
And he stood across the barroom door.
He said, nobody move and he pulled his forty-four.

Stagger Lee, cried Billy, oh, please don't take my life.
I've got three little children and a very sickly wife.

Stagger Lee shot Billy, oh, he shot that poor boy so bad.
'Till the bullet came through Billy,
and it broke the bartender's glass.

"Stagger Lee" was originally a popular American folk song about the murder of Billy Lyons by "Stag" Lee Shelton in St. Louis, Missouri at Christmas, 1895. It was first published in 1911, and was first recorded in 1923 by Fred Waring's Pennsylvanians.

On Christmas night in 1895, Shelton and his acquaintance William "Billy" Lyons were drinking in the Bill Curtis Saloon. Lyons was a member of St. Louis' underworld, and may have been a political and business rival to Shelton. Eventually, the two men got into a dispute, during which Lyons took Shelton's Stetson hat. Subsequently, Shelton shot Lyons, recovered his hat, and left. Shelton was charged, tried and convicted of the murder in 1897. He was paroled in 1909, but returned to prison in 1911 for assault and robbery. He died in incarceration in 1912.

In 1950, a version of "Stack-a-Lee" by New Orleans pianist Archibald reached number 10 on the Billboard R&B chart. Lloyd Price recorded the song as "Stagger Lee" in 1958, and it rose to the top of both the R&B and US pop charts in early 1959.