

The American Songbag

Lilly & Willy on the Fast Train to Mars

A New Musical by Peter Ray
Inspired by Carl Sandburg's The American Songbag

Short Synopsis

The Devil has been watching humanity for ten thousand years. He has seen empires rise, wars fought, fortunes won and lost, and generations repeat the same mistakes. He claims he does not create greed, fear, loneliness or despair. He simply knows how to exploit them. Yet one human weakness continues to puzzle him: love.

Into his world comes **Lilly**, a restless young woman from Pike County who heads west searching for a better life. Her first marriage fails, and her next taste of prosperity comes through a wealthy miner named Jack. Their luxurious life ends aboard the Titanic, where Jack dies and Lilly discovers that money cannot buy safety. She returns to Placerville alone and broke, but still determined to keep going.

There she meets **Willy**, an unsuccessful Irish prospector with little money, a fiddle, and an extravagant confidence in his romantic abilities. Lilly has learned to distrust promises, but Willy offers something different: himself. They fall in love.

Together they try nearly every promise America has to offer. They buy "**Wizard Oil**", hoping for a miracle cure. They listen to a preacher who tells them dignity lies in honest labor, so they become farmers. They work themselves nearly to exhaustion, only to lose their farm to the bank. The preacher then offers another ideal: service to others. Willy goes to war, promising Lilly he will return.

War destroys Willy's faith in glory. At home, Lilly must survive without him. A banker promises to protect her as a working girl, but that protection becomes another transaction. She briefly finds independence and money as an entertainer, only to discover how quickly the world replaces her with someone younger.

Exhausted by loss, Lilly finally stops asking how to build a better life and simply asks to escape this one in **“Jesus, Take Me to Mars.”** Drugs provide the counterfeit escape that follows. She becomes **"Fentanyl Lil"** and dies shortly before Willy returns.

Willy collapses. He drinks and gambles, eventually retreating from the casino into a digital world where gambling follows him home via his computer and his phone. Broke, angry and alone, he decides he will tell the world what is wrong with it.

In **“Willy the Wanderer,”** the old American wanderer becomes a modern **social-media influencer**. Willy no longer needs a highway or railroad because the entire world is inside his phone. He scrolls through wars, rumors, billionaires, preachers and politicians, building followers through outrage, blame, hot takes, memes and endless arguments. He becomes convinced that his opinions matter because strangers online agree with him. Yet after all the posting, sharing, blaming and refreshing, the question remains: Did anything change? Willy's answer is simply, **“No.”** His wandering has moved from the physical world into the digital one, but he is just as lost.

Then Willy encounters something that cannot be reduced to a post. He finds a freezing orphan outside a rich man's mansion. The wealthy man has warmth, food and plenty, yet refuses to open his door. Willy pounds on it, but nobody answers. For perhaps the first time, his anger is directed not toward his own misfortune but toward someone else's suffering. He cannot save the girl, but he recognizes the terrible truth: **somebody could have.**

Still desperate for an external savior, Willy turns toward modern wealth and technology and begs the "**Rich Man, Take Me to Mars"**. But that promise fails too. With nowhere left to wander, argue, gamble or escape, Willy turns to drugs. In the psychedelic nightmare of **“Willy the Weeper,”** his whole life returns in distorted fragments until Lilly appears and offers the only destination that matters: *home.*

Willy dies and awakens beside Lilly in the morgue.

The Devil believes he has finally won. But in **“A Hundred Years Ago,”** he is confronted by something larger than himself. Human lives may last less than a century, but humanity keeps returning. Children are born. Seeds become trees. Rivers reach the sea. Young people fall in love. The Devil may be ten thousand years old, but even he cannot command nature, time or the endless renewal of human life.

Then two hearts begin beating.

Lilly and **Willy** rise from their morgue tables, alive and young once again, and start to dance.

In **“Lilly and Willy on the Fast Train to Mars,”** everything the Devil thought he owned begins slipping through his fingers. The farmer dances. The soldier drops his gun. The poor child opens the door. The lonely find one another. And whenever the Devil declares that the story is over, humanity starts it again.

Mars has changed meaning. For Lilly it was once an escape through religion. For Willy it became an escape through wealth and technology. Neither could take them there.

In the end, **Lilly and Willy find each other and learn to dance.**

The Devil survives. He always will.

But so do we.

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