

“À Saint-Lazare” A song by Aristide Bruant

by

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The popular image of Saint-Lazare prison at the turn of the twentieth century is brilliantly captured in the *chanson réaliste* song *À Saint-Lazare* by the Parisian singer-songwriter-writer and early recording artist Aristide Bruant (1851-1925).

Louis-Armand-Aristide Bruant, whose image was immortalized in a famous poster painted by his friend Toulouse-Lautrec, came to Paris in 1866. Making his home in the Montmartre Quarter he frequented the local working-class bistros absorbing the hard-edged experiences of daily life there. He began appearing at the famous *Le Chat Noir* club and adopted the stage name of Aristide Bruant and his signature “look” consisting of a black velvet jacket, red shirt, long red scarf, and high boots. He quickly rose to pop-stardom and opened his own successful nightclub *Le Mirliton*. In this milieu, he attracted members of the upper classes who were excited by the experience of “slumming” in this famously bohemian quarter. He became well-known for the witty and insulting way that he treated his audiences, to their great feigned-shock and delight.

Through his songs, poems, and later early sound recordings Bruant immortalized the day-to-day life and “apache” atmosphere of Belle Epoque Paris. His commanding aesthetic sense was also expressed in his memorable collaborations with artists such as Lautrec and Alexander Steinlen whose illustrations and posters promoting Bruant and his work also perfectly captured the City of Lights at the dawn of the twentieth century.

The song *À Saint-Lazare* was published in a series entitled *Dans les Rues* that included such other songs as *À la Roquette*, *À la Bastille*, and *À Grenelle*. It tells the story of a Parisian prostitute who has been found to have a venereal disease and is being held for treatment at Saint-Lazare. She won't be released until she is cured. She writes a letter from prison to her pimp:

C'est d'la prison que j't'écris  
*I'm writing you from prison*  
Mon pauv' Polyte,  
*My poor Polyte,*  
Hier je n'sais pas c'qui m'a pris,  
*Yesterday, little did I suspect what would be the results*  
a la visite.  
*of my checkup.*  
C'est des maladies qui s'voient pas  
*I did not suspect that I had the disease*  
Quand ça s'declare,  
*which*  
N'empêche qu'aujourd'hui j'suis dans l'tas.  
*will keep me from working the streets, now that I'm*  
À Saint-Lazare !  
*at Saint-Lazare!*

Mais pendant c'temps-la, toi, vieux chien,  
*But during this time, my dear*  
Qué qu'tu vas faire?  
*What will you do?*  
Je n'peux t'envoyer rien de rien.  
*I won't be able to send you anything.*  
C'est la misère.  
*What misery.*  
Ici tout l'monde est décavé.  
*Here, everyone is broke.*  
La braise est rare.  
*Money is scarce.*  
Faut trois mois pour faire un linvé  
*It takes three months just to make twenty sous*  
à Saint-Lazare!  
*at Saint-Lazare!*

Vrai, d'te savoir comm'ça sans l'sou,  
*I know that you are broke,*  
Je m'faire une bile!  
*and this upsets me so!*

T'es capab' de faire un sal'coup,  
*You could even turn to crime,*  
J'suis pas tranquille.  
*I sure am worried.*

T'as trop d'fierté pour ramasser  
*You are too proud to resort to picking up*  
Des bouts d'cigare  
*cigarette butts from the street*  
Pendant tout l'temps que j'vas passer,  
*during the time I will be,*  
À Saint-Lazare!  
*at Saint-Lazare!*

Va-t-en trouver la grand' Nana,  
*Find another good ole woman of the evening,*  
Dis que j'la prie  
*Tell her, I'm begging her*  
D'casquer pour moi, j'y rendrai ça  
*to take over for me; I will pay her back*  
A ma sortie.  
*when I get out of here.*  
Surtout n'y fai pas d'boniments,  
*Above all don't try to seduce her*  
Pendant qu'je m'marre  
*while I am sick*  
Et que j'bois des médicaments,  
*and being treated here*  
À Saint-Lazare!  
*at Saint-Lazare!*

Et pis, mon p'tit loup, bois pas trop,  
*And my dear, don't make things worse by drinking too much,*  
Tu sais qu't'es teigne,  
*You know how wicked you are*  
Et qu'quand t'as un p'tit coup d'sirop  
*when you've had a little bit too much to drink.*  
Tu fous la beigne;  
*You get into fights;*  
Si tu t'faisais coffrer, un soir,  
*If you were to get locked up one night*  
Dans une bagarre,  
*after a brawl*  
Y a pas personne qui viendrait m'voir  
*there wouldn't be anyone who could come to visit me*  
À Saint-Lazare!  
*at Saint-Lazare!*

J'finis ma letter en t'embrassant,  
*My letter is finished, and I embrace you,*  
Adieu, mon homme.  
*Goodbye, my love.*  
Malgré qu'tu soy'pas caessant,  
*Even though you're not a softie,*  
Ah! J't'adore comme  
*Ah! I adore you like*  
J'adorais l'bon Dieu comme papa,  
*I adored our good God, like a papa,*  
Et qu'j'allais communier à Sainte Marguerite.  
*when I'd go to communion at Sainte-Marguerite.*

The recording of *À Saint-Lazare* which accompanies this exhibition features Corey Fretz, Soprano, accompanied by Brad Robin on the piano. It was produced and recorded by Thomas Miller.