Irish American Vernacular English

Jasm & Gism as a Source for the Word "Jazz"
From the Work of Peter Tamony
by Daniel Cassidy, 2/7/05 San Francisco

Peter Tamony, legendary San Francisco Irish American folklore collector and etymologist -- who lived his entire life in the old Irish Mission District -- laid out the published history of Jasm and Gism, the hot passionate cousins of the hot Irish word Teas (pron. jass, heat.)

Peter Tamony - Irish American Vernacular

Peter Tamony was born to Irish immigrants in the Mission District on October 9, 1902. He lived in the same house on 24th Street in the heart of the Mission until his death in 1985.

Tamony's interest in words and their origins began when he took a job in the 1920s at a downtown bank and noticed that many speech patterns and usages of his middle-class colleagues and clients differed from those he had learned growing up in the Irish Mission District. He also noted the similarities between Brooklyn and New York dialect and the speech of the Mission District in the quirky (corr-chaoi, odd shaped, odd mannered) pronunciations and shared "slang" vocabularies.

"The Irish have always been here (in the Mission), most of them from Brooklyn. That is why in San Francisco there still can be distinguished some Brooklyn in our speech. This area was originally settled by craftsmen and mechanics who came from Brooklyn like shipwrights, ship's caulks, and tanners.

Unable to participate in sports due to a bout with tuberculosis when he was 20, Tamony became an avid fan of baseball through the sports pages. He took note of the vivid and unconventional language of sports columnists used and started documenting their word usage, as well as that of the people from other parts of San Francisco.

Peter Tamony was first published his research in American Speech in 1937 and two years later
began writing a column, "The Origin of Words," for the San Francisco Newsletter and Wasp. Many of his etymologies were cited in works by H.L. Mencken, Damon Runyon, and English and American dictionaries. He was consulted by editors of the Oxford English Dictionary, Dictionary of American Regional English, and Encyclopedia Britannica. It was, of course, Peter Tamony who was the unnamed source of the 1913 citation for earliest use of the word “Jazz” by his reporter “Scoop” Gleeson

Peter Tamony died on 24 July 1985, leaving the second and third floors of the townhouse he shared with his sister Kathleen filled with boxes of word files. They were donated by Kathleen to the University of Missouri and no longer reside in the Mission. The San Francisco Irish have lost their old jazz. " (123)

The Sanas of Jasm, gism
Teas ioma (pron. jass iom, chas iom)
An abundance of energy, excess heat, much spirit, excitement, passion.

Ioma, adj. (al. iomad, iomaí) abundance, excess, much, great quantity.. (Ó Dónaill, p. 717)

Jasm, often pronounced, jazm or gism today is from the Irish phrase teas ioma and means a “lotta jazz.” Note the final "a" in ioma is a weak unstressed vowel and not pronounced or barely pronounced.

Peter Tamony was described by labor leader and foklorist Archie Green as "the keeper of the lore of the Irish clans of San Francisco."

Peter Tamony's half-century of research into the sexual connotations of “Jazz” traced it back to its lexical ancestors in American vernacular: Jasm and Gism (Teas ioma, pron. jass iom, chass ioma, a large amount of heat and passion.)

Tamony wrote in 1959, "...a sexual source of the word jazz, gism (and) jasm, (is) from the North Eastern states.” There were millions of Irish and Scottish immigrants to the northeastern states, who brought jasm and gism in the jazz of their crossroads caint (speech.)

"It is odd, indeed, that examples of a second suggestion of a sexual source of the word jazz, Gism (or) Jasm, should be from the northeastern states. The 1860 example of Jasm (‘energy, enthusiasm’) in A Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles, 1951) is from the work of Josiah Holland, a Massachusetts writer, while the 1848 example Gism ("strength, talent") (is) cited in Dialect Notes, VI (X), 453, is a Rhode Island usage. John S. Farmer, Americanisms, Old and New (1889) defines Gism as 'a synonym for energy, spirit.’” (Peter Tamony, JEMF Quarterly, Spring 1981, p.11).

1)"Jasm, n. Origin obscure. Possibly the same word as gism, semen, see Wentworth, compare “jazz”): Energy, enthusiasm.” Mathews’ examples are from 1860 and 1886:

2) “If you’ll take thunder and lightning and a steamboat and a buzz-saw and mix ‘em up and put ‘em up and put ‘em in a woman that’s Jasm.” Josiah Holland, Miss Gilbert, 1860

3) “Willin', but hain’t no more jas’m than a dead cornstalk.” Harper's Magazine, Sept. 1886,

“Jazz,” “Jazzin,” and “Jazzed” -- and their Irish American vernacular cousins “jasm” and “gism” are “obscene” words in the cant of the crossroad. Re-rooted into the Irish and Scots-Gaelic languages, jasm and gissom (teas ioma) are the sacred natural jazz that is the seed of life.