

Catholic

UPDATE

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DECEMBER 2024



Let Heaven and Nature Sing

The Stories Behind Favorite Christmas Songs

LAWRENCE LIVINGSTON

Music has a unique power to evoke feeling and memory, and that's especially true of Christmas music. There's a reason that year after year we play those old, familiar tunes. Even the schmaltzy holiday songs—and let's be honest, there are plenty of them—give us a sense of continuity and the joy of nostalgia.

Yet, as much as we love our Christmas carols, we rarely stop to think about where they come from, what the lyrics mean, or even if they are truly songs of Christmas. Some that we associate with Christmas are really just winter songs; for example, “Let it Snow,” “Winter Wonderland,” “Frosty the Snowman,” “Sleigh Ride,” and a batch of others never once reference holiday themes, religious or secular. A good example is “Jingle Bells,” which started out as a nineteenth-century tavern sing-along ditty. The lyrics are, in fact, a bit bawdy, especially the second verse, which is about getting “upset” (possibly a play on the words “upset” and “sot” made up by author James Pierpont) in a snowdrift with Miss Fanny Bright. A tipsy fellow taking a young lady for a ride, unchaperoned, and getting stuck in the snow would have been pretty spicy stuff in the Victorian era!

Thankfully, there are plenty of genuine Christmas songs, some old and some more recent, that are worth exploring.



In the Footsteps of a Good King

“Good King Wenceslas” might be the most recognizable Christmas carol that hardly anyone knows. Most of us can get as far as “...on the feast of Stephen.” A few might make it to “... deep and crisp and even.” But after that? That’s when we start humming.

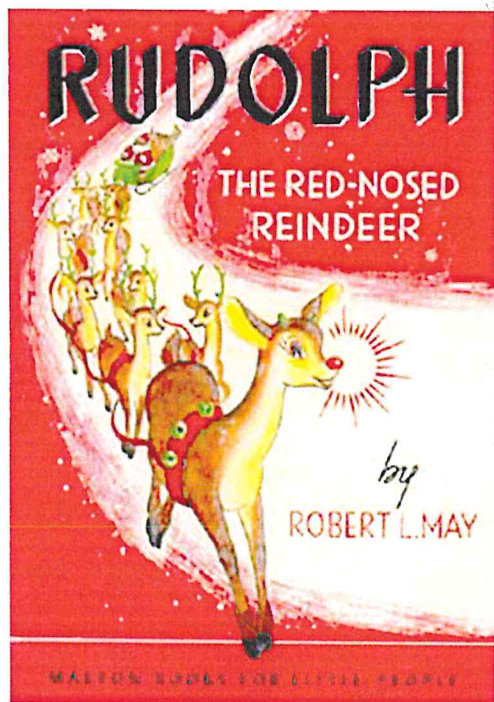
The song is based on a Czech poem about a king who sets out, along with his page, on the second day of Christmastide (the feast of St. Stephen) to take food and firewood to a poor family several miles away. At one point, the exhausted page says he can’t go on through the deep snow, but when he is encouraged by the king to step in the king’s own footprints, he is able to continue.

The song, a metaphor for the Christian journey, is loosely based on the life of St. Wenceslaus, who wasn’t a king but a duke in tenth-century Bohemia (now the Czech Republic). Renowned for his kindness and beloved by his people, the real-life Wenceslaus was assassinated by his jealous brother with the help of their mother. Remember that the next time you think your family has issues.



Sheet music for “Good King Wenceslas” in a biscuit container from 1913, preserved at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Gryffindor / Wikipedia



Rudolph, The Red-Nosed Reindeer, Marion Books. Promotional booklet cover of the original story by Robert L. May. Wikipedia.

The Evolution of a Reindeer

Speaking of issues, one beloved song concerns a certain reindeer whose community learned, finally, to embrace his, shall we say, distinctiveness.

Tell any small child that Rudolph isn’t among the traditional reindeer on Santa’s team, and you’ll likely get a belligerent stare-down. In fact, “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” didn’t exist until 1939, when a Montgomery Ward catalog writer named Robert May wrote a story for the company’s annual Christmas giveaway book.

The book became popular, and May received hundreds of letters from parents and teachers, telling him how inspiring his story was for kids who struggled because they, like Rudolph, were different. Then, in 1949, a songwriter named Johnny Marks, who happened to be May’s brother-in-law, adapted the story of Rudolph into a song that cowboy star Gene Autry recorded. The song was a hit, and, from that point on, Rudolph was an established part of American Christmas culture.

The icing on the Christmas cookie was the 1964 Rankin-Bass television special that most of us grew up with. It introduced the world to a whole new group of characters, like Hermey the aspiring dentist elf and the unfortunate residents of the Island of Misfit Toys, and it provided Rudolph with an expanded backstory.

The evolution of Rudolph from holiday marketing campaign to Christmas icon is an example of how when lore is lacking, communities create it. This once happened around lodge fires and on village greens. Now it happens in an accelerated way through mass media.

Following the Star of Wonder

One example of lore that took its own time to develop is the legend of Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, the Three Kings.

The story of the Magi as it appears in Matthew's Gospel is, in a way, more noteworthy for what it doesn't include than what it does. It doesn't say there were three visitors. It doesn't say they were kings. Nor does it let us know their names or exactly where they were from.

Yet, because the inclusion of the Magi in the story of Jesus' birth communicates an essential truth of our faith—that the Christ came for all, Jew and Gentile, wealthy and poor, powerful and weak—a rich tradition developed over the centuries around the mysterious visitors from the east.

"We Three Kings of Orient Are" was composed in 1857 by John Henry Hopkins, an Episcopal deacon from Pennsylvania. In it, the Magi tell their own story. The first and fifth verses are in their collective voice, while the middle three verses are sung individually, with each king telling of the gift he brings to the Christ Child.

The song resonates with us, perhaps because it helps fill in the Magi in our imaginations. It also helps us better understand the symbolic meaning of the three gifts, which represent Jesus' majesty (gold), divinity (frankincense), and mortality (myrrh).

The story of the Magi, like much of Matthew's infancy narrative, points to the cross and reminds us that there should always be a little Good Friday in our Christmas. The humble babe, the Son of God, is indeed a king worthy of homage, but his kingship will not be established in worldly power but rather in sacrifice.



Adoration of the Magi by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo. Wikipedia.



Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (Loew's Inc.) movie poster. Wikimedia.

Making an Effort to be Merry

The relationship between joy and sorrow that Matthew infuses into his infancy narrative is also present in some of the best Christmas music—those songs that avoid the temptation to overdose on Christmas cheer and remind us that merriment sometimes takes a little effort. "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," written for the 1944 movie musical *Meet Me in St. Louis*, is a lovely example.

The song is credited to composers Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane and is sung by Judy Garland in a scene where she is trying to console her little sister after they learn that their family must move from their beloved home. Both melancholy and hopeful, it was perfect for Garland and her soulful voice.

The lyrics to "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" evolved over time. Originally, they contained the line, "It may be your last. Next year we may all be living in the past," which was changed to "Let your heart be light. Next year all our troubles will be out of sight." Later, when Frank Sinatra recorded his version, the line "until then we'll have to muddle through somehow," became "hang a shining star upon the highest bough."

Hugh Martin thought those changes were fine, but one he didn't like was the phrase "if the fates allow," which he had originally written as "if the Lord allows." It was changed by the film's producers, presumably to make the song more secular and marketable. Martin never let go of his disapproval of that alteration and, years later, rewrote the song as "Have Yourself a Blessed Little Christmas."

Transcending Language and Culture

It was on one blessed little Christmas more than a century earlier, and far away from Hollywood, that one of our most beloved Nativity hymns debuted. Many of us recall the tale of how mice had eaten the insides of the church organ in a small Austrian village, and how a young priest and the parish music director quickly composed a Christmas hymn that could be accompanied on guitar to play at Midnight Mass. That's the legend of how "Silent Night" came to be.

The part about the mice may be apocryphal, and the lyrics were actually written two years earlier, but the rest is true. The year was 1818, shortly after the Napoleonic Wars. Father Joseph Mohr had written a poem about the Nativity of Jesus, and he asked his friend Franz Gruber to set it to music. On Christmas Eve in the village of Oberndorf, the two men performed the song for the first time for the congregation—yes, on guitar.

"*Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht*" ("Silent Night, Holy Night") quickly became popular throughout Europe and America and was translated into multiple languages. The English lyrics that we're familiar with were written in 1863 by Episcopal priest John Freeman Young, and they differ a bit from the original German. To illustrate, here's a literal translation of the original first verse:

Silent night! Holy night!
All are sleeping, alone and awake.
Only the intimate holy pair,
Lovely boy with curly hair,
Sleep in heavenly peace!
Sleep in heavenly peace!

An Anthem for Faraway Loved Ones

The desire for heavenly peace, it seems, transcends language and culture. At a time when the world was at war, that desire helped make a popular hit out of Irving Berlin's "White Christmas," which is still the highest-selling single recording of all time. It was one of several holiday-themed songs that Berlin wrote for the 1942 film *Holiday Inn*, and it was released as a single by Bing Crosby shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

There was something about the sentimentality of the song and the fact that so many men were heading overseas for war that resonated with the American public. It quickly became something of an anthem for loved ones far away from home. Though many others have recorded versions of "White Christmas," it has forever become identified with Crosby, so much so that in 1954 he starred in a film named for the song and destined to become a holiday classic.

Berlin's song is credited with creating the market for recorded Christmas music, and it set the stage for so many other sentimental secular Christmas songs, including "I'll

Be Home for Christmas" and "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas."

A Glimmer of Hope in a Moment of Fear

"White Christmas" became popular largely because of World War II, but another song was inspired by its composer's memory of a particular horrible event from that war.

Noel Regney, a Frenchman, was forced into the German army after his country fell in 1940. He secretly became a member of the French Resistance and led his German platoon into an ambush, where nearly all of them were killed. Though he believed his actions were justified, his part in the massacre haunted him for the rest of his life.

After the war, Regney moved to New York, where he earned a living writing commercial jingles and music for radio and television. He married Gloria Shayne, another songwriter, who had a few hits of her own. The couple lived happily until October 1962, when the United

States and Russia came to the brink of nuclear war in the Cuban Missile Crisis.

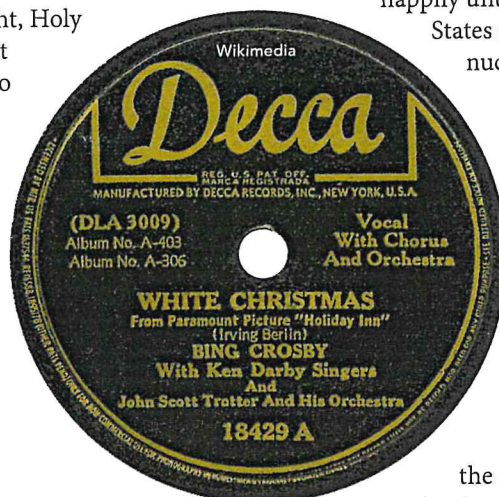
Walking the streets of New York, Regney saw the same fear and despair on people's faces that he remembered from the occupation of Paris. The horrors of the war came flooding back to him, but then he saw something that gave him a glimmer of hope. It was two babies in strollers smiling at each other while their mothers chatted.

Regney later said the innocence of the children reminded him of newborn lambs, and a lyric began to form in his head. He rushed home and told Gloria what had happened, and the two of them quickly wrote a song loosely based on the infancy narrative in Matthew's Gospel, urging people to pray for peace. The song began, "Said the night wind to the little lamb..."

That's how "Do You Hear What I Hear?" was born. Thankfully, the missile crisis passed, but the message of the song is no less valid today than it was then: pray for peace, people everywhere. The child sleeping in the night will bring us goodness and light.

And we'll keep singing about it, year after year.

Lawrence Livingston, a graduate of Benedictine College and St. Meinrad School of Theology, served the Diocese of Davenport as a consultant for youth ministry, the Archdiocese of Kansas City as consultant for adult faith formation, coordinated the MAPM distance learning program for Aquinas Institute of Theology, and most recently worked for Unbound as the senior writer and editor. Lawrence is married and lives in Shawnee, Kansas



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