

“White Christmas”—Bing Crosby (1942)

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Essay by Cary O'Dell



Crosby's 1945 holiday album



Original release label



"Holiday Inn" movie poster

With the possible exception of “Silent Night,” no other song is more identified with the holiday season than “White Christmas.” And no singer is more identified with it than its originator, Bing Crosby. And, perhaps, rightfully so. Surely no other Christmas tune has ever had the commercial or cultural impact as this song or sold as many copies--50 million by most estimates, making it the best-selling record in history.

Irving Berlin wrote “White Christmas” in 1940. Legends differ as to where and how though. Some say he wrote it poolside at the Biltmore Hotel in Phoenix, Arizona, a reasonable theory considering the song’s wishing for wintery weather. Some though say that’s just a good story. Furthermore, some histories say Berlin knew from the beginning that the song was going to be a massive hit but another account says when he brought it to producer-director Mark Sandrich, Berlin unassumingly described it as only “an amusing little number.” Likewise, Bing Crosby himself is said to have found the song only merely adequate at first.

Regardless, everyone agrees that it was in 1942, when Sandrich was readying a Christmas-themed motion picture “Holiday Inn,” that the song made its debut. The film starred Fred Astaire and Bing Crosby and it needed a holiday song to be sung by Crosby and his leading lady, Marjorie Reynolds (whose vocals were dubbed). Enter “White Christmas.” Though the film would not be seen for many months, millions of Americans got to hear it on Christmas night, 1941, when Crosby sang it alone on his top-rated radio show “The Kraft Music Hall.” On May 29, 1942, he recorded it during the sessions for the “Holiday Inn” album issued that year.

Both the film and the recording were released during the very un-holiday month of August of 1942. Regardless, the film was a hit and the song, as temperatures around the country cooled, rose up the charts. Crosby’s recording of “White Christmas” was the top selling disc in the country by the end of October 1942 and would remain so well into January of 1943. That initial run would prove be the song’s first of many up the charts.

“White Christmas” would also win an Oscar for Best Song thanks to its inclusion in “Holiday Inn.” According to “White Christmas” historian Jody Rosen, the song would also ignite a trend for pretty but wistful holiday tunes, including “I’ll Be Home for Christmas,” “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” and, later, “Blue Christmas.”

“White Christmas” would later serve as the centerpiece to Crosby’s best-selling holiday album, “Merry Christmas,” released in its original form in 1945 and revised and expanded over the years. And, Hollywood, never one to let a money-making opportunity go by, years later, in 1954, the

song would serve as inspiration for a film called “White Christmas.” It starred Bing Crosby, Danny Kaye, Rosemary Clooney and Vera-Ellen. Later, in the 2000s, that film would be transferred to the Broadway stage.

The song “White Christmas” has a gentle nature (perfect for Crosby’s relaxed, crooning style) and a great sing-along-ability. There are also only 54 words in it, making the verses easy to remember. And though Crosby’s fame—he was already a major star of screen, radio and song—no doubt helped its popularity, it was the song’s longing nature for home and an American winter that truly struck a chord with listeners. At the time of its release, World War II was fully underway and millions of servicemen and women were already stationed in warm, snow-less climes all around the world, even in places where Christmas isn’t celebrated at all. “White Christmas” spoke ruefully to their wintery home sickness.

The success of “White Christmas” was unprecedented and unexpected. So much so that Decca’s original disc, from which all other copies were struck, finally just wore out from overuse. So, in 1947, Crosby was coaxed back into the studio to record a new version. Hence, the version you are most likely to hear today is not the 1942 original but the 1947 re-recording. Musicologists today love to compare the two “Christmases,” noting any slight differences in orchestration or Crosby’s delivery. The ’47 master recording meanwhile has no risk of being worn out; it is currently in the permanent collection of the Library of Congress.

Curiously, both versions of “White Christmas” omit the song’s original first verse. In it, Berlin has the narrator set in Beverly Hills (or “Beverly Hills, L-A,” as he puts it) longing to be “up north,” and slowly growing nostalgic for all the accouterments of the holiday from tree-tops glistening to children listening to, of course, fresh fallen snow. As this opening is often left out, many probably don’t know it even exists. Even today, only the most stringent of song purists (among them Pink Martini and Linda Ronstadt) usually incorporate it into their versions.

And many versions there have been. It is almost easier to name artists who haven’t performed “White Christmas” than those who have. Nevertheless, some “White Christmas” cover-ers include: Sinatra, the Drifters, the Ravens, Darlene Love, Elvis, Perry Como, Doris Day, Andy Williams, the Ventures, Otis Redding, Barbra Streisand, New Kids on the Block, Linda Ronstadt, Peggy Lee, Taylor Swift, Martina McBride, Bob Marley and even Boy George. There are estimates that over 500 various versions of the song exist, sung in more than a dozen languages.

Still, despite these reimaginings, it is, without question, Crosby’s version that remains the definitive recording. And though Crosby would go on to record over 500 songs and have more number one hits (38) than any other artist including Elvis Presley and the Beatles, “White Christmas” remains the tune he is most associated with. He would sing it often throughout his career and, of course, it was an important element of his annual holiday TV specials in later years.

“White Christmas” has also become an integral part of the American holidays as synonymous to the season as Santa Claus and shopping. And though it might have originally echoed the sentiments of soldiers and others away from home, via its consistent, yearly resurrection it has come to represent many things to many people intermixed as it is now with their own lives and family memories.

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