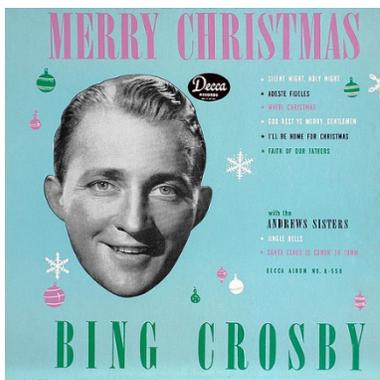


## “White Christmas”—Bing Crosby (1942)

Added to the National Registry: 2002

Essay by Laurence Bergreen (guest post)\*



*Crosby's 1945 holiday album*



*Original release label*



*“Holiday Inn” movie poster*

### ***“The Best Song Anybody Ever Wrote”: Irving Berlin and “White Christmas”***

If you mention “White Christmas” to almost anyone, they will often assume it’s a folk song along the lines of “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” or “Deck the Halls,” and countless other tunes. It’s so simple, so natural, so easy to remember, and it seems like it’s always been there, almost like Christmas itself. In reality, “White Christmas” is the creation--or better, yet, the inspiration--of one person, Irving Berlin, the Russian immigrant and self-taught genius.

Born Israel Baline, the son of a poor Jewish cantor in a small town in Russia, Berlin immigrated to America as a small child along with his immediate family, and lived most of his life in New York City. He began his career as a street singer and saloon pianist, and died in 1989 at the age of 101.

Beginning with “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” in 1911, which gained instant popularity even as it was denounced as a “public menace,” Berlin, generally writing both words and music, made himself through sheer genius and effort into the most esteemed and successful popular American songwriter of the 20th century. His songs celebrated major aspects of the national experience, from love to patriotism to war. He was neither a Democrat nor a Republican. Like so many of his generation, he was simply grateful to be in the USA, breathing the air of freedom. He identified as an American, first and last. Another distinguished songwriter, Jerome Kern, once wrote to their mutual friend, the critic Alexander Woolcott, that “Irving Berlin has no place in American music. HE IS AMERICAN MUSIC.”

Berlin was only 36 at the time, and from then on, he would be known as the quintessentially American musician. He was, after all, the composer of “God Bless America”--the proceeds from which he donated to charity. Whatever was happening in the public sphere at a given moment, from prosperity through depression, from commiseration to celebration, Berlin managed to

render in simple, unforgettable tunes constructed according to the tried-and-true formulas of Tin Pan Alley and Hollywood.

Among the staples were songs celebrating holidays. They provided welcome distraction from the hardship and concerns of daily life. For years, Berlin had been trying to mount a revue he called "Holiday Inn" about a country hotel that was open only for the holidays. Although it seemed like a surefire idea, the show never seemed to come together. For the better part of 20 years Berlin composed and saved holiday-themed tunes against the day that it did. Then came World War II, and everything changed. The country was uniting in a great struggle against distant tyrants. At the time, 1941, Berlin was in Los Angeles working on scores for movies, including "Holiday Inn," which was finally becoming a reality. He was entering his mid-fifties, a seasoned pro, by turns charming and irascible, feisty and shy, and at the peak of his career. If he had retired at that moment, his reputation would have been secure, but he accepted one more challenge, to write a Christmas song for "Holiday Inn," and it had to be great, because Christmas was biggest holiday of all. Berlin's own memories of Christmas included the holiday tree belonging to his family's neighbors, the O'Hares. He was writing a holiday song, but because the country teetered on the brink of World War II, he was also writing a war song evoking the home front.

Back in New York, Berlin recalled being in LA over the holidays, far from home and overcome with nostalgia and melancholy for those bygone Christmas seasons of his youth. In that frame of mind he began to compose. An insomniac, he worked mostly at night at home, playing only the black keys of the piano, as he had learned as a youth. Like other Tin Pan Alley composers, Berlin had no formal musical education and did not know musical notation, so he relied on transcribers to perform that chore on his behalf. Berlin wrote the Christmas song over a weekend, working as usual throughout the night, pausing briefly to consider his effort. He had composed what he called a "round" song, meaning it was completely natural and had come together without effort. By the time he was done, it was Monday morning, and the city was awakening. Instead of going to bed, he dressed and went straight to his place of business, astounding his employees, who were accustomed to nocturnal work habits. He found his transcriber, Helmy Kresa, and announced, "I want you to take down a song I wrote over the weekend. Not only is it the best song *I* ever wrote, it's the best song *anybody* ever wrote."

Helmy was accustomed to Berlin's tendency to exaggerate, and reflected, "You conceited ass." But when Irving played a rough version of the song for him, the transcriber realized this was an exceptional song. Later, Berlin made a deal with Paramount studios to include the movie "Holiday Inn," starring Bing Crosby. And when Crosby first heard the song, he removed his pipe from his mouth and murmured, "You don't have to worry about that one, Irving." And that was indeed the case.

The song topped the charts. Crosby's version became the best-selling single of all time, selling more than 50 million copies, and twice that number in other versions. It won the Academy Award for Best Original Song in 1942, and the movie version it inspired, "White Christmas," became the highest grossing movie of 1954.

The song's popularity has never dimmed. In 1999, National Public Radio included Bing Crosby's version in its compilation of the 100 most important American musical works of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and in 2002, the Library of Congress added the original Crosby version (1942) to its first fifty historically significant recordings for its National Registry. Thanks to Berlin, every Christmas, no matter what the weather, is in some way a white Christmas, just like the ones Irving Berlin used to know.

*Laurence Bergreen is the author of "As Thousands Cheer: The Life of Irving Berlin."*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect the views of the Library of Congress.