

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## *Classic Book Notes #80*

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**Season's Greetings, Happy Holidays,  
and Merry Christmas to All!**

Editor's note: Throughout December we are reprising four of Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Andrew Roth's Classic Book Notes about the origin and meaning of our favorite Christmas songs, from the most ancient carols to the current #1 Christmas tune in American popular music. Following is the second of the four-part series that was first published as Book Notes #80 in December 2021.



## A-Caroling We Will Go to the Movies! Part Two



From left, Irving Berlin, Jule Styne, Sammy Cahn, Johnny Marks, and Mel Tormé

What's your favorite movie Yuletide tune? There are literally dozens, some of which have become Christmas and Yuletide classics. Perhaps surprisingly, perhaps not, many of them were written by Jewish songwriters. Why? The answer to that question links to my *The American Tapestry Project's* "Immigrant's Tale."

Before investigating that linkage, however, have you ever asked yourself what's a "Yule" and what does "Yuletide" mean, about which Nat King Cole sings so memorably in Mel Tormé and Robert Wells' "The Christmas Song," better known as "Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire"?

Well, as we've been learning in previous *Book Notes*, in my *American Holidays* series and in last week's [first installment on American Christmas songs](#), the customs surrounding many of our holidays have pagan origins. In particular, Nordic and Celtic pagan roots. Carols and caroling trace their lineage back, granted in a bit of a crooked line, to the ancient Celtic harvest festival Samhain's influence on our Halloween customs and the ancient pagan custom of singing and dancing to encourage a return of spring on the vernal equinox and to ward off the chill at

the winter solstice. Similarly, burning a Yule log at the winter solstice is an ancient Nordic pagan tradition found in both Viking and Germanic cultures. It was meant to protect against the cold, but it was also a celebration of the sun and a yearning for its return.

The word Yule itself has ancient Germanic roots naming the two months hinging on either side of the winter solstice – December and January. “Yuletide” then is the deep winter season signaling one year’s end and a new year’s beginning. The “Yuletide” celebration began on the solstice by lighting a giant log. It could last for days until the log burnt itself out. Although today a “Yule log” is a rolled Christmas cake, originally it was a log burnt celebrating the sun.

As Linda Watts says in her *Encyclopedia of American Folklore*, “The familiar custom of burning the Yule log dates back to earlier solstice celebrations and the tradition of bonfires. ... Many have beliefs based on the yule log as it burns, and by counting the sparks and such, they seek to discern their fortunes for the new year and beyond.” [1] Eventually, as the Christianization of northern Europe and the British Isles progressed, “Yuletide” came to be a synonym for the entire Christmas season ending with Twelfth Night on January 5.

OK, that was interesting, but what is your favorite “Yuletide” movie song? It’s a long list containing such obvious choices as Judy Garland singing “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” in 1944’s *Meet Me in St. Louis*, “Silver Bells” sung by Bob Hope and Marilyn Maxwell in 1951’s otherwise forgettable *The Lemon Drop Kid*, Josh Groban singing “Believe” in 2004’s *The Polar Express*, and “You’re a Mean One, Mr. Grinch” from 1966’s animated TV special *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, which has now become an annual classic. Two from the *Home Alone* franchise make most lists. They are “Somewhere in My Memory” from 1990’s *Home Alone* and “All Alone on Christmas” from 1992’s *Home Alone 2*. Others appearing on multiple lists include gimmick numbers like “What’s This?” from 1993’s *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and soundtrack background music like Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil’s “Christmas Vacation” from 1989’s *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*.

Numerous lists ache to be *au courant* with up-to-date tunes everyone’s already forgotten, but even in the trendiest seeking lists two or three songs always appear near the top: Judy Garland’s “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” from *Meet Me in St. Louis*, “Believe” from 2004’s *Polar Express*, and, of course, Bing Crosby’s version of “White Christmas” from 1942’s *Holiday Inn*. As we will discover, in 1957 Crosby sang definitive versions of multiple Christmas songs, including an entire LP (for the analog challenged, an LP is a long-playing vinyl record album) for children entitled *A Christmas Story* for Golden Records. [2] Golden Records was a Simon and Schuster record label meant to accompany its popular Golden Books for young readers.

On many lists ranked as the No. 1 Christmas movie song of all time, Garland’s “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” was one of three The Great American Songbook standards from *Meet Me in St. Louis*. The other two are “The Trolley Song” and “The Boy Next Door.” [3] The film itself was one of 1944’s two biggest hits. It was number two. Bing Crosby’s *Going My Way*, in which Gonzaga University’s most famous alumnus played a young priest, topped the list. *Meet*

***Me in St. Louis***, like Crosby's ***Holiday Inn***, was a "holiday movie" with a classic girl-meets-boy, girl-loses-boy, girl-gets-boy back again plot. In ***Holiday Inn***, the genders are reversed. The plot is strung out across a calendar year providing the opportunity for musical numbers keyed to the year's passing holidays.

Written by Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane, the original lyrics to "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" were considered too depressing for a holiday film. They sang of people parting never to see one another again – Garland's family in the film was leaving St. Louis so her father could accept a better job in New York City. Who actually inspired the changed lyrics is still debated, but Garland and her director Vincente Minnelli argued for changing "it may be your last (Christmas)/Next year we may all be living in the past" to "Let your heart be light/Next year all our troubles will be out of sight." In the film, Garland sings the song to her little sister as the family prepares to move away. [4]

1944 was the last Christmas of the World War II years, but, of course, no one knew that in 1944. Garland, a trooper, sang the song at the Hollywood Canteen for U.S. troops, bringing many to tears. [5] In 1957, Frank Sinatra lifted the lyrics to an even cheerier level changing "Until then we'll have to muddle through somehow" to "Hang a shining star upon the highest bough." [6] Garland later married her director Vincente Minnelli; they became the parents of Liza Minnelli.

Judy Garland singing the classic version of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" can be found [here](#).

Christmas movies, it's fair to say, are not known for the originality of their plot lines. They're usually about leaving home, romantic snarls ending happily or children doubting Santa magically brought to belief by intervention divine, magical, or parental. Tom Hanks' 2004 ***Polar Express*** works all the conventions as it "tells the story of a young boy who is questioning whether or not he believes in Santa Claus. Then, on Christmas Eve, a magical train – the Polar Express – appears outside his home and whisks him away to the North Pole to restore his belief in Santa and all that he embodies." [7] But its production values make it a cinema classic. As Roger Ebert said in his review of the film:

The look of the film is extraordinary, a cross between live action and Chris Van Allsburg's artwork. Robert Zemeckis, the same director whose 'Who Framed Roger Rabbit' (1988) juxtaposed live action with animation, this time merges them, using a process called 'performance capture,' in which human actors perform the movements which are translated into lifelike animation. The characters in 'The Polar Express' don't look real, but they don't look unreal, either; they have a kind of simplified and underlined reality that makes them visually magnetic. Many of the body and voice performances are by Tom Hanks, who is the executive producer and worked with Zemeckis on 'Forrest Gump' (1994) – another film that combined levels of reality and special effects. [8]

The Glen Ballard and Alan Silvestri song "Believe" as performed by Josh Groban has become a new Christmas standard and was the recipient of a Grammy for Best Song Written for a Motion

Picture in 2006 and nominated for Best Original Song at the Academy Awards in 2005. Its lyrics include:

*from Believe*

Children, sleeping.  
Snow is softly falling.  
Dreams are calling,  
Like bells in the distance.  
We were dreamers,  
Not so long ago.  
But one by one, we  
All had to grow up.  
When it seems the magic slipped away ...  
We find it all again on Christmas Day ...  
Believe in what your heart is saying,  
Hear the melody that's playing  
There's no time to waste,  
There so much to celebrate.  
Believe in what you feel inside,  
And give your dreams the wings to fly.  
You have everything you need, if you just Believe. ... [9]

The official version of Josh Groban's performance of "Believe" can be found [here](#).

But, with a respectful nod to Judy Garland and Josh Groban, the most popular Christmas song ever recorded remains Irving Berlin's "White Christmas." In fact, it is still the best-selling single of all time. Bing Crosby's version alone has sold more than 31 million copies. [10]

Originally "intended by Berlin for a Broadway revue that was never produced," [11] "White Christmas" debuted on Crosby's Kraft Music Hall radio show on Christmas Day 1941. [12] It then reappeared in 1942's ***Holiday Inn***, a musical starring Bing Crosby, Fred Astaire, Marjorie Reynolds, and Virginia Dale. The film unfolds at a Connecticut farm transformed into an inn whose unique selling proposition celebrates each of the year's holidays with a song-and-dance revue showcasing holiday themed songs.

Berlin wrote 12 new songs for the film and did a reprise of his "Easter Parade" for the spring number. The success of "White Christmas" came as a surprise to Berlin, who thought the tune he wrote for Valentine's Day – "Be Careful, It's My Heart" – would be the one moviegoers left the theater humming. [13] Berlin, arguably America's greatest songwriter, won only one Academy Award for his many compositions. "White Christmas" took honors as Best Original Song at the 1943 Academy Awards. The song's immense popularity grew even more after the 1954 release of ***White Christmas***, a film loosely based on ***Holiday Inn*** in which Crosby reprises his role with new co-star Danny Kaye replacing Astaire.

Unlike most Christmas songs, “White Christmas” is a sad song. Its singer, far from home, hearth, and friends, yearns for a Christmas “just like the ones I used to know” ...

*from White Christmas*

I'm dreaming of a white Christmas  
Just like the ones I used to know  
Where the tree tops glisten  
And children listen  
To hear sleigh bells in the snow, oh, the snow... [14]

The pathos of “White Christmas” springs from two sources. Note the dates of its first performance and the movie’s release. Crosby first sang it on the radio a mere two weeks after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. It was a December of gloom, as everyone intuited the coming storm. It also spoke, indirectly and metaphorically, of Berlin’s own loss. The exact date of its composition is unknown; one of Berlin’s daughters speculated it could have been in 1938 or 1939. What is known is that Berlin’s three-week old son died on December 25, 1928. Every year thereafter, Berlin and his wife visited their son’s grave on Christmas Day. [15] So, for Irving Berlin, Christmas Day was a day of sorrow, loss, and yearning for the unattainable.

The classic 1942 Bing Crosby rendition of “White Christmas” can be found [here](#). One of America’s greatest songwriters, whose hits included “White Christmas,” “Easter Parade,” and “God Bless America,” Irving Berlin composed many of America’s most famous tunes like “A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody,” “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” “Always,” “Anything You Can Do (I Can Do Better),” and that’s just the “A’s”! Born in Russia, Israel Beilin emigrated to America with his parents in 1893, settling on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. With a knack for music – Berlin could not read sheet music and was limited as a piano player – he began as a street singer. He quickly found success, publishing his first song in 1907 and scoring his first hit, “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” in 1911. When his name was misspelled on an early sheet of music as “Irving Berlin,” he took the change and ran with it.

Berlin’s family of Russian Jews was part of the massive immigration between 1880 and 1915 into the United States of new Americans from southern and eastern Europe. As I detailed in my ***The American Tapestry Project’s*** “Immigrant’s Tale” Episode #6, which can be found [here](#), waves of Christian and Jewish immigrants, including Italians from southern Italy, Greeks, Poles, Hungarians and other Slavs from throughout the Balkans, much to the chagrin of nativist bigots, transformed American culture. One of the greatest transformations took place in entertainment and popular music. Many Jewish immigrants were attracted to the world of Tin Pan Alley, America’s turn-of-the-20th century-music industry then located in New York City. As Michael Feinstein, sometimes known as “Ambassador of The Great American Songbook,” observed, “In the first half of the twentieth century, Jews flocked to the music industry. It was one business where they didn’t face overwhelming anti-Semitism.” [16]

And one of the types of songs they composed were Christmas songs. Why? Well, it’s where the opportunities were, but, more importantly, it was a portal into American culture – an avenue of



assimilation. Maddy Albert, in her “11 Iconic Christmas Songs That Were Written by Jews,” quotes Rabbi Kenneth Kanter of the Hebrew Union College, who said that Jewish musicians embracing Christian music helped them assimilate into America’s dominant Christian culture. It was a form of Jewish patriotism. “These songs made Christmas a kind of national celebration, almost a patriotic celebration,” Kanter said. [17] These songs, few of which have any religious overtones, speak to family, the joy of the season, the joy of winter, and the need to care for one another.

It’s a long list that includes many of the songs most Americans think of as “Christmas Standards” – the songs of the season. Among the many are Sammy Cahn and Jule Styne’s “Let It Snow,” George Wyle and Eddie Pola’s “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year,” Jay Livingston and Salamanca, New York’s own Ray Evans’ “Silver Bells,” “Walkin’ In a Winter Wonderland” by Felix Bernard and Richard B. Smith, “Sleigh Ride” by Leroy Anderson and Jewish lyricist Mitchell Parish, several by Johnny Marks, including “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” “A Holly Jolly Christmas,” “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day,” and “Rockin Round the Christmas Tree,” and Mel Torme and Robert Wells’ “The Christmas Song.”

We looked into Johnny Marks and “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” in a ***Book Notes*** in December 2020 which can be found [here](#).

Let’s take a look at three: Sammy Cahn and Jule Styne’s “Let It Snow,” George Wyle and Eddie Pola’s “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year,” and Mel Torme and Robert Wells’ “The Christmas Song” (“Chestnuts Roasting On An Open Fire.”) You might be surprised to learn that two of them were written during a Southern California heat wave.

Jule Styne was born in London in 1905 but grew up in Chicago after his parents moved to America. He teamed up with Lower East Side New Yorker Samuel Cohen, known professionally as Sammy Cahn, to write “Let It Snow.” Styne and Cahn were well established Hollywood presences before they wrote “Let It Snow.” In fact, they and Jimmy Van Heusen wrote most of mid-20th century America’s non-rock, pop hits. They won the Academy Award in 1954 for “Three Coins in the Fountain” and were nominated several other times for songs like “I’ve Heard That Song Before,” “I’ll Walk Alone,” and “It’s Magic.” Cahn himself won four Oscars.

According to Albert and Shirley Menendez in their ***Christmas Songs Made In America***, trying to imagine cooler conditions, Styne and Cahn wrote “Let It Snow” in 1945 during a Hollywood heat wave. [18] The song begins “Oh the weather outside is frightful/ Let it snow, let it snow,” which was not a celebration of snow’s virtues but an incantation exhorting the weather gods to turn off the heat. As the Menendezes continue, “the lyrics have a certain pre-1960s innocence about them, referring to goodnight kisses, parting for the night, and popping corn.” [19] Part, I think, of the charm of Christmas music is just that – a recapturing, if only for the brief length of the tune, that innocence America, or at least Americans of a certain age, lost after the cultural convolutions of the 1960s, which turmoil still roils today. “Let It Snow’s” lyrics sing:

*from Let It Snow*

Oh the weather outside is frightful

But the fire is so delightful  
And since we've no place to go  
Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!

It doesn't show signs of stopping  
And I've bought some corn for popping  
The lights are turned way down low  
Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow! [20]

Covered by numerous artists, most polls still list the best version as Vaughn Monroe's original 1946 rendition, which can be found [here](#).

George Wyle, who also wrote the theme for "Gilligan's Island," and Eddie Pola wrote "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year" for the first ***Andy Williams Christmas Album***, which Williams then sang on his variety TV show, ***The Andy Williams Show***. Williams recorded seven more Christmas albums, every one of which included "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year." [21] "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year's" lyrics sing:

*from "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year"*

It's the most wonderful time of the year  
With the kids jingle belling  
And everyone telling you be of good cheer  
It's the most wonderful time of the year  
It's the hap-happiest season of all  
With those holiday greetings and gay happy meetings  
When friends come to call  
It's the hap-happiest season of all [22]

Two quick observations: By now you have noted that almost all popular Christmas songs actually have very little to say about the religious nature of the holiday. To be sure, there are great religious Christmas carols, like "Silent Night," "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," "O Little Town of Bethlehem," and "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen," among others, but most popular Christmas songs are secular. They sing of the season, they sing of family, they sing of Christmas trees, they sing of Santa, they sing of gift giving and lovers snuggling.

And they sing of winter.

Why winter?

How did winter become so associated with Christmas, for it rarely snows at the scene of Christ's nativity? The answer is complicated and for Americans has to do with the post-Civil War attempt to create the *American Way of Christmas*. It was not a systematic process. It was too disorganized, too organic to say it was an orderly process, but it was a movement driven by the victorious Union to refashion a common culture. Northerners drove that movement, in



particular New Englanders. It was their experience and their vision of Christmas that became the *American Way of Christmas*. In New England in December, it snows; hence, sleighs and snowmen became key Christmas symbols. To learn more about that, check out the Jefferson Educational Society website for my *American Holiday's* series with "Christmas: A Brief History", which can be found [here](#).

For now, Andy Williams singing "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year" can be found [here](#).

If one song has come to define the perfect homebound Christmas, it's Robert Wells and Mel Torme's "The Christmas Song." It was written during that same 1945 Southern California heat wave as "Let It Snow." Torme tells of finding Wells at the piano writing down wintry notes, trying to think himself cool from the heat outside. They began to bounce the words around, landed on a melody and, so Torme recounts, wrote the song in about 40 minutes. [23]

The song's familiar, almost iconic, lyrics include:

*from The Christmas Song*

Chestnuts roasting on an open fire  
Jack Frost nipping at your nose  
Yuletide carols being sung by a choir  
And folks dressed up like Eskimos

Everybody knows a turkey and some mistletoe  
Help to make the season bright  
Tiny tots with their eyes all aglow  
Will find it hard to sleep tonight  
They know that Santa's on his way  
He's loaded lots of toys and goodies on his sleigh  
And every mother's child is gonna spy  
To see if reindeer really know how to fly... [24]

Nicknamed the "Velvet Fog," Torme is probably best known to Gen Xers and those younger as the obsession of the judge on the old sitcom *Night Court*, but he was one of the great jazz singers of his era stretching from the 1940s to the 1990s. The son of a Polish Jewish immigrant father, he grew up in Chicago exhibiting musical talent from a precocious age. Performing professionally for the first time when only four years old, Torme was a member of Chico Marx's band, made his movie debut with Frank Sinatra and in 1947 became a teen idol with his performance in the musical *Good News*. In 1944, he formed a group – Mel Torme and His Mel-Tones – recording his first hit with "What's This Thing Called Love?" He had a long career in films, radio, TV, and, of course, recordings and night clubs. [25]

The definitive version of "The Christmas Song" was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be Nat King Cole's. First recorded by the Nat King Cole Trio in 1946, it was the first holiday standard sung by a Black American. Always a perfectionist, Cole noticed that in the first version

he did, he added an extra “s” to reindeer, making it “reindeers know how to fly.” He corrected it for subsequent recordings. As a result of that superfluous “s”, the first recording is a collector’s item. [26] On just about all tabulations of the most played, most requested, most sold Christmas songs, “The Christmas Song” comes in first and no worse than the top three. It has almost come to define what it’s like to experience Christmas in America.

Nat King Cole singing a 1961 rendition of “The Christmas Song” can be found [here](#).

So, with the sounds of Nat King Cole’s velvet voice doing justice to Mel Torme’s “The Christmas Song” in mind, think about what a powerful statement of American synergy resides in the fact that many of your favorite Christmas tunes were written by Jewish artists. In a very special way, that is what is special about America.

Next week in **Book Notes**, “A-caroling we will go” will explore whimsical gimmick songs like “Frosty the Snowman,” “All I Want For Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth,” “The Chipmunk Song,” and that slyly coy “I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus.”

For a more complete Christmas caroling experience to actually hear these songs, listen to my **The American Tapestry Project’s** “A-caroling We Will Go: The Origins of Classic American Christmas Carols” which is available on WQLN/NPR’s website [here](#), and other popular podcast sites.



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