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A-Caroling We Will Go! (Part Four)



Following is the last of a four-part series on Christmas Carols by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Andrew Roth, Ph.D.

Let's conclude this monthlong exploration of American Christmas carols and songs with a comparatively shorter **Book Notes** by asking two different but interrelated questions: What is the *most popular* American Christmas song of all-time, and what is the *best* American Christmas song of all-time? Regarding the latter, any academics reading these **Notes** will immediately ask, "What's your criteria?" Regarding the former, it's a straight-forward quantitative decision. As they say in sports lingo and on election night, the results are in and you can find them at **Billboard**, **Spotify**, and even the **Guinness Book of World Records**.

Spoiler alert, it's not "White Christmas."

Regarding the *best* Christmas carol or song, well, that's a matter of taste and, as some Roman wag said a long time ago, "*De gustibus non Disputandum est,*" or "there is no disputing about taste." You like Brussels sprouts (so do I), but many don't; you're a Red Sox fan, about which the less said the better; or, well, whatever, as was said, "there is no disputing about taste." Still, if one is to anoint a song the best Christmas carol ever, it seems appropriate to establish some criteria.

First, it must be melodious, which I realize is so elementary a statement as to be virtually meaningless. In order to avoid turning this into an exercise in musicology, which I am not qualified to conduct, I simply mean it must be pleasing, soothing even, to the ear. No John Cage dissonance, no hard rock screeching. It must, in the old show business axiom, leave you humming (preferably silently and to yourself). It must speak with appreciation to the season, its totems and customs. That means that none of [last week's cynically sassy songs](#) will ever make the cut. In speaking to the season, it must make at least a nod to the holiday's Christian origins while at the same time acknowledging that the holiday, almost from the start in America, has transcended those origins to become an ecumenical mid-winter celebration of life, family, friends, community, and a shared cultural heritage. It must be inclusive, welcoming all to share in the season of joy.

And, lastly, it must have just the right dash of *schmaltz* – that sense of comfort and security only the very best chicken-soup can dispense. It must be sentimental, but not overly. It must stoke some hint of childhood innocence, evoking warm memories of huddling under the dining room table waiting for the department store Santa to read your letter on the radio. It must take you back to that time when you still believed all the lights would turn green, when you still believed your life would unfold just as you imagined, when you still believed [everyone](#) you met was good and true, and the taste of newly falling snow on the tip of your tongue was nature's finest liquor. At its best, if only for a moment, it must take you out of time into the eternal present singing the glad tidings, the peace and joy of the good news that all is well and safe.

While those criteria are admittedly simple, in order to head off protests that I have omitted religious songs from the criteria, I'll remind you that we have discovered these past several **Book Notes** that Christmas carols and songs come in two large buckets – religiously themed and secular. I prefer to think of the latter as festive songs speaking to those things Americans hold in common and value communally. As we have discovered, most American Christmas songs were written in the 20th century and fall into the latter bucket. The best religiously themed American carol might be one of the earliest – "O Little Town of Bethlehem." For a brief discussion of "O Little Town of Bethlehem," see Part One of this four-part series published on December 2, which can be found [here](#).

Still, using the general criteria sketched above, I think it's hard to argue that the best religiously themed Christmas carol isn't American. It remains "Silent Night," or in the original German "Stille Nacht."

First performed on Christmas Eve in 1818, it was composed by a young Catholic priest, Joseph Mohr. In a bind because the organ at his church, St. Nicholas in Oberndorf bei Salzburg, was out-of-order, Mohr needed to find some substitute for Christmas Eve music. He asked Franz Gruber, a friend, organist, and schoolmaster, to set to music a poem – "Stille Nacht" – Mohr had written several years earlier. On Christmas Eve, Mohr and Gruber sang the song, as Maddy Roberts relates in a brief article at **Classic FM Digital Radio**, with Mohr

providing guitar accompaniment and the church choir repeating each verse's last two lines. As Roberts says, "Good thing they didn't call an engineer" and fix the organ! [1]

Silent Night (English Version)

Silent night, holy night!
All is calm, all is bright.
Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child.
Holy infant so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night, holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight.
Glories stream from heaven afar
Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia,
Christ the Saviour is born!
Christ the Saviour is born

Silent night, holy night!
Son of God love's pure light.
Radiant beams from Thy holy face
With dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus Lord, at Thy birth
Jesus Lord, at Thy birth

Stille Nacht (Original German Version)

*Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht
Alles schläft; einsam wacht
Nur das traute hochheilige Paar.
Holder Knabe im lockigen Haar,
Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh!
Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh!*

*Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht,
Hirten erst kundgemacht
Durch der Engel Halleluja,
Tönt es laut von fern und nah:
Christ, der Retter ist da!
Christ, der Retter ist da!*

*Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht,
Gottes Sohn, o wie lacht
Lieb' aus deinem göttlichen Mund,
Da uns schlägt die rettende Stund'.
Christ, in deiner Geburt!
Christ, in deiner Geburt! [2]*

In that spirit of ecumenism I mentioned earlier, a beautiful version of the German carol sung in English by Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli can be found [here](#).

What is the *greatest* American Christmas carol/song?

At the risk of rattling more than a few cages, I am tempted to nominate John Lennon and Yoko Ono's "Happy Xmas (War Is Over)," but I won't. Some might

quibble whether it qualifies as an American carol, but both Lennon and Ono had been granted permanent American residence, so it technically squeaks into the discussion. Written sometime in 1969/1970 and released by **John & Yoko/Plastic Ono Band** with backing vocals by the Harlem Community Choir in 1971, the song was the culmination of Lennon and Ono's several year anti-Vietnam War crusade. More popular in the United Kingdom than the U.S., Lennon "conceived 'Happy Xmas (War Is Over)' as a means of elaborating upon the themes of social unity and peaceful change enacted through personal accountability and empowerment" he had advocated in his earlier peace protests. [3]

Speaking to that "heavenly peace" in "Silent Night," John and Yoko sing:

from Happy Xmas (War Is Over)

So this is Christmas
And what have you done?
Another year over
And a new one just begun
And so this is Christmas
I hope you had fun
The near and the dear ones
The old and the young

[Chorus]

A very Merry Christmas
And a happy New Year
Let's hope it's a good one
Without any fear

[Verse 1]

And so this is Christmas (War is over)
For weak and for strong (If you want it)
For rich and the poor ones (War is over)
The road is so long (Now)
And so happy Christmas (War is over)
For black and for white (If you want it)
For yellow and red ones (War is over)
Let's stop all the fight (Now)... [4]

The song has been covered by numerous artists, including Celine Dion, Miley Cyrus, and John Legend, but the classic version with John Lennon, Yoko Ono, and the Harlem Community Choir can be found [here](#).

If "Happy Xmas (War Is Over)," which by the way according to **Business Insider** is #10 on *The 10 Christmas Songs Americans Are Listening to the Most* [5], is not the *best*, what is the *best* American Christmas carol/song? Well, recognizing that as someone once said "consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds," in the following **Roth's Book Notes' Top Ten Christmas Carols/Songs** I'll violate my own criteria and include a rock tune or two and happily admit, as Eric Harvey wrote in **The Atlantic**, that my list, like "the Christmas-Song Canon" has a baby-boomer bias. [6] Actually, while there is a generational bias to the list, it has less to do with baby boomers themselves than the fact that most American Christmas songs were written in the mid-20th century and coincided with the rise of mass radio airplay and the mass distribution of recorded music. In effect, the mid-20th century saw at least two

booms – babies and Christmas music!

So, as they used to say on **Top 40** radio, let's begin the countdown. First, two Honorable Mentions – Wham's "Last Christmas" and Mariah Carey's "All I Want For Christmas Is You." Technically, "Last Christmas" shouldn't make this list, as the uber-'80s duo of George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley are both Brits, but the tune appears on virtually every list of Christmas songs Americans like most. Written and produced by Michael, it was composed by Michael during a visit to his parents' home; in fact, it was written in his childhood bedroom lamenting a relationship gone wrong. With a touch of revenge in the lyrics, it gives a bit of a twist to the holiday schmaltz test. [7]

Going over the top on the *schmaltz-o-meter* is American pop icon Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas Is You," which sings:

from All I Want for Christmas Is You

I don't want a lot for Christmas
There is just one thing I need
I don't care about the presents underneath the Christmas tree
I just want you for my own
More than you could ever know
Make my wish come true
All I want for Christmas is you
Yeah

I don't want a lot for Christmas
There is just one thing I need (and I)
Don't care about the presents underneath the Christmas tree
I don't need to hang my stocking there upon the fireplace
Santa Claus won't make me happy with a toy on Christmas Day
I just want you for my own
More than you could ever know
Make my wish come true
All I want for Christmas is you
You, baby ... [8]

Well, those make Honorable Mention, but what are my subject to revision **Book Notes' Top Ten Christmas Carols/Songs**? Here they are, beginning with

#10. "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town": Part of that mid-20th century boom in Christmas carols and songs, "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" was written in 1934 by Fred Coats and Haven Gillespie. After Eddie Cantor turned it down as too much of a kids' song, Coats badgered Cantor's wife for support. At her urging, Cantor sang it for the first time on his weekly radio show in October 1934. Cantor was a big booster of Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade and sang the song just as Santa made his appearance at parade's end at Macy's Department Store on 34th Street in Manhattan, [9] where you might have heard a miracle once occurred. Covered by literally every singer of any note, memorable versions include Fred Astaire and Lou Rawls, but for an authentic 21st century take on the tune listen to Bruce Springsteen's version available [here](#).

#9. "Sleigh Ride": Composed during another southern California heat wave, this time in 1946, by Leroy Anderson with lyrics by Mitchel Parrish added in 1950, "Sleigh Ride" does well on the *schmaltz-o-meter* with references to "Farmer

Gray's home, to Currier and Ives prints, and to homey things such as coffee and pumpkin pie." [10] It also clearly passes the melodious test; its sound having become part of the season's aural wallpaper. Covered by numerous artists, most memorably in its orchestral version by the Boston Pops Orchestra, it has found a revived popularity on multiple Christmas lists in this Phil Spector version featuring The Ronettes, one of the great girl-groups of the early-1960s, which can be found [here](#).

#8. "O Little Town of Bethlehem": We discussed this early American Christmas carol in Part One of this series, which can be found [here](#). The iconic version remains Nat King Cole's take, which can be found [here](#).

#7. "Up on the Housetop": Written in the 1860s, "Up on the Housetop" along with "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and "Jingle Bells" are among the earliest American Christmas songs. As we learned, American Christmas songs come in two categories – religious and festive. Like "Jingle Bells," which does not mention Christmas at all, "Up on the Housetop" is not religious but signals the new American holiday's emergence by "hedging its bets" calling Santa Claus either "good old Santa," "dear Santa," and "good Saint Nick," Americans having not yet settled on Santa Claus. [11] Again, the song has been recorded by a number of artists, but the childhood favorite remains Gene Autry's 1953 version, which can be found [here](#).

#6. "Let It Snow": This Jule Styne and Sammy Cahn tune was one of three written during southern California heat waves, this time in 1945. We discussed it in Part Two of this series; it's one of many classic American Christmas songs written by Jewish artists. As we noted in Part Two, the classic version remains Vaughn Monroe's original 1946 rendition, which can be found [here](#).

#5. "Jingle Bells": As we discussed in Part One, dating from the 1860s and originally known as the "One Horse Open Sleigh," who knew it was a drinking song written for 'hot rodding' sleigh riders? Again, countless versions exist but Frank Sinatra jingling along can be found [here](#). In the 1950s, Bobby Helms had his Andy Warhol 15 minutes of fame with a rock 'n' roll version titled "Jingle Bell Rock." Despite many now forgotten topical references to rock 'n' roll songs of the era, such as "Rock Around the Clock" and other popular tunes, the song has defied Andy Warhol and lasted well into the third millennium continuing to appear on virtually every 2021 Christmas song pop list. The original Bobby Helms' 1957 version can be found [here](#).

#4. "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year": To prevent you missing the song's theme, it tells it to you in the title. Hitting all the items in our criteria for a great Christmas season tune, it was written for Andy Williams' first Christmas TV special and was subsequently included in every Christmas album the affable crooner recorded. We discussed it in Part Two of this series, which can be found [here](#). Andy Williams singing "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year" can be found [here](#).

#3. "Happy Xmas (War Is Over)": See above...

#2. "White Christmas": Discussed at some length in Part Two of this series, which can be found [here](#), one might ask "Why isn't this song #1?" Well, it's good; in fact, it's *very* good. This Irving Berlin tune has been a perennial hit since Bing Crosby first sang it on his Kraft Radio Music Hall in December 1941, then reprised it in the 1942 film *Holiday Inn* and then, knowing how to play a winning hand, did it all over again in yet another film, 1954's *White Christmas*. Having sold

well over 100 million copies (Crosby's alone has sold over 30 million), it is the biggest selling single recording of all-time. Yet, in the age of Apple Music, Pandora, Spotify, iTunes, and YouTube, it is not the most frequently played Christmas song of our time. Still, no American Christmas season is quite Christmas without at least a half-dozen or so soundings of Bing Crosby's version, which can be found [here](#).

#1. "The Christmas Song" ("Chestnuts Roasting On an Open Fire"): Also discussed at length in Part Two of this series, which can be [here](#), this Mel Tormé and Robert Wells classic was also written during a southern California heat wave. The songs familiar, almost iconic, lyrics sing:

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 ... [12]

How does it match our criteria for a great Christmas song? Well, it's melodious and certainly leaves you humming. In fact, it can be hard to get out of mind after hearing it one or two times. It is not the least bit sassy as it celebrates the season, family, friends, and community. On the *schmaltz-o-meter* it can come perilously close to oozing, but then pulls back leaving a balanced glow in the listener's mind and heart. Sitting before a roaring fire, roasting chestnuts with your dearest at your side, few songs convey a greater sense of peace and well-being.

More to the point, the song is quintessentially American. Celebrating the most American of holidays – a New England style white and snowy Christmas – it was composed by two Jewish musical artists and its iconic version was also the first popular Christmas song recorded by an African American. It, literally, hits all the notes in the very best image Americans sing of themselves. As I said in Part Two, taking the liberty to quote myself:

The definitive version of "The Christmas Song" ("Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire") 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. [13] 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](#).

That’s my **Top Ten** – what’s yours? I’d like to know for next year’s Christmas season **Book Notes**. Send me your list at roth@jeserie.org

Oh, by the way, the most popular Christmas song by an overwhelming margin is Mariah Carey’s “All I Want for Christmas Is You.” Written in 1994 and a constant presence on Christmas pop charts ever since, it has become so ubiquitous that a Texas bar recently banned it until at least Dec. 1 and decreed it could only be played once a night. Which created an immediate furor among Mariah Carey fans, with Carey herself leading the social media charge. The outcry hasn’t hurt the ratings, as the song recently made Apple Music’s Top 100 most-played songs for the year and, as of Dec. 1, Spotify had it listed as the second-listened-to song in the country. [14] It is listed on Billboard’s Hot 100 songs, which it first entered in 2017 and was recently awarded a Guinness Book of World Records award “for being the highest-charting holiday song on the Billboard Hot 100 by a solo artist ...” [15]

Mariah Carey singing “All I Want for Christmas Is You” can be found [here](#).

So, the most popular Christmas song is Mariah Carey’s “All I Want for Christmas Is You” and the best remains and always will be Nat King Cole’s version of Mel Torme and Robert Wells’ “The Christmas Song” (Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire).

Merry Christmas! Happy Holidays!

Remember to send me your list of your Top Ten *American* Christmas Songs to roth@jeserie.org

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



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End Notes

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