



Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas: Anatomy of a Christmas Classic

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Christmas Music in Wartime America

Eighty years ago, last Monday (4 December 2023), Judy Garland went into a recording studio with the MGM orchestra and recorded the song 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas' for the soundtrack of the film *Meet Me in St Louis*. It was the start of the process that would lead this song to become one of the most beloved and enduring seasonal numbers ever written.

Eighty-two years ago, tomorrow (7 December 2023), Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and on the following day, America officially entered the Second World War. What followed was a complete disruption of life in the USA: around 16 million Americans signed up to the Armed Forces during the war, and roles changed at home, with the Rosie the Riveter campaign encouraging women to replace the men at work.

Popular music also responded. There were songs about life in the army, such as 'Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition' by Frank Loesser, future composer-lyricist of *Guys and Dolls*; and Irving Berlin wrote *This is the Army*, a musical that toured America and the UK in aid of the war effort, performed entirely by members of the Armed Forces.

It seems to me that it's no coincidence that three of the most enduring Christmas songs of all time, including 'White Christmas' (1942), 'I'll Be Home for Christmas' (1943), and 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas' (1944), appeared during this period. As a family time, the winter holiday was the hardest point for many people separated from their loved ones, and although the American Christmas song was not a new concept in the 1940s (there are examples from the nineteenth century), the fragile social and political context led to a burgeoning of the genre. The country was facing loss, absence, and displacement, and the Christmas song was the perfect poignant vehicle for expressing the collective experience of this sentiment.

White Christmas and Wartime

First came Irving Berlin's 'White Christmas'. This song was actually drafted in the late 1930s for a stage musical that Berlin abandoned, and he put the song in a drawer for several years. In 1942, he inserted it into a new film he had written for Bing Crosby, *Holiday Inn*, and in a way, he never finished it. The rather short refrain has only one set of lyrics, and he tried in vain to write a second refrain. Further, the verse that he'd written was not used in the movie because it didn't make sense in the snowy context of *Holiday Inn*:

The sun is shining, the grass is green,

The orange and palm trees sway.

There's never been such a day

In Beverley Hills, L.A.

But it's December the twenty-fourth,

And I am longing to be up north.

This verse reveals that the song is actually about someone sitting in the sunshine of California, dreaming of a snowy holiday in the north. Removing this framing puts the emphasis on a more universal sense of dreaming of Christmas, and the phrase that suddenly becomes important is ‘just like the ones I used to know’. This sense of the past, of a wistful absence of something no longer experienced but felt in the imagination, tapped into the wartime Zeitgeist and paved the way for its reception as a song about dreaming of a simpler time: peacetime.

Carl Sandburg of the Chicago *Times* wrote the following about the song in December 1942:

“We have learned to be a little sad and a little lonesome without being sickly about it. This feeling is caught in the song of a thousand juke boxes and the tune whistled in streets and homes, ‘I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas’. When we sing that we don’t hate anybody. And there are things we love that we’re going to have sometime if the breaks are not too bad against us. Way down under this latest hit of his Irving Berlin catches us where we love peace.”¹

Thus, although the song is, in reality, a fragment of a song written long before America entered the war, it epitomised the spirit of the times when it was actually heard widely for the first time, just months after Pearl Harbor, in 1942.

A Sense of Time

‘I’ll Be Home for Christmas’ is more obviously the product of wartime displacement. Written for Bing Crosby by lyricist Kim Gannon and composer Walter Kent (who also composed the wartime hit ‘The White Cliffs of Dover’), it appeared a year after ‘White Christmas’ and depicts a soldier writing home for Christmas:

*I’ll be home for Christmas
You can count on me
Please have snow and mistletoe
And presents on the tree
Christmas Eve will find me
Where the love light gleams
I’ll be home for Christmas
If only in my dreams*

We can see how Gannon has taken up the idea of dreaming of Christmas initiated in Berlin’s ‘White Christmas’ and taken it further: here, there is an intense signalling of an idealistic future (I *will* be home for Christmas), shockingly destroyed in the final line that accepts that this probably *won’t* happen because it’s only a dream (the soldier is away at war). These two songs, then, provide a framework for understanding ‘Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas’, which was the third of the group to appear before the public (in 1944): not only do they use the idea of Christmas to tap into anxieties about societal disruption, but they use past (‘just like the ones I used to know’), present (‘I’m dreaming’) and future tenses (‘I’ll be home’) to evoke the sense of temporal displacement.

Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas: The Sketches

When we listen to a performance of ‘Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas’, the song is now so familiar that it almost seems easy, obvious, a cliché. But the evidence shows that not only was the song that we hear in the film *Meet Me in St Louis* difficult to create; the words to the song evolved further in the years after the Judy Garland original appeared, as we’ll see later in the lecture.

When I started to work on this talk, I was lucky to gain access to the sketchbooks of a man called Hugh Martin, who composed both words and music to the song. Martin had originally formed a team with another songwriter called Ralph Blane, and for some time they wrote songs separately but allowed both their names to be credited on them. This is the case with the three songs from *Meet Me in St Louis*, the other two being ‘The Boy Next Door’ and ‘The Trolley Song’, all of which appear in Martin’s hand in his sketchbooks.

Where ‘Have Yourself a Merry’ first appears, there is only a sketch for a melody, with no words. The first two lines of the song sound as they do in the familiar version (though it’s obvious some notes have been erased and replaced with the ‘correct’ ones), but the melody goes awry in the third and fourth line and he abandons it. Further down the page is a new sketch for the third and fourth lines, but he takes it no further. Later in the sketchbook, Martin writes out the whole lyric for the song, but many of the words are unfamiliar: for example,

¹ Quoted in *The Complete Lyrics of Irving Berlin*, 350.

the first line reads 'Have yourself a merry little Christmas, it may be your last'. In the lecture, we'll look at some of the pages of the sketchbook, consider how Martin developed the melody, then the words, and think about why he changed the latter to reflect the more poignant but less drastic version we know from the film *Meet Me in St Louis*.

Domesticity and *Meet Me in St Louis*: The Boy Next Door

The film itself is based on a series of short stories by the American writer Sally Benson. They were written for *The New Yorker* between June 1941 and May 1942, thus enveloping the period of the USA's entry into the war. Brilliantly capturing the national Zeitgeist, the stories describe the exploits of an average (white, middle-class) American family between 1903 and 1904. The stories, which were later turned into the novel *Meet Me in St Louis*, and the movie, both depict a household that is dominated by women, including the mother, three sisters, and domestic staff. Because all they are limited by their gender roles, they tend to have their way, dominating the activities and focus of the house, and even in the end thwarting Mr. Smith's plan to move the family to New York, where he was to have taken a new job. The film is a touching portrayal of domestic life, its two ballads for Judy Garland's character Esther providing particular highpoints of wistful yearning ('The Boy Next Door') and sisterly tenderness ('Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas').

Rewriting the Song

The website SecondHandSongs.com lists over 2,000 recordings of 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas', which speaks to the variety and diversity of the song's reception history. In the first ten years after its appearance in the film, there were a few important recordings, including one from 1948 by Frank Sinatra. This used the version that appears in the film, but in 1957 Sinatra commissioned a revised lyric for the song from Hugh Martin, saying that the original lyric was too serious for the theme of his new Christmas album *A Jolly Christmas with Frank Sinatra*. Martin obliged by providing some new lines; in particular, he replaced the line 'Until then we'll have to muddle through somehow' with 'Hang a shining star upon the highest bough', thus removing from the song its most poignant symbol of wartime resilience. Other parts of the song were tweaked too, largely with the aim of talking about the present in a positive and more definite light ('Someday soon we all will be together' becomes 'Through the years we all will be together').

Performance History

Sinatra's 1957 version was a huge hit and shifted the song determinedly into postwar domestic optimism. From there, many of the subsequent recordings gave the song a more upbeat character, with Ella Fitzgerald's 1960 swing version a notable landmark in its history. Fitzgerald goes through the refrain twice and uses both the Garland and Sinatra versions of the penultimate line (we hear both 'muddle through' and 'shining star'). The riff or accompaniment figure that dominates Frank DeVol's arrangement for Fitzgerald's recording arguably dominates the recording more than the melody does, and this paves the way for subsequent versions in which the arrangement becomes grander (the Jackson 5's 1970 recording almost sounds like a James Bond theme at times!), lush and more complex (e.g., Billy May's for The Carpenters in 1978), or simply jolly (The Overtones). By contrast, since the millennium several contemporary artists, including Coldplay (Chris Martin), Sam Smith and Phoebe Bridgers, have presented stripped-back versions that are as bleak, or even bleaker, than Garland's timeless original. It seems the song now has two parallel performance histories: one that revives what the words were originally about (i.e., wartime) and one that builds on Sinatra's more commercial, Eisenhower-period upbeat optimism.

Coda: An Academy Award nominee

'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas' is the most successful song (commercially) from *Meet Me in St Louis* but it was not even nominated for an Academy Award. That distinction goes to 'The Trolley Song', which was commissioned by MGM producer Arthur Freed to describe Esther's (Judy Garland's character's) journey on the trolley car to visit the construction of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition World's Fair of 1904. Freed rejected the first effort Martin and Blane brought to him. Blane brought inspiration in the form of newspaper or magazine clipping from the Beverly Hills Library. The caption under the 1904 photo of an old-fashioned trolley was 'Clang, clang, clang goes the jolly little trolley' and this led to Martin writing 'The Trolley Song' ('Clang, clang, clang went the trolley'), the film's Oscar nominee. In the end, it lost out to 'Swinging on a Star' from the Bing Crosby movie *Going My Way* – a wonderful song, but not one that has endured nearly as much as any of the main three from *Meet Me in St Louis*.

References and Further Reading

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