Description

Beginning in 1942 with “White Christmas,” the modern Christmas song would become a perennial favorite for American listeners. The popularity of the modern Christmas song, however, was about more than holiday cheer and a silver-toned crooner: “The Christmas Song (Merry Christmas to You),” “Here Comes Santa Claus,” “Pretty Paper,” “Santa Baby,” and “All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth” represented an array of overlapping attitudes, ideas, and beliefs about the American Christmas holiday. During and after World War II, millions of listeners embraced the lyrics and music of these songs as they struggled to define the meaning of a modern American Christmas. In essence, a nation characterized by its consumption would consume Christmas carols season after season as it grappled with the conflicts of modern life.

Consuming Christmas Carols is a descriptive and interpretive exploration of the modern Christmas song in America. From the light-hearted “Here Comes Santa Claus” (1947) to the down-and-out of “If We Make It Through December” (1973), Americans have strived to find a balance between commerce and charity, the past and the present, and between the sacred and profane. From the nostalgia of “White Christmas” (1942) to absurdity of “Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer” (1979), the book argues that Americans have used Christmas songs to balance and minimize conflicting holiday values. *Consuming Christmas Carols* surveys these value systems within five broad categories of Christmas songs: nostalgia, commerce, holiday blues, carnival, and travesty.

The book will also explore the rich visual imagery that has developed alongside the Christmas song, from the black and white images of *Holiday Inn* (1942), to the winter paintings

of Grandma Moses, to the photographs and drawings that decorate holiday record sleeves. By combining observations on song lyrics and visual images, the book will provide a meaningful understanding of how Christmas values collude and collide within American culture.

Consuming Christmas Carols will be the first book to provide an extended consideration of popular American holiday music. Books like *Merry Christmas, Baby: Holiday Music from Bing to Sting* (1993) by Dave Marsh and Steve Propes offer numerous details about the development of modern holiday music, but little understanding of how these songs mirror the American character. Jody Rosen's *White Christmas: The Story of an American Song* (2001) offers more depth, but focuses exclusively on one song. Finally, there are a number of books such as *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas* (2001) by Ace Collins that offer two and three page narratives on individual holiday songs, but these books provide little depth. *Consuming Christmas Carols* will fill a gap by exploring the rich cultural thread that has been woven into the music and lyrics of our most popular Christmas songs, and by showing how these songs have served as a conduit and battleground for American holiday values.

At present, I have completed one chapter of *Consuming Christmas Carols*, and anticipate completing the project in twelve months. The length of the book will be approximately 60,000 words. I believe the inclusion of illustrations and photographs—Currier and Ives prints, historic Christmas cards, and record sleeves—will enrich the material. I also believe that *Consuming Christmas Carols* will be enhanced by the addition of a CD compilation that includes songs reflecting the multiple categories considered in the book.

Chapter Outline

Introduction: Nativity Santa

The introduction begins by considering what has been viewed as the central conflict within an American Christmas: the divide between its religious origins and more modern materialistic manifestation. This divide will be explored by offering descriptions of Gene Autry's "Here Comes Santa Claus" (1947) and Merle Haggard's "Santa Claus and Popcorn" (1973). The introduction also provides a brief account of technological changes, underlining the modern media's role in facilitating a broader distribution of Christmas music beginning in mid-1930s with songs like "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" (1934).

The introduction closes by describing the five Christmas song categories that will be used through the remainder of the book (nostalgia, commerce, holiday blues, carnival, and travesty) and by noting the American habit of recycling or consuming the same Christmas songs each holiday season.

Railroad Advertisement (1945)

Chapter 1: Nostalgia

The first theme to emerge in the modern Christmas song was nostalgia. “White Christmas” (1942), “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” (1944), and “The Christmas Song (Merry Christmas to You)” (1946) connected with listeners by offering wistful images of the American past. Against the historical backdrop of sudden change in the early twentieth century, nostalgia-tinged holiday songs provided a bridge for those who felt disconnected from pre-industrial America. The chapter defines nostalgia within the American experience and interprets “White Christmas,” “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,” and “The Christmas Song” within that experience.

Holiday Inn (1942)

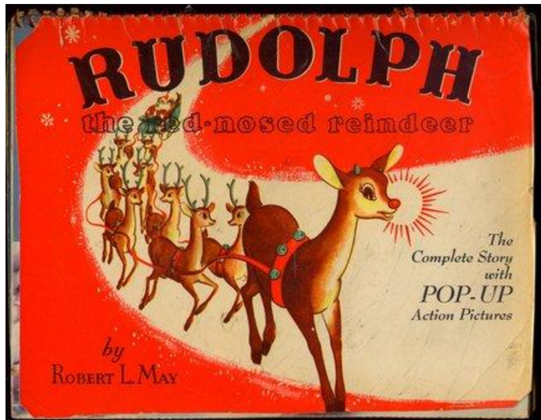
The chapter augments these interpretations by considering images from movies and popular culture that relate to these nostalgic Christmas songs. An advertisement for Florida East Coast Railway reflected the sentiments of “White Christmas” and “I’ll Be Home for Christmas.” Likewise, the warm interior of Bing Crosby’s receiving room in *Holiday Inn* illustrates the romanticized home and hearth that many American listeners of “White Christmas” wished to return to during the turmoil of World War II.

Coke Advertisement (1949)

Chapter 2: Commerce

Christmas songs focusing on commerce would emerge at nearly the same time as those focusing on nostalgia. The chapter, however, offers that "Here Comes Santa Claus" (1947) and "Rudolf the Red-Nose Reindeer" (1949) more accurately represented the post-World War II American zeitgeist. In essence, the myths of Santa Claus and Rudolf as developed in song became more central than Christian myths to the consumer holiday as experienced in America. Because these songs were also children's songs, they also provided psychological cover for the new spirit of the holiday: materialism is never directly embraced.

Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer (1939)



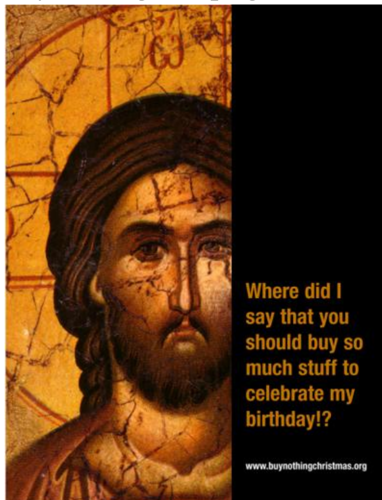
Interpretations of "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" (1934), "Here Comes Santa Claus," and "Rudolf the Red-Nose Reindeer" are expanded by a consideration of popular movies from the era including *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947) and *Holiday Affair* (1949). The chapter also reflects on the connections and contradictions between Santa Claus as he appeared in popular songs and Santa Claus as he appeared in magazine advertisements. Likewise, how the plucky individualism of the copyrighted and less commercialized Rudolph the Red-Nose Reindeer was able to achieve a clearer balance between his appearance in songs and illustrations.

"If We Make It Through December" (1973)

Chapter 3: Christmas Blues

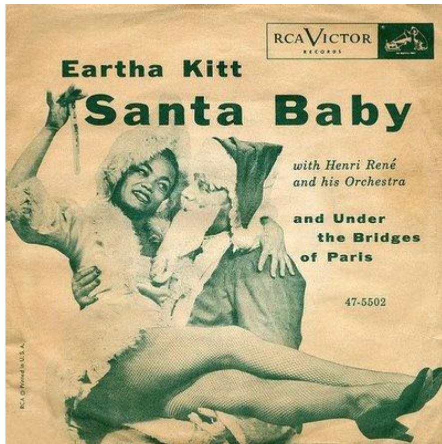
Christmas songs focusing on the blues remind Americans that while many may enjoy the emotional and material fruits of the season, others are alone, financially strained, and in need of charity. The chapter notes how Ernest Tubb's "Blue Christmas" underscored the melancholy side of Christmas loneliness, how Merle Haggard's "If We Make It Through December" (1973) explored class differences, and how Band Aid's "Do They Know It's Christmas" reminded American listeners of a famine halfway around the world. The chapter traces the roots of these songs to Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843) and looks at the book's legacy within popular American culture.

Buy Nothing Campaign



The chapter also looks at the manifestation of *A Christmas Carol* in *Mr. Magoo's Christmas Carol* (1962) and *Scrooged* (1988), and observes the visual connection between Christmas blues and popular culture. Haggard's own image, buffeted against the winter snow somewhere in rural America, authenticates "If We Make It Through December" as the antithesis of "White Christmas." Likewise, a number of the posters in the Buy Nothing campaign not only suggest excessive consumption, but support the same call for the have-nots as Band Aid's "Do They Know It's Christmas," a fund raiser for the victims of the Ethiopian famine in the mid-1980s.

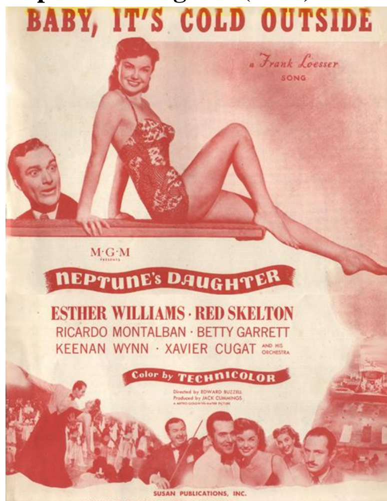
Eatha Kitt, Santa Baby (1953)



Chapter 4: Carnival

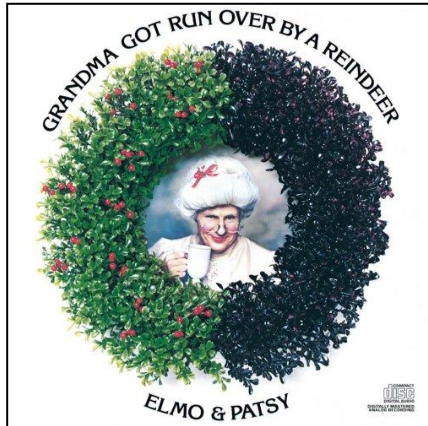
The carnival strain in the Christmas song emerged in mainstream fare like "Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!" (1946), "Baby, It's Cold Outside" (1949), "Santa Baby" (1953), and "Santa Claus Is Back in Town" (1957). The chapter also looks at the similar, though more risqué, versions of carnival as it appeared in underground party records like Ben Light's "Christmas Balls" (1937) and Kay Martin's *I Know What He Wants for Christmas*, *But I Don't Know How to Wrap It* (1962). This older tradition views the holiday as an excuse to abandon social rules and to indulge in hedonistic pleasures from the Christmas office party to New Year's blowouts. If songs about Christmas charity focus on loneliness and the physical needs of others, the carnival strain focuses on overindulgence, sensuality, and chaos.

Neptune's Daughter (1949)



The chapter traces the carnival strain in holiday movies such as *Go* (1999) and *Bad Santa* (2003), and highlights the rich relationship between images and carnival-flavored Christmas songs. From Santa Claus carrying a scantily-clad Eartha Kitt on the record sleeve of "Santa Baby" to a promotional poster for "Baby, It's Cold Outside" featuring bathing beauty Esther Williams, Christmas carnival subverts the home and hearth for licentiousness. This visual tradition would be pushed even further with the underground cover art for Martin's *I Know What He Wants for Christmas*, *But I Don't Know How to Wrap It*.

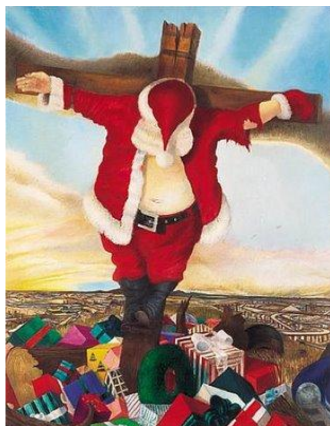
Elmo & Patsy (1979)



Chapter 5: Travesty

A number of holiday songs attempt to break all the rules, turning the Christmas tradition on its proverbial head. If Christmas songs like “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town” were frequently dismissed as children’s songs, the chapter argues, then songs like Yogi Yorgesson’s “I Yust Go Nuts for Christmas” (1949) were likewise dismissed as novelty songs. While these performers relied on humor and nonsense, songs like Stan Greenberg’s “Green Chritma,” (1948), Elmo and Patsy’s “Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer” (1979), and Weird Al’s “Christmas at Ground Zero” (1986) were meant to be taken seriously. These songs reject part or all of the American Christmas experience by transforming the familiar symbols of the holiday into travesties: in modern America, Christmas is a sham underlined by credit card debt, dysfunctional families, and overindulgence of food and drink.

Santa Claus (1989)



Christmas travesty is also reflected in popular movies like *Gremlins* (1984) and *Christmas Vacation* (1989), within the pages of *Mad* and *National Lampoon*, and mirrored in popular culture illustrations and photographs. Elmo & Patsy underline the absurdity of “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer” by placing a picture of Grandma—who, within the song, is run over and killed by a reindeer—on the album cover. Likewise, Stan Greenberg’s “Green Chritma” covers the same thematic ground as Robert Cenedella’s painting of a crucified Santa Claus.

Epilog: Santa v. Jesus

While the divide between materialism and the sacred may appear as the central conflict in the American experience of Christmas, the conflict is misstated. Modern American Christmas as expressed in holiday songs is clearly secular. The divide is more properly seen as a conflict between the kind of Christmases that Americans dream of having, and the ones they actually

have; between the desire to bring friends and family together in fellowship, and the desire for accelerated consumption. Americans may dream of snow-filled lanes in rural settings complete with old-fashioned values that focus on family and community, but they are unable to escape from a modern American Christmas that has become urban, material-based, and much more complex.

Biography

I am a freelance writer and independent scholar, and have been writing about folk, rock, and pop for over ten years. My first book, *Folk Music USA*, was a popular history of the American Folk Revival (1958-65), and published by Schirmer in 2005. My second book, *Women Singer-Songwriters in Rock*, was published by Scarecrow Press in 2010. I also write and edit for Greenhaven Press, and have worked on a number of books in the *At Issue* series.

I never planned to write about popular music, but it has been an outgrowth of my own love of music and a desire to be part of the critical conversation. Over time, I have also learned to appreciate how music—in both words and sheer sound—communicates personal and social values. The values we live by, adopt, reject, and question are encoded in all music, popular and underground. While it is impossible for even a well-funded sociologist to explain exactly how music influences our values and lives, much light can still be brought to bear on this exchange by close listening and intellectual inquiry. Indeed, the very act of choosing to write about music that moves us serves as evidence of its power and influence in our search for meaning.

Competing Books

1. Ace Collins, *More Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondevan, 2006. The most recent volume in a series. Collins' book offers three and four page descriptions of multiple holiday songs; my book will offer a more thorough consideration of how individual songs reflect different values within American culture.
2. James Adam Richliano, *Angels We Have Heard on High: The Christmas Song Stories*. Chatham, NY: Star of Bethlehem, 2002. *Angels We Have Heard on High* includes

multiple photographs and illustrations, and background descriptions of individual Christmas songs; my book also relies on a combination of illustrations and song descriptions, but will consider the overall impact that Christmas songs have made on American culture.

3. Jody Rosen, *White Christmas: The Story of an American Song*. New York: Scribner, 2001. Rosen's book offers an extensive exploration of "White Christmas" that includes background on the song's author, Irving Berlin; my book will look at the broader cultural influence of "White Christmas," and how it, along will similarly-themed songs, reflects America's longing for the past.
4. Albert J. Menendez and Shirley C. Menendez, *Christmas Songs Made in America: Favorite Holiday Melodies and the Stories of Their Origins*. Nashville, TN: Cumberland House, 1999. *Christmas Songs Made in America* focuses on holiday songs written in the United States, offering three and four page descriptions of each song; my book is less concerned with the origins of specific Christmas songs than how Americans have embraced and expressed their values through these songs.
5. Dave Marsh and Steve Propes, *Merry Christmas, Baby: Holiday Music from Bing to Sting*. Darby, PA: Diane, 1993. *Merry Christmas, Baby* offers a brief history of the modern Christmas song, from the 1940s to the early 1990s; my book focuses more on the meaning of holiday songs within American culture; more on the rich fabric of individual Christmas songs than their background on Billboard charts.

Chapter 1: Nostalgia

> "Some recalled the tinkle of bells on bright winter mornings, after snow, when the sleighs came out."—Lloyd Morris[i]

> "We need only reflect on the character of our aesthetic experience, on how often the poem, the story, the song, the picture, 'reminds us of' or 'captures exactly' the way we felt then or 'makes us feel sad for some lovely time and place we shall never see again.'"—Fred Davis[ii]

During the 1940s, "White Christmas" would set the stage for a number of classic American holiday songs steeped in a misty longing for yesteryear. The lyrics of "White Christmas" were less concerned with capturing the realistic details of Christmases as they had been experienced in the American past than providing a vague outline of favored traditions and memories filled to the brim with nostalgia. "… 'White Christmas' had established a new seasonal theme," wrote Dave Marsh and Steve Propes, "the longing for the comforts of home and the way things used to be (whether or not they'd ever actually been quite so pacific and pastoral as memory claimed) …"[iii] After all, the song's author, Irving Berlin, and its first singer, Bing Crosby, were *dreaming* of a white Christmas. And it was a beautiful dream that floated wistfully on the radio airwaves, allowing each listener the indulgence of adding her own memories to the melancholy mix.

"White Christmas" also ushered in a new era in how Christmas would be explored and exploited within popular American culture.[iv] Before 1942, Christmas songs and movies appeared sporadically, and a number, as with Crosby's recording of "Silent Night" in 1935, were popular. But before the success of "White Christmas" and the movie the song appeared in, *Holiday Inn*

(1942), the popular cultural industry had not viewed the themes of home and hearth, centered on the Christmas holiday, as a unique market.[v] Likewise, no one seems to have considered that Christmas-themed songs and movies could be recycled Christmas after Christmas, reappearing on *Billboard* and box office charts.

These developments were also mirrored in the other popular culture products. The winter-themed paintings of folk artists would be mass-marketed as greeting cards in the mid-1940s and beyond. Beginning in 1946, Hallmark would sell millions of holiday cards featuring the paintings of Grandma Moses. Christmas had long been a central part of American life; the modern media, however, would disperse this nostalgic vision of the holiday simultaneously to millions of Americans. Radio, records, the movies, and greeting cards worked to generate an updated version of a Currier and Ives Christmas.

Sung by Crosby, “White Christmas” first hit the airwaves in 1942 and also circulated widely in *Holiday Inn* (August 1942), staring Crosby and Fred Astaire. Beginning in October, “White Christmas” would remain on the *Billboard* chart for seventeen weeks, ten of those at number one; “White Christmas” would also reach number seven on the Harlem Hit Parade.[vi] The broad appeal of “White Christmas” would be followed by similar holiday recordings over the next several years, exploring the themes of home and nostalgia. In 1944 Judy Garland offered “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,” a song featured in *Meet Me in St. Louis* (November 1944). Mel Tormé and Bob Wells would pen “The Christmas Song (Merry Christmas to You)” the same year, but the song would not become a hit until the King Cole Trio recorded it in 1946. All of these songs have remained popular, all have been recorded many times by many

performers, and all were steeped in a nostalgic longing for a simpler time somewhere in the undefined American past.

A number of writers have noted the difficulty of pinning down the meaning of contemporary nostalgia. Originally, nostalgia was defined by physicians as a longing for home, a feeling most commonly experienced by soldiers serving in distant lands. Contemporary nostalgia, however, might be described as the past fondly remembered; as personal memory, primarily disassociated from anything unpleasant. At the beginning of Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1918), the narrator recalls an earlier period when life seemingly moved at a slower pace:

> In the days before deathly contrivances hustled them through their lives, and when they had no telephones—another ancient vacancy profoundly responsible for leisure—they had time for everything; time to think, to talk, time to read, time to wait for a lady![vii]

Engaged in warm recollection, the narrator leaves the impression of wishing to return to an earlier time and place.

But nostalgia is complicated by its relationship to the present. A fond memory may also be tinged by wistfulness; it is as though to say, the present, when measured against the past, is somehow lacking; that if someone expresses the thought that, *people were different back then and they really cared about their neighbors*, then they are also saying, *people care less about their neighbors today*. In this way, nostalgia works as a running commentary on the present. One can find traces of this nostalgic mood in Helen Bartlett Bridgman's description of an old-fashioned Christmas in *Within My Horizon* from 1920:

> Human nature is said to be much the same the world over, yet the shining eyes of those New England children looking up into that tree, a tree taken only a few hours before from the woods near by, did realize a certain ideal. To them Christmas with its good cheer and simple tokens was a vital, exquisite thing. Modern city children, with their little old heads, their almost uncanny appraisement of values, miss so much, so much.[viii]

When the past is compared to the present, observed Fred Davis in *Yearning for Yesterday*, present circumstances, "… are invariably felt to be, and often reasoned to be as well, more bleak, grim, wretched, ugly, derivational, unfulfilling, frightening, and so forth."[ix]

While we generally think of nostalgia as an emotion experienced by individuals, Davis also speaks of a broader social nostalgia. In the wake of sudden social changes or historic events, including economic hardship, assassination of a well-known leader, and war, millions of people may experience disruption, "… creating fertile social psychological medium for the production and diffusion of nostalgic sentiment."[x] The central element here is sudden change. "It is as if at the moment of recognizing the *new* situation or condition we are led to remark to ourselves and to others, 'Hey, isn't this a lot different from what was being seen/said/thought/felt just a few short years ago?'"[xi] In twentieth century American history, it would be easy to point to a number of broader social events qualifying as "sudden social changes," including World War I and II, the Great Depression, the social upheaval of the sixties, the oil and economic crises of the 1970s, and the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001.

As "White Christmas" was issued in 1942, part of America's melancholy mood and longing for the past was easy to understand and identify. After the Japanese attack on Pearl

Harbor on December 7, 1941, America would remain at war through the next four Christmases. Sixteen million Americans would serve in the armed services and be stationed from the Fairbanks, Alaska, to the Philippines, to North Africa. Even after the war, many military personnel remained stationed in Europe and Japan. American popular culture highlighted these Christmas separations in a variety of ways. James H. Barnett wrote in *The American Christmas*:

> During World War II newspapers exhibited pictures of soldiers, taken during the holidays, and displayed marked sympathy for those unable to return home for Christmas.[xii]

In a single-page piece in *Life* in 1941, a soldier has been photographed with his girlfriend. His arm is around her waist and their faces are close to one another's as they say goodbye. The article noted of the young man's farewell:

> And what he dreamed of principally was his Christmas furlough … But now with the nation at war, most Christmas furloughs will be drastically cut or cancelled altogether, and this farewell scene takes on a deeper significance.[xiii]

It has often been noted that soldiers wishing to return home played a significant role in the popularity of songs like "White Christmas," "I'll Be Home for Christmas," and "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas." These songs reached soldiers by Armed Forces Radio, USO shows, and jukeboxes.[xiv] For many soldiers, these new, nostalgic Christmas songs captured and poignantly expressed the feeling of separation from home, friends, and family. "Christmas meant home, warmth, security, and a sense of roots; war was the antithesis of all of that."[xv]

The war mobilization would also cause mass population displacement on the home front, as millions of Americans aided the war effort as factory workers, nurses, and volunteers. Many

women would enter the workforce for the first time, leading to a significant rise in the number of married women who worked.[xvi] African Americans also migrated to both the North and the West during World War II, and by 1944, two million blacks worked in war plants.[xvii] Phillip H. Ennis underlined the significance of these migrations in *The Seventh Stream*:

> The movement of people was unquestionably the most pervasive and important fact of the war years. It was the greatest mass migration the country had ever seen. Over fifteen million civilians crossed county lines in pursuit of jobs or family. The crowding, the scarcities, the uncertainty, and, above all, the disruption of the familiar placed a heavy burden on the expressive culture the migrants brought with them or found by strange locales.[xviii]

If Americans had often been thought of as a population on the move, the rate of mobility increased significantly during World War II.

But America's nostalgic mood had deeper roots than World War II. Standing on the precipice of a new era that would be bolstered by economic prosperity at home and political influence abroad, many Americans felt anxious. Rapid change in the twentieth century had seemingly divorced Americans from familiar traditions and staid rituals. Lloyd Morris wrote in *Postscript to Yesterday*:

> To those old enough to remember it, the America of 1896 returned in quaint images. In fifty years it had become almost as remote, very nearly as idyllic, as the America of the founding fathers.[xix]

"White Christmas," "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," and "The Christmas Song" expressed a desire to turn back the clock on the modern world, to cling and remain loyal to a way of American life that had vanished.

The broader changes in American lifestyles were highlighted by changes in transportation, communication, and living spaces. In *Postscript to Yesterday*, Morris compares 1896 to 1946, noting the changes that left many Americans uneasy. While perhaps diminished in economic importance in 1896, rural and small town America still existed; and even if an American grew up in the city, she still had roots in the rural countryside as well as family members who had remained behind. Everyone traveled by carriage, boat, or train; there were no super highways and no automobiles to drive on super highways. Even after the invention of the telephone in 1876, most distant communication by everyday Americans took place by mail; while a few houses may have had electric lights, very few were wired for a more extensive use of electricity. Also, there were no wars in 1896 in foreign lands requiring Americans to travel far from home (the Spanish-American War would begin in 1898 and serve as a prelude to the entry into World War I in 1918 and World War II in 1941). Morris noted:

> Who would have anticipated more than momentary interest in pictures that flickered, or horseless locomotion? And certainly there seemed to be little possibility that men would fly until they became angels.[xx]

In 1946, Americans lived in cities and increasingly, thanks to the automobile, moved to the suburbs, living in houses wired for modern kitchen appliances, radio, and telephones. By 1946, any connection with an idyllic nineteenth century America had been severed. Marty Jezer noted in *The Dark Ages*, "The postwar years nailed the coffin shut on the American past."[xxi]

But Morris is interested in more than the technological changes that altered the face of the American landscape. The disappearance of older ways and traditions meant more than a change in America's physical landscape; more than the reality of the phonograph, air travel, and vaccinations. The older ways of living had also been supported by mores and customs, by guidelines to social behavior and etiquette, by an intricate value system. All were woven together into a way of life, a more or less agreed upon social contract between millions of Americans. Morris noted this shift and the resulting collective American identity crisis:

> Culture asserted that all mechanisms exist to serve spiritual ends; that so far as they fail to do so, they are being misused. The social order, the economic structure, and even the state are instrumental devices; their object is to produce a wider and more universal welfare in which men may achieve the good life. And the good life is that which completely fulfills the spirit. Why, culture asked, had Americans been betrayed into indentifying means with ends? Why had they so complacently sacrificed the needs of the spirit to the uses of purely material progress? Why had they rejected the life of values for the life of mere things? Why had they harnessed their superb transforming instruments to the dollar, instead of to the liberation and enrichment of existence?[xxii]

It could be argued that despite the complications of modern life and the anxiety underlying rapid change, Americans ultimately embraced the automobile, electricity, and talking pictures; and that Americans embraced the abundance of the expanding consumer culture with little hesitation; but beneath the physical facts of modern change lay a deeper spiritual disruption, a fear that an important component of American life had been irrevocably lost.

The nostalgia of "White Christmas" and other melancholy holiday songs tapped into the American psyche and the general feeling of disconnection from the past during the early-to-mid-1940s. It was a mindset that placed a new emphasis on memories and the past, a past that seemed more and more divorced from the world that Americans inhabited."White Christmas" and "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" favored a pre-twentieth century or at least a pre-modern America filled with small towns, villages, and farms; rural settings stripped of cars, electricity, radio, and war. In this way, these freshly minted ballads searched for a simpler time and place devoid of the perceived complexities and spiritual void of modern life. More than a white Christmas, Americans were dreaming of escape from the hustle and bustle of Christmas present.

Nostalgia occupied a significant place in the thoughts of Americans during the 1940s, and it was a mood that assured that songs tinted with memories of yesteryear like "White Christmas," "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," and "The Christmas Song" would receive a warm welcome from American listeners. It is ironic, then, that it was a new mass media—part of the cultural upheaval that had fueled Americans' anxious mood—that brought these songs to an American audience. Writer Jody Rosen noted in *White Christmas*:

> The new, aggressively nostalgic Christmas entertainment embodied a central paradox of commercial Christmas culture: they were modern, big-city, mass-media products that sold the holiday as a retreat from, and rebuke to, high-tech urban modernity—a trick that seems the essence of city-slicker salesmanship.[xxiii]

Through the local movie theatre, the diner jukebox, and on the radio in the family living room, Americans, in mass, indulged in the same mood. "For centuries revelers sang solemn carols," wrote author Susan Waggoner. "Then something exciting happened. Electricity. The radio.

Movies. A booming record industry. It was an explosion of sound, usually mushrooming around the ears of holiday shoppers."[xxiv]

The technology that had created vacuum tubes and film projectors, and the manufacturing culture that made radios and phonographs affordable, was wrapped up in the same forces that had changed the American landscape from agrarian to urban, that had replaced the family dairy farm with the textile factory. A 1941 ad for a Sparton automatic radio-phonograph combination promised:

> **A Remarkable Buy** for Christmas! This compact 5-tube, 110 volt AC superhetrodyne Sparton table model, radio-photograph does everything but think—and saves you plenty of money besides! Automatically plays and changes12 ten-inch or 10 twelve-inch records, brings you standard broadcast and American-Foreign short wave. Equivalent to 8-tube operation. Cover closes down in operation eliminating surface noise. Complete with 6-inch electro-dynamic speaker, built-in loop antennae, tone control and permanent type needle. Handsome walnut veneer cabinet with contrasting African walnut trim. Be sure to put this marvelous Sparton model on <u>your</u> Christmas list.[xxv]

The new technologically savvy recording industry also recognized the importance of Christmas to sales. Tongue in cheek, *Billboard* noted in 1943 that record retailers expected, "…old Kris to deliver about 25 percent of their yearly business …"[xxvi] An American consumer may have decried the hustle and bustle of Christmas in the mid-1940s, and she may have expressed longing for an older set of values, but every time she bought a copy of "White Christmas" she was

lending her support to a trend that had undercut the song's idyllic vision of an old-fashioned holiday in the backwoods of rural America.

Nostalgic Songs for a Nostalgic Era

> "I still can't listen to 'I'll Be Home for Christmas,' or Bing Crosby's record of 'White Christmas,' or Judy Garland singing 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas' in *Meet Me in St. Louis* … without getting a lump in my throat."—Richard Lingeman[xxvii]

If Americans wished to turn away from the bustle of Christmas during the 1940s, if they wished to indulge in reminiscences of the past, songwriters, singers, and the music industry were more than glad to feed this indulgence. The success of the industry in the production and marketing of Christmas music had little to do with innovation: the industry had already honed effective ways of delivering music to a popular audience by radio and 78rpm records. The trick had been in discovering a new niche market that could be explored and exploited in popular song, one that simply allowed songsmiths to draw from and build onto a long tradition of winter and Christmas imagery. *Billboard* noted in 1943 that at one time, most songwriters viewed Christmas material as having a short shelf live. The trend, perhaps beginning as early as 1934 with "Santa Claus is Coming to Town," seemed to solidify around sheet music sales of "White Christmas":

> The yuletide songs, however, have enjoyed a different fate. *White Christmas* swept the country last year, sold over a million copies then and has already gone

> close to 300,000 copies this year, selling at the rate of 50,000 a week for Berlin.[xxviii]

If there was a difference between the typical popular song and the Christmas song, it centered on its recyclable nature: successful Christmas songs were often perennials, returning to radio playlists and record bins each holiday. Many would even re-chart.

In retrospect, it's difficult to imagine contemporary Christmas music without "White Christmas," "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," and "The Christmas Song." Each has attained classic status alongside sacred carols like "Silent Night," "Away in the Manger," and "The First Noel." But while the sacred songs delve into familiar Christian mythology surrounding the holiday, "White Christmas," "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," and "The Christmas Song" provide a mythology carved out of the American soil. By celebrating fir trees, falling snow, and many other seasonal clichés, these songs have been woven into the very fabric of an American Christmas. In this fashion, these modern classics have become part of the national consciousness, providing a prism for imagining, remembering, and fabricating the ideal American Christmas.

All three of these songs are unhurried ballads that create an open setting for quiet reflection. The intimate tone of each song is conversational, a soulful prayer overheard, a personal letter, or a late-night, long-distance phone call from someone dear. The quiet tone personalizes the delivery of each lyric, and it's easy to imagine the singer addressing a friend, a spouse, a child, or even the listener herself. Each of these songs offers an invitation to the listener to stop for two or three minutes and enter a quiet reverie—her own memory or fantasy—with the singer. Each song's hushed mood seems to cue the listener: it's okay to relax, there's no hurry.

These songs, in essence, created a mental space that seemed to exist outside of a modern Christmas. For the duration of each song, the listener dreams with the singer, and the hustle and bustle of modern Christmas fades into the distance; each time a jukebox spun “White Christmas” and “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,” you could forget about shopping, Santa, and the ongoing war; and each time Bing Crosby or Judy Garland or the King Cole Trio sang these songs in a movie or for holiday radio specials, you could escape into a dream of the perfect American Christmas.

By drawing from familiar imagery and setting a reflective mood, each of these songs gives the illusion of having captured the spiritual impulse at the heart of an American Christmas. All of these songs have either conjured up an idea of an older, more rural America or concocted a modern Christmas mythology cobbled together from the holiday clichés of yesteryear. There’s a longing to return home or to return to the more familiar, comforting ways of the past; a longing to reunite with distant loved ones; a desire to revisit and revive recognizable signs and symbols that have defined an American Christmas. Together these songs offer a wistful vision of an American Christmas, celebrated with family and friends, and rooted in the rural landscape and values of a pre-Industrial America.

“White Christmas” (1942)

> “The song’s images of sleigh rides and falling snow and eager children capture the mythic essence of the American Christmas.”—Jody Rosen[xxix]

We have become so familiar with “White Christmas” that it’s easy to overlook many of the song’s details. We barely notice, for instance, the short instrumental passage that opens the

song, or the light orchestra that offers a tasteful backdrop to Bing Crosby's reassuring voice. Likewise, the choir that repeats the lyric in the second half of the song easily fades into the background. Each of the elements that support the emotional current of the song, that leave a residue of comfort and solitude, are taken for granted. Even the warmth of Crosby's vocal, gently stretching phrases, bending syllables, and, at one point, whistling, are no more or less than we expect. Over a time span of nearly seventy years, "White Christmas" has simply become a familiar and accepted cornerstone of the modern Christmas holiday.

All of these overly familiar elements, however, work in union to create the affecting import of "White Christmas." The song's pace, for instance, is unhurried, helping to set the mood for Irving Berlin's lyric and Crosby's vocal. Even as the arrangement of singer, voices, and orchestra grows in volume, the combined musical sound remains a simple hush. The leisurely tempo and quietude becomes even more evident as "White Christmas" comes to a close. At this point in the song, the already unhurried pace is brought to a standstill, setting the stage for Crosby to deliver the last line. As he begins, all of the instrumental backing and choir temporarily drop out, leaving a silent calm that the listener might associate with falling snow. Crosby's finale, eventually reunited with the choir and bells, extends for twenty seconds. From the opening instrumental passage to Crosby's finish, each of these elements have served to instill an expressive mood into "White Christmas."

This reflective frame of mind carries over into the emotional resonance of the lyric. As "White Christmas" begins, Berlin's narrator seems to be daydreaming, imagining Christmases from an earlier time in his life, carrying on an inner dialog. This inner dialog is clearly a memory play, perhaps tinted by imagination; the thoughts of someone far from home (physically,

mentally, or spiritually), and longing for return and reconciliation. But while the images he recalls may lack specific details, they do draw a sketch of a certain kind of place in a realistic manner. He dreams of glistening treetops, sleigh bells, Christmas cards, and, most of all, snow. These images are grounded in rural America and perhaps even an earlier America, one similar to the winter engravings of Currier and Ives and the winter paintings of Grandma Moses. Moses, remembering her childhood in an earlier America, wrote in her autobiography:

> After dinner we all went over to the Whiteside Church where the Reverend Henry Gordon gave a lovely talk on Thanksgiving. The church was warmed by wood fires, and the pulpit was trimmed with evergreens and oak bows with acorns on them, quite pretty.
>
> Mr. Abbott took us home from church, we had our first sleigh ride for that year. It was lovely, tucked into the sleigh with buffalo robes, bells a' jingling, and then to enter our home so warm and cozy, with coal fires, surely we should have been thankful, and I think we were.[xxx]

A person would have to live near tree tops, after all, to see them glistening; and one would have to own horses—not cars—to hear sleigh bells. Even taking the time to write Christmas cards evokes a leisurely pace not associated with the busyness of the modern world. At the end of the song, the narrator breaks his solitary reverie to offer a direct holiday salutation to the listener: a sincere wish that the listener will find the same holiday cheer that he seeks.

There is a hymn-like quality to "White Christmas," which may seem like a strange quality for a song that is seemingly secular in content. The quietude and simplicity of the lyric, arrangement, and performance has a peaceful, restful air, and it would be easy to hear the

narrator's inner dialog as a spiritual meditation. The unifying symbol is the whiteness of the snow, an image of purity that blankets and brightens the bare trees and straw-colored fields during winter. The narrator believes that a white Christmas will have vaguely defined restorative powers, that a white Christmas will have the power to make the world anew, or more accurately, to return it to an earlier, more perfect state.

It's also easy to see these ideas and the theme of nostalgia working themselves out in other popular culture artifacts from the era, including the movie that helped introduce "White Christmas," *Holiday Inn* (1942).

In *Holiday Inn*, Crosby's character Jim Hardy opens an inn to celebrate a number of American holidays, an idea bathed in patriotism reflective of the then current national mood in relation to World War II. In a quieter moment in the film, Crosby introduces "White Christmas" in the company of his future love interest, Linda Mason (Marjorie Reynolds). It would be inaccurate to describe the setting of this scene as a typical American home; the fireplace and mantel are much too large. But the room does present a homey atmosphere. Crosby, dressed in a casual robe and smoking a pipe, and his inn, ensconced in rural Connecticut, offer the picture of harmony and tranquility: the contemporary performance world that he left behind, where song and dance acts perform on Christmas Eve in Manhattan, has disappeared. In this pastoral setting, Crosby introduces "White Christmas," and in this version of the song, he's joined by Reynolds (with the vocal sung by Martha Mears). Lit by the warmth of the fireplace, the scene and setting offer a comfy vision of rural American life in winter.

This vision seems far away from the setting of the original and seldom recorded opening verse for "White Christmas." Originally, a brief introduction placed the song's singer/narrator in

Beverly Hills as Christmas approached, basking in the sunshine but yearning to be up North. Berlin believed that the images of a warm Hollywood diminished the appeal of "White Christmas" and eventually removed the opening verse from the sheet music. Crosby never sung it. There was little nostalgia to be found in sunny L.A., and little possibility that oranges and palm trees would offer a comfy vision of a rural American Christmas.

"White Christmas" was not the first Christmas song to indulge in romance with the American past, but never had a song joined so many Americans together in a similar mood. It was embraced by American soldiers away from home, dreaming of their own white Christmases, and embraced by their loved ones at home, dreaming of a speedy reunion with the soldiers. The warmth Crosby brought to Berlin's spare lyric has given Americans an attractive, though bare-bones medium that allowed everyone to fill-in her own symbols and memories. In this way, the lyrics of "White Christmas" were tinged by fondly remembered childhoods, recollections of friends and loved ones, and reminiscences of happy days gone by. In essence, "White Christmas" helped usher in a new era for the Christmas song, offering all Americans a chance to indulge in the sacred hush of yesterday.

"Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" (1944)

> "Have yourself a merry little Christmas
>
> It may be your last
>
> Next year we may all be living in the past"—Hugh Martin/Ralph Blane[1]

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[1] This is the original opening of the non-published version of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas."

While many listeners may remember that Judy Garland sang "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" for *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), they may nonetheless find it difficult to travel back to her original, more darkly-tinted version of the song. It is likely, for instance, that they are more familiar with Frank Sinatra's version from 1957, and equally likely that listeners associate the song with the same pleasant, lingering nostalgia of "White Christmas." After all, whether listeners consider Sinatra or Garland's version, or note the slight difference between the lyrics of each version, the result should be more or less the same: both singers, after all, are wishing someone to have a merry Christmas.

Without considering the deeper resonance of Garland's vocal, there is little on the surface to suggest that her version of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" was somehow darker. The song's narrator is simply asking an unnamed person to forget all of her troubles during the holiday season. The first two verses of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" carry this same basic sentiment, with the narrator enjoining her listener to enjoy Christmas, disregard current difficulties, and to believe that by the following year, everything will be better. While the song's bridge may be less comforting, its glance back to happier days seems like little more than nostalgic reverie. As the third verse brings "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" to a close, the reference to the fates and muddling through until life gets better suggests little more than quaint clichés from an earlier era: life may not always turn out as we wish, but if we persevere, it will always get better. As the last line repeats the song's title, the melancholy of the lyric has been swept away like yesterday's cobwebs.

It has been common to note that Ralph Blane and Hugh Martin's original draft of the "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" for *Meet Me in St. Louis* had been much darker, and,

by implication, that the re-written version sung by Garland in the movie was somehow less gloomy. The original draft suggested that the current Christmas celebrated in the film may be the Smith family's last or at least the last Christmas spent in St. Louis; not surprisingly, a number of people involved with the movie found the lyrics depressing. Eventually, Martin agreed to rewrite the song, replacing the gloomy lyrics; later, he would also rewrite a stanza at the request of Frank Sinatra, altering the line referring to muddling through the holiday season to one about hanging a star on the bough of a Christmas tree. It would be easy, reading about and noting the changes, and noting the emphasis placed on the removal of the offending passages, to guess that the final version that Garland sang for *Meet Me in St. Louis* was a happier one that captured the American Christmas spirit.

But this quick reading of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" remains too close to the lyric's surface, too removed from the inflections of Garland's rendition of the lyric. As Garland's sings the opening lines of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," the strings provide a tasteful cushion beneath her deeply expressed vocal. Her voice is full and emotive, adding pulsating vibrato, depth of volume during the bridge, and, as the song comes to a close, drawing out her words. The emotional pull of Garland's voice is also self-absorbed within the lyric, leaving the impression that she has fallen deep into reverie; that she is singing to herself more than anyone else. Her mood, withdrawn and disheartened, tints the lyric a melancholy blue. As the orchestra slackens its already languid pacing, Garland unhurriedly utters the final line of the song, adding even more feeling to her repeated Christmas wish.

Even with the altered lyric, there remains an unsatisfied yearning in "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," a yearning for the warm glow of yesteryear; a yearning so strong that it

threatens to transform a harmless melancholy for the past into a deeply felt expression of sorrow for what cannot be regained. The measured tempo itself seems to inject a downhearted element into the lyric's wish for a merry Christmas, a mood that is enhanced and solidified by the melodic sweep of the song's bridge. And while the lyric itself may be saying "merry Christmas," Garland/the song's narrator is trying too hard to convince her listener that there will be a merry Christmas. The dreamy references to "golden," "yore," and "faithful friends," along with the need to muddle through what—to many—should be the happiest time of year, leaves the listener caught in a downward spiral of holiday blues.

Garland's reading of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" catches and expands the anxious undercurrent of Martin and Blane's lyric. Even as she offers her heartfelt Christmas wish, she never believes it; even while she may deliver her wish with sincerity, she is unable to rise to the sentiment. A persistent irony undercuts the lyric each step of the way, leaving the listener with a much darker holiday lullaby than later versions of the song might suggest.

When listening to the lyric of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," it's easy to recall *Meet Me in St. Louis*, the movie in which the song appeared in 1944. For the span of the movie, the viewer would never guess that St. Louis was anything but a pleasant town where the upper middle class built multi-story dwellings to house their large, happy families. The Smith family, mom (Mrs. Anna Smith), dad (Mr. Alonzo Smith), grandfather (Grandpa), five children (Esther, Tootie, Rose, Agnes, and Lon), and housekeeper (Katie), lives in what appears to be a spacious, old-money home. The father of the clan is employed as a banker, an apparently comfortable job that allows him to amply support his family: the family eats well, everyone

dresses immaculately, and they can afford hired help. *Meet Me in St. Louis* is a Technicolor version of family life in small town America, circa 1900.

This perfect way of life, however, is threatened when the father is offered a job in New York City. Within the movie, St. Louis is imbued with the warmth of tradition and sense of graceful permanence; New York is a modern and anonymous city. While it might seem a stretch to consider the Smith's crisis as tragic, the viewer, for the duration of the movie, is invited to do so.

This crisis reaches its pinnacle at Christmastime. In the midst of the winter sequence of the movie, Garland's Esther Smith sings "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" to her troubled sister Tootie, attempting to comfort her by recalling perfectly imagined days from the past and wishing for their return. Colloquially speaking, Garland/Esther seems to be trying too hard to put a positive spin on the Smith family's current problems. Tootie, however, remains as unconvinced as Esther, and tears well up in her eyes as she listens. Following the song, Tootie runs outside, picks up a stick, and violently dismantles a snow-person family in the backyard. Her reasoning is simple: if the snow family cannot accompany the Smiths when they move to New York, then no other family who inhabits the house at a later time should be allowed to have them. "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" finds the Smith family at its nadir, and Garland's version of the song permeates the lyric with these qualities, generating a residue that overflows the movie.

While 'White Christmas" concocts a dreamy quality of an affectionately remembered American holiday, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" evokes a sadder mood. The quaint references to "yuletide" and "yore" in "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" mine a barely

recalled American past, while references to troubles and the fates delve into the less hopeful side of holiday nostalgia. One can always hope to be reconciled with friends and family, but these reconciliations cannot be guaranteed; one can dream of the return of golden days, but fate may have other plans in store. In the place of hope and happy dreams, one waits, muddling through troubled times. "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" sets aside the kind of American optimism that places faith in a brighter future for the belief that the best of what life has to offer is possibly buried in the past. Enamored by distant memories, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" offers a backward glance at a misty golden era anchored in an earlier America, an America to which we'll never return.

"The Christmas Song (Merry Christmas to You)" (1946)

> "'The Christmas Song' is suffused in the same fuzzily reminiscent glow—best expressed in its subtitle, 'Chestnuts roasting on an Open Fire'—as 'White Christmas,' and its impact was just as immediate."—Dave Marsh and Steve Propes[xxxi]

It might be easy to think of specific Christmas songs as alluding to particular American settings or to a particular time and place in the American past. In "White Christmas," for instance, a listener might imagine the Connecticut countryside of *Holliday Inn* or the Vermont of *White Christmas* (1954). Even if the setting is less specific in the listener's mind, certain places—perhaps climates known for their warmth and sunshine, like Florida and California, and perhaps climates known for harsher winters, like Alaska—are definitely ruled out. "White Christmas," after all, offered a picture postcard version of the holiday.

Likewise, “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” may evoke a specific place, like the St. Louis of *Meet Me in St. Louis*, or simply recall an older, nineteenth century America with its use of yuletide, olden days, and yore. Here, we might imagine a Currier and Ives Christmas, with sleds pulled by horses through the newly fallen snow. Even while embraced as American visions of the holiday, “White Christmas” and “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” remain connected to regional winters and the mental landscape of nineteenth century America.

Locating “The Christmas Song” in a specific time and place proves a more difficult task. While “The Christmas Song” does present a winter setting, there is no snow; and while roasting chestnuts may seem like an old-fashioned pastime, the song never lets on that this is an activity—in the mid-1940s, following the chestnut blight—relegated to Christmases of yesterday. Perhaps even the brazen act of naming it “*The* Christmas Song” adds a universal touch that moves the song from a specific time and place.

In a sense, “The Christmas Song” borrows from these earlier songs, consolidates all they offer, and then moves beyond them by presenting an expansive vision of an American Christmas. Instead of providing images of snow or a golden yesterday, “The Christmas Song” presents a smorgasbord of symbols—chestnuts roasting, turkey, mistletoe, Jack Frost, and choirs singing carols—and serves as a brief sketch of the perfect American Christmas. The quiet reverie of the earlier songs based in nostalgia, with the narrator-singer intimately addressing the individual listener, has been set aside; regional images of a New England winter or the distant rural past have likewise been discarded. Instead, Nat Cole’s narrator addresses a larger set of listeners, perhaps a set of friends gathered to roast chestnuts or sing carols, and offers them a more up-to-

date version of an American Christmas. Nostalgia for an American Christmas anchored to the past remains, but Cole's version of "The Christmas Song" has one foot in the modern era.

Much of this mood is conveyed in the tone of the King Cole Trio's arrangement of "The Christmas Song." In a short space, the intricacy of the strings, guitar, and bass create a sophisticated blend of light jazz that places the listener at ease. Cole's silky vocal style adds the final element. His mild delivery clearly relies on an amplified microphone, a quality that places him within the crooner tradition. Cole's style, however, has smoothed out the dips and swoops of a crooner like Crosby, and he never attempts to carry the pathos of Garland. Instead, he has compressed his voice to the warmth of his natural speaking tone. These smoother qualities work well with the more optimistic lyric; the nostalgia of Cole's persona might be described as quiet reminiscing.

This warmth imbues the lyrics of "The Christmas Song" with a pleasant glow, though Cole's even tone also compacts the emotional depth of the lyric. Blending with the guitar, bass, piano, and strings, his vocal tone, tenor, and delivery are perfectly in sync with the song's arrangement. Compared to the simplicity of the earlier songs discussed, "The Christmas Song" seems quite intricate, urbane, and modern.

While the arrangement helps to set the mood, at least one element of the lyric updates the song for modern America. Near the end of the second verse, the listener is told that children will find it difficult to sleep at Christmas, because Santa Claus will soon arrive. Children naturally anticipate the toys that Santa has loaded on his sleigh, and will likewise be curious to discover whether reindeer can fly. By adding children and Santa Claus, "The Christmas Song" removes a great deal of the melancholy associated with earlier nostalgia-trimmed songs.

Despite its modern sensibility and milder nostalgic vision, "The Christmas Song's" leading symbol—the chestnut—potentially tints the song with a wistful vision of a bygone time and place. Even by 1946, the American chestnut had nearly disappeared from the tapestry of holiday traditions.

The great American chestnut forest, primarily located in the Appalachians on the East Coast, had been a rich source of timber, tannin, and chestnuts at the beginning of the twentieth century. While business owners and local entrepreneurs profited from the chestnut, many families relied on the yearly chestnut harvest to provide needed food and clothing supplies before the winter. When the chestnut burr opened and released its fruit in the fall, families would gather the harvest and trade with local store owners who in turn shipped chestnuts by train to urban centers like Baltimore. The chestnut represented an essential element of rural life as it was experienced in the Appalachians at the turn of the twentieth century.[xxxii]

By the time of the release of "The Christmas Song" in 1946, the Eastern forest of American chestnut had mostly been decimated by an imported blight first discovered at the Bronx Zoo in 1904. The blight moved quickly from North to South, destroying the fruit-baring trees, and continuing to destroy any new chestnut growth before the tree reached maturity. Even before the demise of the chestnut, traditional Appalachian culture, seemingly one of the last American rural outposts, had been modernized by highways, electricity, and telephones. The chestnuts that "The Christmas Song" pictured roasting on an open fire belonged to a lost culture and way of life, no more than a memory of a memory.

But Cole's reading of the lyric never dwells on or expresses concern over what became of the American chestnut. Instead, the final instrumental notes of "The Christmas Song" offers no

more than a pleasantly wistful reference to another beloved holiday song from the latter half of the nineteenth century: “Jingle Bells.”

In “The Christmas Song’s” brief nostalgic coda, Oscar Moore’s guitar becomes more audible, breaking in as Cole finishes the last syllable of the song. The listener may even remember the guitar from the opening of the song, or perhaps from a brief solo in the middle. Moore’s coda temporarily picks up the pace, allowing his chorded solo of “Jingle Bells” to stand out clearly. On these notes, “The Christmas Song” dovetails nicely, paying homage to an American classic.

But while Moore’s coda may add a slightly wistful air to the song’s ending, “The Christmas Song”—as a whole—is clearly moving in a more cheerful direction. Less haunted by the past, the lyric only embraces pleasurable images and memories from America’s Christmas heritage. Yes, Christmas may be represented by many symbols grounded in the past, but we can also look forward to Santa, presents, and excited children; to roasting chestnuts, feasting on turkey, singing carols, and kissing beneath the mistletoe. It’s a sense of nostalgia a listener might find in a winter-themed Hallmark card designed by Grandma Moses.

In a sense, the more upbeat mood of “The Christmas Song” seems to mirror the American public’s post-World War II mood: the soldiers have come home, the economy is booming, and the future is brimming with possibilities. Expressing little concern over America’s discontinuity with the past, “The Christmas Song” has smoothed the kinks out of holiday melancholy, turning the tide toward a more hopeful vision of an American Christmas in which the past is no more than pleasant memories. With “The Christmas Song,” nostalgia has become memory without pain.

The Ghost of Christmas Past

> "Goods may have always marked the special occasion. Nevertheless, by the twentieth century, shopping for them had become the central means of marking holiday time."—Gary Cross[xxxiii]

While national nostalgia would come and go depending on America's good fortunes, a backward glance at olden times and forgotten ways remained a perennial for the Christmas celebration. The modern Christmas song that had become an essential part of the holiday would preserve that spirit. "White Christmas" and other nostalgia-tinged songs offered a foundation for a new American Christmas, one that would be continually revived over the next seventy years. "In 1945, World War II had ended," wrote Marsh and Propes, "but not the seasonal nostalgia it had unleashed."[xxxiv]

All three of these songs—"White Christmas," "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," and "The Christmas Song"—have remained popular in both the original versions and as recorded by others. Crosby charted with "White Christmas" each year between 1942 and 1951, and again continuously, on one *Billboard* chart or another, between 1953 and 1970. Three other artists, Gordon Jenkins, Charlie Spivak, and Freddy Martin, charted with "White Christmas" in 1942, while "White Christmas" returned to the charts with Frank Sinatra in 1944, Jo Stafford in 1946, Eddy Howard and Perry Como in 1947, and the Ravens and Ernest Tubb in 1949. Over the next fifty-plus years, "White Christmas" would return with Mantovani (1952), the Drifters (1954), Andy Williams (1963), Otis Redding (1968), Michael Bolton (1993), Garth Brooks (1995), Martina McBride (2000), and Bette Midler (2003). In 2006, Crosby's version of "White Christmas" rose to number thirty-five on the Billboard Hot Digital Songs chart.

“Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” and “The Christmas Song” have also left their mark on a variety of *Billboard* charts.

Garland’s version of “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” reached number twenty-seven in 1944, while Sinatra’s earliest version, packaged with the album *Christmas Songs by Sinatra*, reached number seven in 1949. “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” also had a lively revival on the singles charts beginning in 1993. Vince Gill (1993), Kenny G (1994), Martina McBride (1999), Lonestar (2000), James Taylor (2001), Ruben Studdard and Tamyra Gray (2003), and Sarah McLachlan (2006) have all charted with “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.”

The King Cole Trio and Cole as a solo artist reached a variety of *Billboard* charts intermittently between 1946 and 2006. Even in 1969 and 1972, Cole’s version of “The Christmas Song” went to number one on the Christmas chart. Les Brown charted with “The Christmas Song” in 1947 and James Brown in 1966. A large cast of others, Herb Albert (1968), Natalie Cole (1991), Toni Braxton (1993), Reba McEntire (1997), Trace Adkins (1998), Christina Aguilera (1999), Martina McBride (2000), and Michael Bublé (2003), charted with “The Christmas Song.” Sung by Cole, “The Christmas Song” also reached number thirty-two in 2005 and fifty-six in 2006 on the Billboard Hot Digital Songs chart.

All three of these songs appeared on the 2009 ASCAP list of the top ten Christmas songs: Cole’s version of “The Christmas Song” was ranked number two, the Pretenders’ “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” number four, and Bing Crosby’s “White Christmas” number six.

The continued popularity of all of these songs seems to suggest that they hold an important place in the American understanding of the Christmas holiday. Together, these songs represent a value system—a way of life—that Americans wished to hold fast to, even if the modern Christmas experience seemed to undermine that possibility. In this sense, these seemingly secular songs served as a spiritual safety net, allowing Americans to temporarily embrace a sentiment that expressed who they wished to be and how they wished to live at Christmas time.

Whether the Christmas holiday had become too busy, too secular, or too money-centered, "White Christmas," "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," and "The Christmas Song" expressed a desire to return to a truer, more authentic, and pre-modern celebration. Even if a listener realized that the world had changed, she could still say that *she* or her family kept Christmas in the spirit of these songs; even if a listener found herself caught in a whirlwind of holiday shopping, she could always argue that she kept Christmas in her heart. For the duration of three minutes, each song allowed the American listener to believe, escape, or imagine a different kind of Christmas than post-World War II America would heartily embrace.

But by offering Americans a brief respite from the modern way of living, these songs also tempted Americans to believe an attractive untruth. Seduced by bucolic visions of yesteryear, some listeners believed that these sentiments—in the midst of a Christmas holiday primarily focused on shopping and restless activity—were still representative of how Americans lived or should live in the 1940s and beyond. For these Americans, the misty vision of nostalgia was mistaken for reality or a blueprint for the future. Under the spell of nostalgia, these Americans believed that the changes and complexities of modern life could be wished away by a concerted

effort to embrace and reestablish eternal truths; that the perceived values of the past could be reestablished by the willpower of the American character.

In this way, "White Christmas," "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," and "The Christmas Song" provide support for a value system that Americans continue to believe in, even while the lives they live are no longer representative of that value system. In this way, nostalgic holiday songs present a safe haven for those who cannot openly embrace the new American Christmas, even as they take part in it.

Endnotes

[i] Lloyd Morris, *Postscript to Yesterday: American Life and Though 1896/1946*. (New York: Harper Colophon, 1946), xv.

[ii] Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*. (New York: Free Press, 1979), 73.

[iii] Dave Marsh and Steve Propes, *Merry Christmas, Baby: Holiday Music from Bing to Sting*. (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 10.

[iv] Dave Marsh and Steve Propes, *Merry Christmas, Baby: Holiday Music from Bing to Sting*. (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 6.

[v] Mark Connelly, editor, *Christmas at the Movies: Images of Christmas in American, British and European Cinema*. (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000).

[vi] Dave Marsh and Steve Propes, *Merry Christmas, Baby: Holiday Music from Bing to Sting*. (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 6.

[vii] Booth Tarkington, *The Magnificent Ambersons*. (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1918), 11-12.

[viii] Helen Bartlett Bridgman, *Within My Horizon*. (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1920), 238.

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