

# THE MOST

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At last year's Holiday celebration my paper was about one of the most popular Holiday songs – "Santa Claus is Coming to Town." This evening I will discuss THE MOST popular Holiday song – "White Christmas" and its composer.

I'm sure we've all heard the song "White Christmas:"

"I'm dreaming of a White Christmas,  
just like the ones I used to know,  
where the tree tops glisten, and children listen ..., "etc., etc.

"White Christmas" was composed during 1940-41. The first public performance of this song was Christmas Eve 1941 sung by Bing Crosby on the Kraft Music Hall radio show. This was just a few weeks after the Pearl Harbor attack and the beginning of World War II.

The song created a melancholic yearning for Christmases past. Listeners heard the expression of their own nostalgia for peacetime. "White Christmas" is pointedly not religious – no angels or wise men, or even Santa.

Bing Crosby's recording of "White Christmas" became the best selling Christmas song and also the best selling single ever recorded according to the Guinness World Records.

"White Christmas" was recorded by many, many other singers including Frank Sinatra, Elvis, Neil Diamond, Perry Como, the Beach Boys, the Supremes, and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, to name just a few.

In 1942, Bing Crosby sang "White Christmas" in the movie Holiday Inn. During every Christmas season since the early 1940's "White Christmas" has been one of the most, if not the most, popular Holiday song.

However, the best known film rendition of the song of "White Christmas," was in the 1954 movie "White Christmas" which became the largest grossing movie of that year.

By the way, the four leading roles in White Christmas, the movie, were played by Bing Crosby, Danny Kaye, Rosemary Clooney, and Vera Ellen. The two female leads, Clooney and Vera Ellen, were connected to our area: Rosemary Clooney from Augusta, Kentucky, and Vera Ellen from Norwood. Vera Ellen Westmeier Rohe was the daughter of a piano dealer. Vera Ellen was a student at the Hessler Dance Studio in Mt. Adams. One of her fellow students was Doris Kappelhoff, who became Doris Day.

So, who was the composer of "White Christmas," the most popular and best selling Holiday song?

“White Christmas” was written by a Russian-born immigrant who did not celebrate Christmas as he was Jewish.

The composer of “White Christmas” was Irving Berlin who wrote countless other hits including “God Bless America,” “Blue Skies,” “This is the Army,” “There’s No Business Like Show Business,” “Cheek-to-Cheek,” “How Deep is the Ocean,” and “Let’s Take an Old-Fashioned Walk,” etc., etc.

Irving Berlin was born Israel Beilene (later Baline) on May 11, 1888 in Western Siberia, part of the Russian Empire. His family emigrated to the United States in 1893. After his father died, 12-year-old Izzy left school and became a busker, or song plugger, in 1910. Sheet music publishers employed song pluggers to perform new songs in saloons, vaudeville theaters, and on street corners.

His first attempt at song writing was “Marie from Sunny Italy” in 1903 from which he earned 37 cents in royalties. A spelling error on the sheet music to this song misspelled his name as “I. Berlin.” From then on Izzy Baline became Irving Berlin and he never looked back.

Irving Berlin continued plugging songs on New York’s lower east side and worked as a singing waiter in a Chinese restaurant until 1911 when he composed “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” which became an international hit and Berlin became an instant celebrity.

He continued to write hit songs such as “A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody.”

The United States entered World War I in 1917 and Berlin was drafted into the Army. Newspaper headline – “Army Takes Berlin.” But the Army wanted him to write songs such as “Oh! How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning” which he performed himself.

During the decades that followed, Berlin continued to write hit songs for Broadway and Hollywood. It would take all evening just to read the names of his songs out loud.

Getting back to “White Christmas,” many of Berlin’s biographers believe that “White Christmas” was written as a memorial to his only son – Irving Berlin, Jr., who was born December 1, 1928 but died 3 ½ weeks later on Christmas Eve. From then on, Irving Berlin, Jr.’s parents visited his grave every Christmas Eve.

When Irving Berlin demonstrated “White Christmas” for Bing Crosby in Crosby’s Paramount dressing room, Crosby said “Irving, you don’t have to worry about that one.”

Berlin was asked how “a member of the Jewish faith” could write “White Christmas.” He replied: “I wrote it as an American.”

Irving Berlin did not only write a song about Christmas. He also composed the most popular Easter song: “Easter Parade” – you know – “In your Easter bonnet, with all the frills upon it, you’ll be the grandest lady in the Easter Parade,” etc.

So, a poor immigrant Jew ends up composing the most popular songs for the most important Christian Holidays.

Is this a great country, or what?

Happy Holiday, Merry Christmas, and Happy Hanukah!