

# “Santa, Baby”



Sand dunes and 80-degree December temperatures might seem like the last conditions on earth to inspire the creation of timeless holiday songs, but, in fact, the Coachella Valley figures prominently in the writing and recording of a few that we hold most dear.

## “WHITE CHRISTMAS”

There are several stories about the genesis of “White Christmas,” surely the most famous Christmas tune of all, but one tells of Irving Berlin writing it poolside at the La Quinta Inn—today’s La Quinta Resort & Club. (Another puts him poolside at The Arizona Biltmore). After finishing, he quickly called his secretary in New York reportedly exclaiming, “Grab your pen and take down this song. I just wrote the best song I’ve ever written. Heck, I just wrote the best song that anybody’s ever written!”

That statement certainly makes sense in retrospect, considering that according to Guinness World Records, the version recorded by Bing Crosby, another desert fixture, ultimately became the bestselling single in history.

Regardless of the specific desert locale, most believe that the song was written in December 1937 for a Broadway show that was never produced. But later Berlin pulled it out of “the trunk” of song ideas he carried around as a possibility for Paramount Pictures’ 1942 musical film “Holiday Inn.” The beginning of the original first verse was dropped but it certainly could be describing the desert:

The sun is shining, the grass is green,  
The orange and palm trees sway

The song was first introduced on radio by Crosby during the Kraft Music Hall broadcast on December 24, 1941, barely two weeks after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The following year, with the release of the movie that summer, it became a favorite among the troops and well on its way to becoming one of the best known songs of all time.

During the war, Crosby sometimes broadcast his radio program from Palm Springs, usually from the American Legion Post, which was also a stop for Jack Benny and Al Jolson.

And if you don’t associate Crosby with Christmas, as well as Der Bingle with the desert, you haven’t been paying attention for the last half century. The crooner covered practically every other Christmas jingle from “Silver Bells” to “Silent Night,” along with gracing most of the golf courses in the Coachella Valley and



Above: Bing Crosby poses with a model in a publicity shot for Indian Wells Country Club.

Left: A youthful Frank Sinatra is joined by singer and two-time governor of Louisiana Jimmy Davis at Palm Springs’ American Legion Post.

Santa arrives like most visitors from snowy lands, by airplane and wearing shorts on Christmas 1946 to be ferried in a horse-drawn carriage into Palm Springs, where he'll hand out presents to awaiting children.

Below: The American Legion Post's interior in March 1950, festooned with crepe paper.

Bottom: KCMJ/NBC radio show broadcast from the post with Phil Harris, Jack Benny and Al Jolson.



developing Blue Skies Village, with a naming nod to a different one of his many hits, in what is now Rancho Mirage.

In 1957, desert dweller Elvis Presley made a version of "White Christmas," while recording "Blue Christmas" that year, as well. Frank Sinatra, also an icon of the desert, did his own rendition of "White Christmas" in 1944, one that topped the Billboard charts multiple times. Further, the tune was covered by desert celebrities like Doris Day, Eddy Howard and Dean Martin, among many others.

Sinatra additionally recorded "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" but modified the lyrics slightly. His version is more famous than the original recorded for the movie "Meet Me in St. Louis" by Judy Garland, a frequent visitor to the valley and whose daughter Lorna Luft makes her home in Rancho Mirage. Sinatra had the songwriter Hugh Martin change the dreary line "Until then, we'll have to muddle through somehow" to a more jolly "Hang a shining star upon the highest bough."

#### "THE CHRISTMAS SONG"

The mammoth success of "White Christmas," with its tinge of melancholy and longing for home, prompted the creation of other Christmas songs with a similar sentiment.



PHOTOS/GAIL B. THOMPSON, GAYLE'S STUDIO, COURTESY TRACY CONRAD, EXCEPT LOUIS ARMSTRONG, COURTESY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Above: Louis Armstrong belts out a tune in Palm Springs' Chi Chi Club.

Below: Singer Dinah Shore with husband, George Montgomery, join Palm Springs neighbors including actor Van Johnson, in November 1950.



Backstage during the KCMJ radio show at the American Legion Post in Palm Springs, Mr. and Mrs. Jack Benny meet with Tyrone Power and his wife French actress Annabella.

Writing in a "blistering, hot summer," multitalented musician Mel Tormé penned what is commonly called "Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire," or "The Christmas Song," in an effort to "stay cool by thinking cool."

The most famous version was recorded by Nat King Cole, who played at the Chi Chi Club in Palm Springs and owned a house in what is now Vista Las Palmas. Recorded first in 1946 and then multiple times thereafter, the Cole version was a massive hit and is regarded as the definitive version, despite the song being recorded by Tormé almost as many times. Although Tormé never lived here, his daughter and son-in-law named their now-closed jazz bar and restaurant in Palm Springs in honor of the singer known as "The Velvet Fog."

#### MORE WINTER'S TALES

Written by Steve Allen in 1953, "Cool Yule" is definitely the coolest Christmas tune ever, and it was recorded by Louis Armstrong, who did his stints at the Chi Chi, as well.

And "Baby, It's Cold Outside"—written by Frank Loesser and recorded by various desert rats including Dinah Shore, Johnny Mercer, Barry Manilow and Esther Williams—is definitely the hottest and hippest Christmas tune. That is, if you don't count desert regular Eartha Kitt's wickedly funny "Santa Baby."

—TRACY CONRAD

#### ►► DETAILS

Tracy Conrad is a board member of the Palm Springs Historical Society, and also of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. She has served on the Historic Site Preservation Board and the Planning Commission for the City of Palm Springs.