

Christ Was Born in Bethlehem

Informant/Performer:
Jean Ritchie, Kate Corrigan,
and Pamela Schall

Source:
Kentucky Christmas Old and New
Greenhays Recordings GR70717, 1980

Christ was born in Beth - le - hem, Christ was born in Beth - le - hem.

Christ was born in Beth - le - hem, and in a man - ger lay.

And in a man - ger lay, and in a man - ger lay.

Christ was born in Beth - le - hem, and in a man - ger lay.

The musical notation is written on four staves in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. The melody is simple and folk-like. The lyrics are written below the notes. There are asterisks (*) above the notes for 'a man - ger lay' in the second and fourth staves, indicating an alternative ending.

Transcribed by Gail Needleman

* alt.

The alternative ending is written on a single staff in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. It consists of a few notes and a double bar line.

2. Joseph stood a-nigh him (3x)
To keep him from all harm.
3. Sheep and cattle by him (3x)
To keep the baby warm.
To keep the baby warm (2x)
Sheep and cattle by him
To keep the baby warm.
4. Kings and shepherds kneeling (3x)
To welcome in his birth.
5. Angels sang his lullaby (3x)
It rang around the earth.
It rang around the earth (2x)
Angels sang his lullaby,
It rang around the earth.

Background Information

Our sister Jewel heard this carol when she went back to Knott County to teach her first school on Lotts Creek, boarding with Uncle Joe Ritchie, Dad's brother. In school in those days (mid 1930s) they began the day with Opening Exercises - recitations or Bible reading, saluting the flag, and singing one or two favorite songs. As springtime came on, one boy about seven or eight years old would always leap up with raised hand and holler, "Les sing 'Down Came an Angel!'" One day she finally told him that if he'd lead it they'd try it. Well, the other children all knew it and joined in - it was a lovely Easter carol. She brought it home to us, and when Dad heard us singing on it, he said, "O yes, that's a good 'un - I've known that all my life!" After the first verse, the traditional song tells the Easter story. I have given it Christmas words, so that it may be used for both seasons.