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Have Yourself a Jewish Little Christmas: Assimilation and Acculturation in U.S. Holiday Music

"G-d gave Moses the Ten Commandments and then He gave Irving Berlin..."White Christmas."

-Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock*

Jews may not be able to lay claim to the entire popular score of Christmas in America, but their input has been both wildly popular and oddly prolific. They are responsible for more than a dozen Christmas tunes after 1942, and have penned some of the most widely known and best loved holiday classics of the last century. The first major contribution came in 1942, as Irving Berlin's "White Christmas," which became the centerpiece of the film *Holiday Inn* and represented a paradigm shift toward a new genre of music. Mel Tormé's "The Christmas Song" followed in 1946, and a few years later, Johnny Marks' "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer" catapulted into the national consciousness in 1949. Though these songs were written for the holiday celebrating the birth of Christ, the songs themselves were distinctly different from their religious predecessors. While a close examination of seasonal songs prior to "White Christmas" is essential to understanding the significance of what Berlin's song first captured as American tastes began to change, analysis of the authors, histories, and lyrics of "White Christmas," "The Christmas Song," and "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer" reveals each song as a progressive statement of Jewish assimilation or acculturation. The authors make intentional choices in the lyrics to move from America's familiar obsession with nostalgia in Berlin's "White Christmas," to a more established, detailed idealization of the urban American Christmas in "The Christmas Song," and the transformation from theological to popular music culminates in Johnny Marks and Robert May's egregiously commercialized and secular classic "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer." The lyrics become increasingly secular and less reverent through time, exemplifying the process of Jewish assimilation, as a previously disenfranchised group used their agency to

help shape U.S. Christmas culture into something of which they could be a part. Christmas in America has always been a "European hand-me-down," and as Americans strove to make Christmas their own through restructuring and modernizing pre-existing borrowed traditions, these songwriters followed suit, drawing from the past and each other's work to give the population "songs and carols developed out of the nation's own music preferences," to make them uniquely American (Restad 109).

Prior to Berlin's maiden voyage into Christmas music, and the genre's subsequent infusion of Jewish songwriters, the landscape of seasonal music was populated almost exclusively by mangers and wise men rather than reindeer and snow. Carols were fundamentally religious, typically functioning as a poetic variation on the gospels. Songs were commonly created by clergymen for church services; "O Come All Ye Faithful" was written by an English Catholic priest named John Francis Wade, with possible influence from Saint Bonaventura's work. A parish priest in a small French town requested a religious poem for Christmas mass from the local wine commissonaire, Placide Cappeau de Roquemaure, and "O Holy Night" was the triumphant result. And though authorship for "Angels We Have Heard On High" is uncertain, its use of scripture and Latin in the chorus indicates "a monk or priest from the Catholic church" is likely responsible for this song (Collins 25). Lyrically, there is a narrow focus on overtly Christian rhetoric and religious imagery depicting the actual event of Jesus' birth. "Faithful" refers to the "Virgin's womb," and explicitly names Jesus "Son of the Father" and "King of angels" (190). Using "the gospel of Luke as his guide, Cappeau imagined witnessing the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem," for "O Holy Night" (207). Cappeau emphasizes the importance of the event through his use of "night divine," and refers to "the wise men from Orient land" (212). In

"Angels," in addition to referring to Jesus as "the newborn King," the anonymous author overtly refers to other significant Biblical figures, Mary and Joseph (28). The songs also underscore their religious nature through the use of Latin in certain songs, and commands for worship built into the lyrics, such as "O come, let us adore Him," "fall on your knees," and "come, adore on bended knee" (190, 211, 28). While the rhetoric of carols before the landmark "White Christmas" varies depending on author, they repeatedly depict the same scene of Jesus' birth due to a desire to remain close to biblical descriptions, keeping these songs decidedly Christian in nature. Though secular music prior to Berlin's "White Christmas" was not unheard of in the form of songs like "Deck the Halls" and "Here We Come a-Wassailing," these songs are imports from England, and though they are not religious, they are more formally worded than even the early American Christmas songs of the twentieth century, and firmly rooted in English tradition.

As Jewish songwriters ventured into crafting seasonal American music, they wrote from their own perspective on the Christian holiday from which Jews had previously been alienated. Their experiences were decidedly nonreligious, and their secular perceptions were critical for moving holiday music out of predominantly theological territory. The first to capitalize on his perspective as an outsider was Irving Berlin, born Israel Baline on May 11, 1888 in Mohilev, Russia (Bergreen 9). As an immigrant in America, Berlin was far more assimilated than acculturated, though there were elements of the latter, with the occasional attendance of Passover seders, or a Kol Nidre service. But Berlin was far more comfortable with less Jewishness in his life, making choices to mitigate its presence; he did not marry a Jew after his first Jewish wife's untimely passing just months into their marriage, and actually celebrated Christmas with his family to the point of having a Christmas tree in the living room, and in such a fashion his

daughter, Mary Ellin called it “the single most beautiful and exciting day of the year” (Rosen 21). Berlin’s famous hyper-consciousness of the nation’s mood made him particularly successful at capturing its interests through songwriting; he tended to write with his audience in mind and had a “driving need for public affirmation” which crippled his self-worth in stretches of time between hits (21). Berlin had no formal training as a musician or songwriter, and instead was self-taught. This lent itself to simpler verses and rhymes that were consistent themes throughout his work, and are present in “White Christmas” in particular, exemplified through instances like “snow/know,” and “listen/glisten” (55). Though Berlin offered several different origin stories for his most famous song, the most reliable is his musical secretary’s, Helmy Kresa, who remembers Berlin hurrying into his offices on a Monday in early January and declaring, “Not only is this the best song I ever wrote, it’s the best song *anybody* ever wrote,” before asking Kresa to transcribe the lyrics and pick out the melody ready-made in Berlin’s mind but not yet on paper (23). The song contains an unmistakable sadness (which is the reason it struck such a poignant chord with a war-torn American population and the armed forces during World War II, making this into an unlikely, but incredibly popular “Why We Fight” song), possibly due to this song being a product of a person who’d always felt alienated from the holiday, voicing “a Jewish immigrant’s feelings of estrangement” from this celebration (60). But Christmas also held a darker significance for Berlin, functioning as the Yahrtzeit of his only infant son, who died of an unexpected heart attack just weeks into his life.

A defining characteristic of “White Christmas” is its simplicity; Bing Crosby’s version contains four paragraphs, two of which repeat themselves. The song uses just fifty-three words total, and forty-four of them are monosyllables (55). Berlin’s Judaism and immigrant past

contributed to the simplicity of this song; his experiences of the holiday were largely uncomplicated or nonexistent until later in his adult life. Though "White Christmas" was the first song of its kind in the twentieth century, its style is consistent with the earliest American Christmas songs, as it is "simply arranged and heartily sung," and "transcended time and change...and characteristically avoided the earthly issues of poverty, irreligion, or revelous high spirits" (Restad 110). Information about the song's narrator is minimal, as is setting, aside from a general landscape that seems to depict wintry, pastoral New England. There is no mention of religious rhetoric of any sort. These nebulous qualities combine to make this a more universal Christmas song, rather than a tune that requires a specific religious background to relate to and enjoy. When writing "White Christmas," Berlin drew from his own experiences of Christmas, but more significantly, from the past. The song actually contains traces of its religious predecessors. The flow, particularly of the chorus is described as "hymn-like," and some of Berlin's lyrics are reminiscent of parts of the classic "Silent Night" (Rosen 55). While no religious imagery intrudes on his lyrics, Berlin manages to sanctify the holiday through the key element of his song; the "unblemished whiteness of the Christmas snowfall is the whiteness of purity and perfection" (57). Imagery of serenity in "White Christmas" brings to mind phrasing from "Silent Night," in particular, "All is calm, all is bright." Berlin's final lyric, "May your days be merry and bright/and may all your Christmases be white" brings attention to the prominence of the word "bright," reinforcing the idea that Berlin looked to this earlier, traditional song for inspiration (58). His use of the past was wise; America's obsession with nostalgia is a theme running through the development of Christmas in this country, as Americans "rescued the best of Christmas from the past and made Christmas "no doubt" better than the old" (Restad 122).

America borrowed several elements of the holiday from Europe and England, through "fundamental traditions that had been recaptured or newly invented" (108). The song is a pastoral look to Christmases past, similar to the earlier "Jingle Bells," when "time paced itself to horses and sleighs, not trains and clocks" (110). "White Christmas" illustrates a world untouched by modernity, something Americans related to and longed for at the troubled time of the song's release and peak in popularity.

"White Christmas" was a critical first step in Jewish influence on seasonal music; Berlin's lyrics were simple but genteel, and the addition of Bing Crosby, the embodiment of the everyman as singer compounded these qualities, making this song particularly easy to swallow despite the distinct lack of religion. The use of Crosby, already known to the American people as "The Voice of Christmas" of the era and a publicly "devout Catholic," kept this new addition to the Christmas songbook from feeling too foreign and aided in ensuring the song's popularity (Rosen 99-100). The safe, clichéd images of quintessential American Christmases "just like the ones I used to know" capitalized on Americans' hugely heightened pain and nostalgia during a time of national and global conflict and separation from loved ones (Crosby). This combined with its popularity with Uncle Sam's forces immortalized Berlin's song. The song functions as a "milestone of Jewish acculturation," as the iconic ode to a Christian holiday was penned by an immigrant and son of a cantor (Rosen 12). At its time of release, "White Christmas" was relatable on every level, perfectly capturing the nation's fragile emotional state, sealing it into the American consciousness, and paving the way for the schmaltzier tunes to follow.

Though America remembers Mel Tormé chiefly for his reputation as a lounge lizard, his contribution to seasonal music in the form of "The Christmas Song" represents a bold effort to

continue the secularization of holiday songs. Tormé was born in Chicago to a middle class Jewish family, but came of age during the Great Depression. Mel's father lost his dry goods shop and went to work as a salesman. His mother's wages from her job in a dress shop, along with his grandparents' help and the "occasional few dollars I earned in kid vaudeville units in and around Chicago went into the family pot" (Tormé 5). Their combined efforts kept the family from starving, and Mel's work in show business afforded him the ability to aid his family financially, even as a child. Tormé described the Depression years as "happy but difficult," and says, "we never, really, wanted for anything" (9, 17). Of the three authors, Tormé is the most comfortable with his Jewishness, almost immediately introducing his parents as coming from "Russian-Jewish backgrounds," and recalling how, at family dinners, "old Hebrew songs" were invariably sung (2-3). He casually describes growing up in a "principally Jewish" neighborhood, his kosher house, and how his grandmother made the "best gefilte fish ever" (9). He also occasionally uses Yiddish words in context in his autobiography, describing how his " whole family *kvelled*" at an early point in his career (10). Tormé idolized artists Duke Ellington, and from a young age worked to emulate him when he played piano, wanting to "shape sounds the way Duke Ellington did," calling him his "inspiration" and his "musical hero" (19). Eventually, Ethel Waters described Tormé as "the only white man who sings with the soul of a black man" (1). Tormé's "views of life and music were never complicated by racial prejudice," and his choice of Nat King Cole as singer for his contribution to Christmas music means he is credited widely with opening the avenue of holiday music to African Americans (Collins 44).

Tormé wrote "The Christmas Song" with his good friend and lyricist Bob Wells in 1945 on a sweltering day in LA (supposedly these are the conditions also responsible for "White

Christmas"), when it was so hot, Wells wanted to write something to "cool himself off," and all he could think of was "Christmas and cold weather" (Tormé 84). The two writers were collaborating on the title songs for two movies, *Magic Town* and *Abie's Irish Rose*, though their work quickly got pushed aside when Tormé made a curious discovery upon his arrival. Wells had the first four opening lines written on a notepad when Tormé arrived at his house, after considering "everything that reminded [him] of cold winters in New England" (Collins 45). Wells' train of thought began after his mother brought home a bag of chestnuts to stuff a turkey, and remembered vendors selling bags of them on the streets of New York City around the holidays. Though Wells was simply hoping to harness the power of positive thinking, Tormé observed "this may make a good song" (Tormé 84). The rest of "The Christmas Song" was written collaboratively in roughly forty-five minutes. Upon completion, Wells and Tormé visited Nat King Cole's home uninvited, who was so impressed with the song he "wanted to record it before Tormé could offer it to anyone else" (Collins 48). After it was released in the late fall of 1946, Tormé calls everything that came after as "our financial pleasure" (Tormé 84).

While Mel Tormé's "The Christmas Song" resembles "White Christmas" in its picturesque representation of Christmas, Tormé's tune presents an even more idealized version of the Americanized holiday, with considerably more detail, and paints a much clearer, more established picture just a few years later. Stylistically, the song is quite a bit more complex than its predecessor; though it also has four paragraphs, none of the verses are ever repeated, whereas "White Christmas" emphasizes its simplicity and message through repetition of the first two paragraphs. Instead, each of "The Christmas Song's" lines discuss something different about Christmas in America. While this song could be interpreted as nostalgic, there is nothing overtly

dated in its lyrics which cause the listener to recall memories of Christmases past. Rather, its imagery evokes Yule-tide feelings through using well-established, enduring traditions all Americans are familiar with, and would be appropriate in any era, ensuring the song's longevity and relevance at a later date. Like Berlin's classic, these lyrics leave out all religious imagery. However, the omission feels much more conspicuous in this song, due to the amount of detail otherwise covered. The closest the song comes to theology is mentioning "Yule-tide carols being sung by a choir," but abruptly transitions to a different subject in the next line, moving on to folks in winter clothing, not giving the listener a chance to protest the casual treatment of possibly religious imagery (Cole). The lyrics also fail to specify what sort of carols are sung (though in 1946, there still were not many secular Christmas songs), or by what sort of choir. If listeners take the iconic "chestnuts" reference as a cue that this song takes place in an urban setting, holiday choirs of a nonreligious variety are not unusual in large cities (Cole). This song focuses exclusively on the trappings of Christmas to help the listener look forward to the holiday, and, avoids any sort of message beyond the banal "Merry Christmas to you" (Cole).

"The Christmas Song" is less universally adored than Berlin's ode to the holiday, but it is still a wildly successful and considerably more adventurous effort than "White Christmas." It lacks the same simplicity and nostalgia, but remains relatable for Americans through extensive imagery that, even if something like "chestnuts roasting on an open fire" seems decidedly foreign due to geographical location where this folk tradition was absent, the lyrics contain something for everyone (Cole). There are at least one or two lines anyone can recognize and relate to, regardless of religious affiliations. Tormé and Wells do not skimp on mainstream tropes like Santa Claus, cold weather garments, and, most American of all, food. The lyrics also

intentionally include a large demographic from women, to children, to "kids from one to ninety-two" (Cole). Nat King Cole's cut of "The Christmas Song" was the first "American Christmas standard introduced by an African American," and boosts the song's inclusive nature not simply through wide-reaching lyrics, but the purposeful choice of a member of a minority to give it voice (Collins 49). The songwriters' willingness to cover so much detail about the Christmas holidays, in vernacular markedly less formal than Berlin's song through words such as "folks," "tiny tots," and "every mother's child is gonna spy," while still omitting religion, and choosing Nat King Cole as the song's first and arguably most iconic voice, represents more willingness to take risks on the part of Jewish songwriters in an active effort toward inclusiveness (Cole).

But perhaps the most compelling evidence of Jewish influence on Christmas music and the growing desire for more secular songs comes in the form of the most enduring Christmas character since Santa Claus. Johnny Marks, responsible for shaping the existing story of a reindeer named Rudolph into music and lyrics, was born in 1909 in Mount Vernon, New York as a third generation American in a secular Jewish family. Marks' parents were secular, and he continued this tradition for the rest of his life. As he got older, he became part of Ethical Culture, a philosophical, "'non-religious religious movement,' which still exists," and its emphasis on "humanistic moral values" has made it the 'quasi-religion' of particularly secular Jews (Bloom). Marks eventually founded a music company called St. Nicholas Music, and wrote several other Christmas classics, including "Run, Rudolph, Run," and "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree." Robert May was Marks' brother-in-law, and is responsible for the original story of Rudolph. May worked as a copywriter for Montgomery Ward while his Jewish wife was dying of cancer. The ad department asked for a "cheery Christmas story" Ward could give its shoppers as a gesture of

goodwill and to help increase Christmas sales (Bloom). After May's wife passed, he solicited the opinion of his Jewish in-laws, and his young Jewish daughter, Barbara, on his story about a reindeer with a conspicuous nose. Upon publication of the pamphlets, Montgomery Ward's story about Rudolph became enormously popular, and millions of booklets were passed out. The head of Montgomery Ward eventually gave the Rudolph rights to May, free and clear, to help him support another ailing wife and his growing family. This marked the first time Montgomery Ward had ever done anything like this. Mirroring the song he is now largely responsible for, May's religious secularization was extreme; he married a devout Catholic after the death of his first wife, and all his subsequent children were raised in the Catholic faith. None of his children even knew their father was Jewish until after they reached adulthood. While it is unclear as to whether May ever actually converted to Christianity, his burial in a Catholic cemetery, with a cross on his gravestone indicates this is likely the case.

"Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" least resembles Berlin's song in composition, though they both begin with verses far less famous than the rest of the song. This song is the least serious of the three, with light-hearted, cartoonish imagery replacing staid, adult themes, and an anti-bullying message that makes this song most appealing to children. It is impossible to ignore the parallels between this song and the experience of a social outsider or immigrant. Written during the Great Depression, within a community one individual is treated differently and ostracized because he looks different. This seems even more pointed when considering the reason the other reindeer choose to bully Rudolph, which was his "very shiny nose" and the well-known Jewish stereotype of large noses (Autry). That being said, in this story, the protagonist becomes a hero for the physical feature that most sets him apart. A visit from a

beloved authority figure in Santa Claus and his deferential, politely phrased request validates Rudolph and actually puts him in a position of power through "guid[ing] my sleigh tonight" (Autry). An outcast no longer, "how the reindeer loved him" for saving this most important American holiday, holding Rudolph in such high esteem, they predicted he would "go down in history" (Autry). This story also "ratified the American dream in terms of merit and acceptance" instead of money (Restad 165). This could have been an attempt on May and/or Marks' parts to challenge the stereotype that Jews are motivated primarily by monetary compensation. Unsurprisingly, this song continues the theme of omitting religion, but the tale does manage to have an ethical message through teaching tolerance, and that it is objectionable to despise someone simply for some accident of birth like a physical disability or race. "Rudolph" also sends the message that "a worthy soul, given the opening, can turn a liability into an asset," and that "success will surely follow" (165). Rudolph represents the most literal example of assimilation, and not simply for the song's message and secularity; after his positive contribution, the narration describes his enthusiastic welcome into society.

Though this song' history is the saddest, it is also the most secular and commercialized, which is unsurprising given that these writers were the most secular of the three songs. While Tormé's song at least included a plethora of different well-known and beloved trappings of the season, this song's focus is much narrower. Though it does declare itself as a Christmas song through mentioning "Christmas Eve" and Santa Claus, by this point, the identity of Christmas within America was largely established (Autry). The song's secularity is also unsurprising as the story was originally created by May with the goal of helping to generate income, at the behest of a large retail company as an advertising gimmick; his subsequently established record company

named St. Nicholas Music demonstrates Marks' pragmatism. In spite of its commercial origins, the song still manages to have a sentimental background and moral message. The Jewish reshaping of Christmas is displayed here in this boldest and most secular carol about a thinly veiled metaphor between Rudolph and Jews themselves. The unorthodox choice of Gene Autry, a country star, to record this song also demonstrates the changing tastes away from tradition, into something more modern and specifically American.

While "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" was not the last secular song written about Christmas, and it certainly wasn't the last secular song written about Christmas by Jews, it signified the completed transition away from strictly religious seasonal music in America. Jewish songwriters influenced the Christmas songbook, and aided in the creation of a new genre of popular music vastly underdeveloped before "White Christmas." More so than seeing a niche in the market on which to capitalize through creating American holiday music, these songwriters sought their own societal acceptance in an overwhelmingly Christian culture. These songs represent an effort by religious outsiders to become part of the American voice. At the same time, it is worth noting the ingenious impishness of their efforts; beginning with "White Christmas," these writers effectively "buried all traces of the holiday's Christian origins beneath three feet of driven snow" (Rosen 165). Tunesmiths like Berlin, Tormé, and Marks helped transform a holiday previously fraught with barriers of entry, gradually breaking them down through their preferred medium, and using increasingly non-religious lyrics over time. While their songs have lost some of their impact as the historical context in which Americans listen to them has changed, these songs continue to mark the Christmas seasons. After so many years, their effect is kitschy and almost Pavlovian rather than emotional, but these songs influence how we feel about and

celebrate Christmas in this country. “White Christmas,” “The Christmas Song,” and “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” are largely responsible for the holiday’s inclusiveness, after their writers helped reshape the holiday soundtrack (sometimes literally) in their own image.

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