

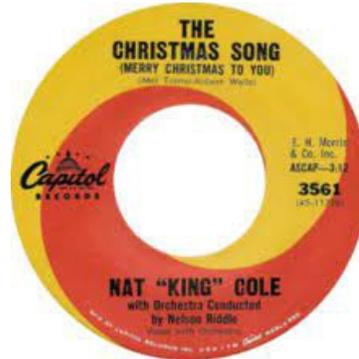
“The Christmas Song”—Nat “King” Cole (1961)

Added to the National Registry: 2022

Essay by James Torme (guest post)*



Nat “King” Cole



Early label



Mel Torme

Beyond its unmistakable lyrics and melody, Mel Tormé and Bob Wells' “The Christmas Song” has a deeper significance: it broke barriers to bring us all together for the holidays.

The summer of 1945 brought the usual allotment of heat waves to the West Coast of the United States. To add to this, domestic air conditioning had not yet been widely proliferated. Not to be hampered by this, Southern Californians resorted to a variety of self-cooling methods. These ranged from the use of light clothing, blocks of ice, fans, “sponge baths,” public fountains, pools, and high-ceiling homes, all in conjunction with cold beverages. However, there were always a few particularly intense, high-pressure summer days where all attempts to comfortably exist seemed futile. “The Christmas Song” (also known as “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire”) was written by 19-year-old Mel Tormé and 22-year-old Bob Wells on just this sort of day in Los Angeles.

Tormé, whose favorite childhood toy was the family's Emerson “Cathedral model” radio, had broken into his native Chicago's vaudeville scene at the tender age of four, quickly developing into a fine radio actor, singer, and drummer. At 15, while a student at Hyde Park High on the South Side of Chicago, he wrote a song called “Lament to Love,” which was discovered, recorded, and made a hit by star bandleader Harry James. Two years later, Tormé, already an experienced professional drummer on the Chicago club scene, scored a special guest singer/drummer/musical director job touring with the Chico Marx band (of the famous Marx Brothers). This brought the now 17 year-old out to Hollywood--and into a few early movie roles. Tormé and his family had been living in Los Angeles for a couple of years when he met the young aspiring songwriter, Bob Wells, at a party.

Bob Wells was born as Robert Levinson in 1922 in Newark, New Jersey. Diagnosed with polio as a child, he would spend much of his youth in bed, listening to music on the radio. Just like Tormé, it was the excessive hours spent doing this that catalyzed his interest in songwriting and inspired him to move to Hollywood in order to pursue a career in music. Once there, early jobs included work as a pianist and songwriter for singers Peggy Lee and Rosemary Clooney.

Upon getting acquainted, Tormé and Wells, who were both of Jewish descent, but hailed from opposite coasts, hit it off and decided to try their luck as a writing team.

Though Mel would later describe their initial foray into songwriting as “predictably hit and miss,” the new partners were able to secure a few movie song contracts relatively swiftly--one to

record the title track for the film “Abie's Irish Rose” (1947) and another to do the same for the Jimmy Stewart/Jane Wyman film “Magic Town” (1947).

They were even lucky enough to record their songs “Willow Road” and “Born To Be Blue” with the great Bing Crosby in those early days. The young duo, who would ultimately co-write over 200 songs, was showing potential.

Now, on this hot early afternoon the following July, Tormé, newly discharged from military service at Fort MacArthur, CA, began his new daily routine of sliding into his Plymouth, driving over the hill from Hollywood to Toluca Lake (a residential Los Angeles suburb in the San Fernando Valley) and writing songs with Bob Wells (who had also served in WW2, in the United States Air Force) at the Wells’ family home. During this pre-Manson family era, it was common to leave a home’s front door unlocked, especially during daylight hours.

As had become his habit, Tormé let himself into the Wells residence and walked into the empty front foyer.

“Bobby!” he called out.

There was no sign of his friend. Glancing over in the direction of the piano, Mel noticed a spiral pad with a few lines penciled on it. He walked over, picked up the pad, and looked down at the words:

*Chestnuts roasting on an open fire
Jack Frost nipping at your nose
Yuletide carols being sung by a choir
And folks dressed up like Eskimos*

Mel called out for Bob again and waited. Still no sign of him. Then, finally, Wells materialized, wearing a white T-shirt, tennis shorts, and looking uncomfortable.

“Hey, what's this?” inquired Tormé, holding up the pad.

“I tried everything,” Bob explained. “I was just so hot today. Cold drinks. A cold shower. Couldn't get comfortable. I'm nothing but hot. Then, I had a thought. Maybe if I sat and wrote some wintry verses, I could cool myself down, you know, mentally.”

Mel glanced back toward the pad, then back at Bob.

“You know, I think this just might make a song.”¹

They sat down and began expanding on the initial four lines. Tormé applied a haunting, arpeggiated melody that had been going through his head for a week or so. Forty-five minutes later, “The Christmas Song” was fully written.

Energized, the two young men jumped into Wells’ always immaculate cherry red 1941 Buick convertible. The plan: drive over the hill and play the song for a dear friend, whose star was rising fast. That friend was the inimitable singer and pianist, Nat “King” Cole. On the way to Cole's, they stopped in and played the song for Johnny Burke of their publishing company, Burke/Van Heusen. Burke listened, then quickly concluded that the song was not much of a serious prospect because “it would only be good for one day of the year.”

Shrugging off Burke’s less than glowing assessment, Tormé and Wells continued to Nat Cole’s home, in Hancock Park. The two had enjoyed genuine friendships with both Nat and his

manager, Carlos Gastel (also Mel's manager), for some time.² Upon being greeted at the door by Cole, they made a beeline for the piano and played the song once through.

"Play it again!" said Nat.

They started again from the top, but before they could get all the way through, Cole interrupted,

"STOP! That's MY song! Do you understand?" He continued, "Nobody else gets that song!"

Nat "King" Cole had fallen in love with "The Christmas Song." Already saddled with a busy schedule, Cole would record the song about a year later, and it was subsequently released in the late fall of 1946, just in time for the holidays. It would become his biggest hit. Written by two people who were barely out of their teens, the newest holiday song on the block would go on to capture the hearts of music lovers everywhere. Its highly relatable family holiday imagery revealed itself with self-deprecating lightheartedness: a song that seemed to say, "Yes, we know these things are clichés, but they never get old, *and neither should you.*"

This philosophy is reinforced with the lyrics:

*So I'm offering this simple phrase
To kids from one to 92
Although it's been said many times, many ways
Merry Christmas to you*

The only holiday perennial that takes the time to discourage ageism (Tormé later wrote another song based on this principle, called "Christmas Was Made For Children"), the song's penultimate line not only suggests that many of us are, in essence, grown-up children, but also puts forward the idea that one can and should feel the innocence and wonder of youth when it comes to enjoying the magic of the holiday season.

Interestingly, the first recorded version of the song, which was tracked by Cole and his trio with a light string section at Capitol Studios in Hollywood, had a slight grammatical error in it. Nat Cole sang:

"to see if *reindeers* really know how to fly"

Upon realizing this eight weeks later, Cole, who was a perfectionist, insisted on going back into the studio to re-record the whole thing. Capitol Records, who were initially less than excited about this, would soon have any regrets washed away. The re-recorded version ultimately became a massive hit on both the pop and R&B charts. It continues to be identified as a personal favorite holiday recording by many people in key demographic groups, far into the 21st-century.

At the time of this writing, both of the first two Nat Cole recordings of the song are still floating around on the airwaves, though the initial cut with "reindeers," heard much less frequently, is now considered a rare collector's item.

Cole would record no less than four more versions of the song, including an initial full orchestra version, arranged by Nelson Riddle, in 1953. He would then record yet another version, this time under the baton of Ralph Camichael (with stereophonic sound) in 1961. Widely seen as the *ultimate* "Christmas Song" recording, that version was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1974, as well as being selected for preservation by the Library of Congress, having been designated as "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant."

In terms of its form, “The Christmas Song” differs from most perennials, holiday favorites, and hit songs of the modern era, in that it has no chorus. The song is made up of two introductory verses, a bridge, then a third and final verse. The fact that it succeeded despite this puts it in a category with other unconventional hit songs such as Dave Brubeck’s “Take Five,” Sir Paul McCartney’s “Yesterday,” and Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody.”

Without question, the song’s timing helped its popularity. Its release coincided with the return of massive numbers of soldiers who had been fighting in Europe and the Pacific. Finally back on home soil, these people could now once again enjoy the simple pleasures of the holidays with family and friends, for the first time in years. The voice of Nat Cole singing “The Christmas Song” provided the perfect soundtrack to this very significant moment in their lives. Having witnessed war’s atrocities abroad, returning G.I.’s would hear the song, then forever associate it with the special glow of their first postwar Christmas “back on the range.” Both military personnel and the general public claimed this musical homage to home sweet home, with its distinct melody, lyrics about simple traditions, nostalgic jazz-oriented chords, and groundbreaking, pitch-perfect Nat “King” Cole rendition, as their own.

From both a political and historical point of view, Tormé and Wells’ “The Christmas Song” has a much deeper significance than meets the eye. It was the first holiday standard to be introduced to the world by an African-American, and, despite the considerable resistance to artists of color that still existed at the time, it could not be stopped. Coming off of his highly successful single “I Love You for Sentimental Reasons” a few months earlier, the music-loving public were not only primed, they were clamoring for more Nat Cole. Now they would get what they wanted, wrapped in a package where the pairing of artist and song with a moment in time were no less than sublime.

By demonstrating this kind of progress in American popular music, Nat “King” Cole and “The Christmas Song” helped set the stage for yet another historic breakthrough by a black American. Just five months after the release of the “Christmas Song,” the supremely skilled Jackie Robinson made his own statement when he smashed through the color barrier to become the first African-American player in Major League Baseball.

Unsurprisingly, Mel Tormé continued to play a role promoting inclusivity in show business throughout the late 1940s and 1950s. He toured extensively with artists of color such as Nat Cole and Duke Ellington, advancing the idea of a racially-mixed act years before it was universally accepted. This led to some frightening situations, a few of which Tormé recounted in his 1988 autobiography “It Wasn’t All Velvet.”

There are some interesting quotes about this era in Tormé’s own words:

The life of a black entertainer was a complex, at times terrifying web of interlocking contradictions. Here was one of the greatest singers of our time, selling out theaters across the country, and still having to make do with a second-class existence. The hotels, the restaurants, the clubs--everything was segregated, and even the most successful black performer couldn’t escape that fact. ³

And:

There were many occasions where we were refused service at restaurants or hotels, and sometimes we had to eat our meals in the back of a kitchen or in the car.⁴

He then made the following observation:

Despite everything, Nat remained a consummate professional. He never let the racism get in the way of his performance, and he never let it affect his attitude towards his fans. That was a lesson I took to heart, and I've tried to live by it ever since.⁵

Indeed, Tormé did go on to do just that. His efforts on behalf of his African-American peers in the entertainment industry were appreciated by the black community. His own down-home, Ella Fitzgerald-influenced singing style, and the uncanny soulfulness of his musicality were recognized by iconic contemporaries such as Ethel Waters, who said, "Mel Tormé is the only white man who sings with the soul of a black man," and the great Count Basie, who famously said, "The way Mel sings, he should've been black!"

Meanwhile Tormé's counterpart, Bob Wells, went on to become one of the most decorated television writer/songwriter/producers on the scene, contributing material for numerous films, television shows and specials. While doing this, he collaborated with such greats as Dinah Shore, Shirley MacLaine, Julie Andrews, Patty Duke, Cy Coleman and the aforementioned Duke Ellington. By the time Wells died in 1998 (just one year before Tormé), he had amassed six Emmys and a Peabody Award, as well as Grammy and Oscar nominations.

The success of "The Christmas Song" was just one of many important milestones on a societal path that led to further cultural advances and Civil Rights victories. But its impact was significant. To this day, the song is seen as a symbol of progress and inclusivity. It helped establish a path that led all the way to the election of Barack Obama, the first African-American President of the United States, in 2008.

All five of Nat Cole's recorded versions of "The Christmas Song" are masterful, sincere, and of the highest possible quality. Arguably, his performances of the song became even deeper and more meaningful over time, with many people identifying the 1961 full orchestra/Ralph Carmichael version as their favorite, through the years.

From films such as "Home Alone," "Elf" and "The Santa Clause III" to television shows including "The Simpsons," "The Office," "Glee," "The West Wing," "Parks and Recreation," "Friends" and "A Charlie Brown Christmas." "The Christmas Song" has been featured in countless productions and advertising campaigns. It has been recorded by many of the world's most renowned artists, from Ella Fitzgerald to Justin Bieber, and was among the very first songs to be inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame.

Having gone on to become a widely-loved jazz singer in his own right, Mel Tormé would record his own excellent versions of "The Christmas Song." He also famously performed it with Judy Garland on "The Judy Garland Show" in 1963. For Tormé's one and only Christmas album ("Christmas Songs," Telarc, 1991), Tormé commissioned a symphony orchestra version of the song from his longtime friend and arranger, Angela Morley.⁶

The legacy of performing this arrangement is carried on by two of Tormé's sons, Steve March Tormé and James Tormé, both second-generation pop/jazz artists. The latter released his own special 70th anniversary *a cappella* version of the song in 2015.

Nat Cole and "The Christmas Song" came together at just the right time. Together, they shattered racial and cultural prejudices to further integrate African-Americans into mainstream American culture at large. Cole's many recordings and performances of the song, including those on "The Nat King Cole Show," along with those of thousands of music artists around the world, remind us of American culture at its very best. As the song's timeless melody floats along, the power of music to bring people together and transcend class, race, historical, and other cultural differences is clear for all to see.

Recognized a few years ago on British television as one of the top ten highest-earning songs of all time⁷, “The Christmas Song” is viewed by many as the definitive holiday standard. Now established as an indispensable part of the holidays, the song will no doubt continue not only to delight, but to benefit each new generation that discovers it.

James Torme is a jazz vocalist based in Los Angeles, California. He made his CD debut in 2011. He also happens to be the son of American singer Mel Tormé and British actress Janette Scott.

Footnotes:

¹ Mel Tormé, *It Wasn't All Velvet* (Viking Press, 1988), p.84

² Carlos Gastel, a major music industry manager, guided the careers of such jazz luminaries as Peggy Lee and Stan Kenton. He also managed Mel Tormé in the crucial early part of his career.

³ Mel Tormé, *It Wasn't All Velvet* (Viking Press, 1988).

⁴ from a posthumously printed interview in *The New York Times* in 1999.

⁵ Mel Tormé, *It Wasn't All Velvet* (Viking Press, 1988).

⁶ Angela Morley (née Wally Stott) English arranger, who was already accomplished in film composing, later worked on a myriad of high-level projects including the *Star Wars* and *Superman* films. Transitioning in 1972 to become Angela Morley, she became the first openly transgender person to be nominated for an Academy Award.

⁷ From the BBC Four documentary *The Richest Songs in the World* (2013), where the song is featured at number 10 on the list of the “10 highest-earning songs of all time.”

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.