

**This interview with  
MARIAH CAREY  
was conducted by the Library of Congress  
on April 12, 2023**



*Mariah Carey*

**Library of Congress: On behalf of the Library of Congress and the Librarian of Congress, Carla Hayden, she wants to congratulate you that “All I Want for Christmas is You” is being added the National Recording Registry.**

Mariah Carey: Thank you so much. This is incredible. I never would've thought this was gonna happen.... Everybody always asks me like, “Oh, did you know it was gonna be this thing?” And the answer is “no.” I wasn't sitting there writing like, “I'm going to be in all these places and my song is gonna mean something to people every Christmas.” I didn't... I had no idea. I just wrote from my heart what I wanted. So thank you so much for including me in this incredible company. This is major and this is so gratifying to me as an artist, as a songwriter,...

**LC: Can you tell us a little bit about when you were growing up and your experience of the holidays?**

MC: Well, there was a lot going on around me when I was growing up, obviously. Being black and biracial and being ambiguous looking in America growing up. It's still the same but a little bit better. But when I was growing up, I had a difficult time 'cause nobody gave me direction or a talk, like here's how you handled this or that. And I also had some very interesting situations. Situations that weren't--they weren't what you think of with “All I Want for Christmas is You.” It [was] not the most festive situation. So I had some people that would kind of ruin every holiday....

But every year I waited for Christmas. I always loved it as a little kid. And then, you know, certain people that would just be around and kind of ruin it, you know? Like people that I was related to whatever,... So every year I was like, "I just wanna have the best time ever."

So, at a certain point the record company came to me and said, "What do you think about doing a Christmas album?"

I'm like, isn't it a bit early? You know, why are we doing Christmas already? It's like just my second album or whatever. Anyway, it just became something that I did. It was the first Christmas song I ever wrote and I kind of wanted it to sort of embody all the things I didn't have when I was a kid. I wanted it to make people happy and make myself happy. It was more like, "This is my healing," but it's also fun. It's not like taking itself too seriously. It's really just like for the love of the holidays and for the spirit that always saved me during the more difficult times in my childhood.

**LC: There's a line in your memoir that I really liked: "I was a child craving a childhood."**

MC: I come from a very dysfunctional family and I had to work through that and figure out how to evolve from that into my adulthood and then my career, which was always the driving force.

I believed so firmly as a child that it would happen. And you know, I was a child craving a childhood because we didn't have the normal stuff. We didn't have like the cute cereal that everybody else ate or the Juicy Juice. So I talk about that in the book. It was a meager type of existence. Because my parents divorced when I was [young], and I always went to that magical place of like, "Oh, Christmas is coming." No matter what it was, I was just like, "Okay, I'm gonna focus on that and it's gonna be great no matter what."

So as an adult, when the record company came to me and asked me to do a Christmas album.... I sat there and the first song I wrote was "All I Want for Christmas is You" and I kind of tried to really tap into my childhood self. Like, what are the things I wanted but didn't have?

So I wrote the song about kind of ... I wanted it to be a love song because that's kind of what people relate to, but also really a Christmas song that made you feel happy.

And I didn't want it to feel like it was part of a specific era or time. I wanted it to sort of override time in its own way, which is a theme I have. I don't acknowledge time. But even back then, I was like, I wanted to feel like maybe it's from the 1960s or something, like the classic Christmas songs that I listened to growing up, like all my life as a kid and then every Christmas afterwards.

I mean, the whole songwriting thing. Most people are like, "Oh, I didn't know she wrote her own songs." I'm like, "How many times do I have to say it?" But it's okay. I wrote the song and then as we recorded it and produced it, the goal was to make it feel, to make other people feel like they were having a great time.

I've had people say, "I love your music, we listen to your Christmas album even in July!" So then I'd be like, "Wait a minute, really?" So it's gradually become something that I look at and think, "I guess this is kind of a big deal."

**LC: Did you say you wrote the song in your early twenties, like when you were 22?**

MC: Yes, I was very young writing that song. So it felt like from a kid's point of view, you know what I mean?

**LC: You mention in your book, when you were a little kid, you were living in upstate New York, and you mentioned you had a little beat up Casio keyboard, something pretty simple. And it was on that that you got the first lines for "Christmas"? Did those first lines that came to you, did they sound like what you later played in the studio?**

MC: In terms of the structure and the melodic structure of the song, yeah. And the ideas were there and it was just me playing piano and I'm not a piano player. I prefer to work with genius piano players that can articulate what I'm hearing in my head. I wrote "Vision of Love" that way. That way sometimes, I guess, I am a piano player, because yeah, I just started messing around and then I wrote some lyrics as I was walking around the house.

I brought what I had written on the piano and the lyrics and the melody to my then writing partner, Walter [Afansieff], and we worked together on how the record would sound. So the record and the initial writing demo obviously are different, but only because there's not big a background vocal.

Doing the background vocals for "All I Want for Christmas is You" was one of the best and most fun sessions I've ever had. I worked with a group of singers that are just incredibly gifted vocalists. And my main thing is background vocals: I love arranging and writing background vocals. And I really looked up to Luther Vandross and Aretha Franklin, all the greats who have used their voice as an instrument, in a way to create a wall of sound type thing.

So what we did with that song, what I'm the most proud of, is the arrangement, the background, the vocal arrangements, and it's almost like impossible to recreate that cause it's just a different sound. We were already being inspired by the greats, the Phil Spector's of the world, that made those wall of sound type records.

So that's really where the record ended up.

**LC: This song hit number one an extraordinarily long time after it came out. Most of your number ones happened very quickly but this had a very long gestation period. Do you have any particular explanation for why in the past four or five years it has really blown up?**

MC: No, I mean, honestly, this was something that was a labor of love, but it was also like, kind of like experiment. I'd never done this before, written a Christmas song,

This is something that I couldn't have expected, but it's honestly, I didn't know that anybody else would appreciate it but, now, it allows me to really celebrate the holidays with friends around the world that I may have never met, you know? It allows me to be really be thankful for everything.

Like this is my dream job. I did overcome a lot to be here but to keep working... you know what I mean?

The thing what I love about "All I Want for Christmas is You" is that I never, never expected it... I don't know how many Christmas songs really go to number one on those charts. It had been number one on the holiday charts, and that was amazing for me. So when, when this like kicked into this whole other thing, I was extremely grateful.

Without going on a tangent about it, I really, truly do love the holidays because they represent happiness and kind of like one day when we hoped everybody could just get along... My thing is to let them know like there's hope. You can do the things that you wanna do, believe in yourself, all of those things.

**LC: Your recent CBS Christmas special, which you did from Madison Square Garden, that was the biggest finale at the end, and what I loved most was the crowd shots. I can't remember seeing a New York crowd go more full-throated ever before...**

MC: The last couple of shows I did at Madison Square Garden and a couple of other places,.. I love performing but particularly at Christmas because everybody comes—all different ethnicities, all different ages. People with kids that are like four or five years old singing "All I Want for Christmas is You" next to like their parents and their parents. So it becomes like this multicultural, multi-different age group bonding moment. And I just love it because it's, it's genuine, like we're all having an experience together. So that last Christmas special that I did for Paramount and CBS was fun.

The one thing that we didn't capture that I wish we did is the concert I did in 2019, right before the pandemic, at Madison Square Garden. I wrote about it in the book afterwards because it was just such an amazing moment. That's when the song first went to number one and everything. So it was kind of a great thing to see all those different cultures and different people, ages, races, all the things together, celebrating.

**LC: You're famous for your vocal range. As a technical matter, does this song present any unique challenges?**

MC: You know what's interesting? I don't even look at that way at all, as "All I Want for Christmas" as "This is a big vocal moment for me." Because it's a celebratory moment. I just sing it.

I do try to sing it very similar to what people are used to, how they are expecting to hear it.

There's been so many covers of this record as well, and I recently heard one that I really liked and I never usually liked people covering this song. I'm not gonna say the artist's name, but it

was like they stuck to the script. They did it the way—structurally--the way I wrote it. And yet it had a new, a sort of soulful edge to it.

Sometimes people take this song and they make it into like a slow, sad moment [and] I'm like, "That is the opposite of why I wrote this song."