

Desert played role in timeless holiday songs

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Sand dunes and 80-degree December temperatures might seem like the last conditions on earth to inspire the creation of holiday songs, but in fact, the Coachella Valley figures prominently in the writing and recording of some of the most enduring and timeless of tunes.

There are several stories about the creation of "White Christmas," surely the most famous Christmas tune of all, but one tells of Irving Berlin writing it poolside at the La Quinta Hotel (another says it was the Arizona Biltmore, but either way, it was in the desert). After finishing, he quickly called his secretary in New York exclaiming, "Grab your pen and take down this song. I just wrote the best song ever written. Heck, I just wrote the best song that anybody's ever written!"

That statement certainly makes sense in retrospect, considering that the version recorded by Bing Crosby, another desert dweller, would become the best selling single in history and hold that honor for decades to come.

Regardless of the specific desert locale, most believe the song was written in December of 1937 for a Broadway show that was never produced. Later Berlin pulled it out of "the trunk" of songs he carried around as a possibility for Paramount Pictures' 1942 musical film "Holiday Inn." The beginning of the first verse was eventually dropped, but 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 was well on its way to becoming one of



Palm Canyon Drive is seen during Christmas season in the 1950s.

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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.

If you don't associate Crosby with Christmas as well as Der Bingle with the desert, you probably 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 developing Blue Skies Trailer Village in Rancho Mirage in a nod to another one of his hit songs.

In 1957, desert honeymooner Elvis Presley made a version of "White Christmas" while recording "Blue Christmas" as well. Frank Sinatra, an icon in the



Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra play golf in the desert.

desert, did his own rendition of "White Christmas" in 1944, topping the Billboard charts multiple times in the coming years. The tune was covered by des-

ert celebrities like Doris Day, Eddy Howard and Dean Martin as well.

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

The most famous version of "Chestnuts Roasting" 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 in the desert, 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."

Written in 1953 by Steve Allen "Cool Yule" was recorded by Louis Armstrong who did stints at the Chi Chi as well. Playful and replete with clever innuendo, "Baby, It's Cold Outside" was written by Frank Loesser and recorded by various desert rats including Dinah Shore, Johnny Mercer, Barry Manilow and Esther Williams. And then there is desert regular Eartha Kitt's wickedly funny "Santa, Baby" filling out the list of Christmas songs with desert associations.