

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Autry's influence on pop Christmas music

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Christmas and cowboys seem an unlikely combination. But Christmas celebrations have a lot to do with one particular cowboy, who was also one of the most important personages to ever call Palm Springs home, Gene Autry. Autry's accomplishments are legion and legendary in many different arenas, from the hotel business to professional baseball, radio to rodeos. But Autry's association with the genesis of Christmas celebrations in today's popular culture is not as well-known. So entrenched are Gene Autry's songs in Christmas celebrations today, it is perhaps hard to imagine these tunes only date back to the 1940s. That they were written by or made famous by the singing cowboy is remarkable.

Holly George-Warren, Autry's official biographer noted that in the summer of 1947, Art Satherley, recording executive at Columbia Records, suggested Autry cut a new Christmas song he had discovered that is now long-since forgotten. For the flipside of the record, Autry remembered a song idea he'd had the previous November while participating in the annual Hollywood "Santa Claus Lane" parade. Riding his trusty steed champion in the parade ahead of St. Nick himself in his sleigh, Autry heard children on the sidewalk excitedly shouting, "Here comes Santa Claus!" Satherley took Autry's idea to Oakley Haldeman, who composed the melody to Autry's lyrics.

Johnny Bond, another cowboy crooner and movie star, recorded a demo version of the song at his home studio, where Satherley, cocktail in hand, stood next to the microphone, accidentally recording the tinkling ice cubes in his glass. The sound effect inspired the use of jingle bells on the studio recording by Autry on August 28, 1947 at Columbia Records.

Autry's jaunty tone, distinctive pronunciation of "Santy" Claus, and the jingling bells made the tune immediately popular, with initial sales of two million following its December release that year. "Here Comes Santa Claus (Right Down



Gene Autry, known as 'The Singing Cowboy,' is seen here in an undated photo.

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Santa Claus Lane)" became an instant classic.

Autry would go on to sing several more Christmas tunes, making them just as iconic and universally known.

In 1939 as an assignment for Montgomery Ward department store, Robert May, a staff copywriter, created the character of Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer, for the coloring books the store sold to children. In 1949, a decade later, the success of "Here Comes Santa Claus," inspired May's brother-in-law, songwriter Johnny Marks to synopsise the Rudolph story into a catchy song.

Its introduction paraphrased the famous poem "A Visit from Saint Nicho-

las" (commonly known as "Twas the Night Before Christmas") listing Santa's reindeer, "you know Dasher and Dancer, and Prancer and Vixen, Comet and Cupid, and Donner and Blitzen, but do you recall, the most famous reindeer of all?"

Autry recorded the song about that "most famous reindeer of all" during the Christmas season of 1949 and it soared to popularity, becoming the number one song in the nation. The record sold an impressive 1.75 million copies its first Christmas season and 1.5 million the following year. By the end of the 1960s, the Autry rendition had total sales of 12.5 million, making it Columbia's highest-selling record at the time. (Cover ver-

sions by other artists, including desert denizen Bing Crosby in 1950, would eventually sell more than 150 million copies, second only to Bing's "White Christmas".)

In 1950 it seemed Autry had a monopoly on the holiday genre, and Jack Rollins and Steve Nelson shopped their new song "Frosty the Snowman" to Autry, who again had a big hit. Countless subsequent recordings of the tune made it into the Top 10, including renditions by Jimmy Durante and Nat King Cole. That year, the story would be published by Little Golden Books and be made into a three-minute animated short, that featured a jazzy, a cappella version of the song.

(And in 1969, Durante would narrate a longer TV version for Rankin/Bass Animated Entertainment. Five years before, Rankin/Bass made Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer into a stop-motion animated film with an embellished story and a charming reindeer character whose glowing nose saves Christmas. First shown as a television special on Sunday, December 6th, 1964, the song made famous by Gene Autry found a whole new audience. The program has enjoyed the wildest of success, making hundreds of millions of dollars through the years.)

Christmas songs were certainly commercially viable. And Autry introduced and made "Frosty," "Rudolph" and "Here Comes Santa Claus" known all over the globe and every Christmas season since he first recorded them, these songs are still played, and are practically synonymous with the season itself. In fact, it is hard to imagine the season without those melodies.

Then there is that other holiday, Easter. Rollins and Nelson composed another song sung by Gene Autry also now universally known among schoolchildren and adults alike. "Here comes Peter Cottontail, hoppin' down the bunny trail ..." But that's for another season and another story.

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