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THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Crosby, Christmas inseparable from the desert

Tracy ConradSpecial to Palm Springs Desert Sun
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The presenter for best original song at the 15th annual Academy Awards ceremony held at the Cocomat Grove at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles honoring the films of 1942 was composer Irving Berlin. Berlin opened the envelope to find the winner was none other than he, himself, for the song, "White Christmas." Berlin told the audience, "I'm glad to present the award. I've known him for a long time."

The tune had been knocking around in Berlin's consciousness for a while. There are several stories about its genesis. One tale tells of Berlin writing it poolside in the desert at La Quinta. (Another version of the story puts him in the desert but at the Arizona Biltmore.) After finishing the song, he quickly called his secretary in New York exclaiming, "Grab your pen and take down this song. I just wrote the best song I've ever written. Heck, I just wrote the best song that anybody's ever written!"

Regardless of the specific desert locale, most believe the song was written in December of 1937 for a Broadway show that was never produced. The melody reportedly first came to Berlin on the set of the film "Top Hat" in 1935. Mark Sandrich who directed the musical, and Fred Astaire, who played the leading role, would both go on to make the film "Holiday Inn" with a storyline conceived by Berlin.

Berlin pulled the tune out of "the trunk" of song ideas he carried around for the Paramount Pictures tribute to 12 holidays throughout a calendar year. Berlin was quoted as saying Christmas presented the biggest compositional challenge.

The verse acknowledges the anachronism of a Southern California Christmas but was dropped from the film as it made no sense with the plot: "The sun is shining, the grass is green / The orange and palm trees sway / There's never been such a day / In Beverly Hills, L.A. / But it's December the 24th / And I am longing to be up north."

Berlin didn't think "White Christmas" would be a hit. Speaking to BBC after the subsequent film named for the tune, he said he thought the composition about another holiday would popular. "I had a song in that called 'Be Careful, It's My Heart,' for Valentine's Day," Berlin said. "And that's the song I picked as the big hit, and that's the song as a publisher I plugged. And it was a fair success. But I also had a song in there called 'White Christmas.'"

"White Christmas" was introduced on radio by Bing Crosby during the Kraft Music Hall broadcast on Dec. 24, 1941, barely two weeks after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. No one much noticed the tune, according to jazz historians Gary Giddins and Will Friedwald. Crosby recorded it a few months later, in a mere 18 minutes on May 29, 1942. With the release of "Holiday Inn" in the fall of 1942 and an album of its songs, "White Christmas" became a favorite among the troops now far away from home.

Berlin published his own music and had the compositor remove the verse from the sheet music. Berlin was skeptical about the song because it was so short, too short, he thought to sell much. By September 1942 it was selling tens of thousands of copies a week. The version recorded by Bing Crosby was on its way to becoming the best-selling single of all time.

During the war, Crosby often broadcast his radio show from Palm Springs, from the American Legion Post across the street from the O'Donnell Golf Course. The popularity of "White Christmas" would make Bing synonymous with Christmas itself and — together with Gene Autry's recordings of "Here Comes Santa Claus" and "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" — create an entire genre of seasonal Christmas music.

Bing recorded more than 70 songs that are now considered part of that canon. Starting 1935 when Jack Kapp, the head of Decca Records, suggested that Bing record "Adeste Fidelis" and "Silent Night." Bing was reluctant, saying he did not want to record sacred tunes for commercial gain. He finally re-



Bing and Kathryn Crosby and their children from a 1975 Christmas card.

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lented and donated all the proceeds to charity.

According to Giddins and Friedwald, in 1944 after D-day, Crosby, performing for the troops in England and France, didn't want to sing "White Christmas" because the soldiers would cry and he was supposed to be lifting their spirits. He tried to leave it out of the show, but the troops insisted, calling out for him to sing it. Crosby could never again do a show without it.

In 1954, "Holiday Inn" was remade as "White Christmas," which acknowledged that the United States had been in the war.

The new version was meant to reunite Crosby and Astaire, but Astaire declined. The role was offered to Donald O'Connor, but he dropped out due to injury and Danny Kaye was cast.

The soundtrack rights for the film were controlled by Decca, but Rosemary Clooney was under exclusive contract to Columbia, a competing record label. Decca recorded and released an album with the movie cast except Clooney's part was sung by Peggy Lee. Columbia

released an album with Clooney singing all eight songs from the film. The only way to hear Clooney singing with Crosby is on-screen.

Crosby was spending a lot of time in the desert. He owned a house at Thunderbird and then at Silver Spur Ranch. He also created Blue Skies Village Trailer Park in Rancho Mirage, named for another one of his hit songs and movies.

In 1961 he performed in the first of his Christmas specials in England. Many television holiday shows would follow and become a perennial staple of the season. Crosby would appear with lots of other stars with desert connections like Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin.

Giddins has written two volumes and is working on the third, which certainly constitute the definitive biography of Crosby. He says that Bing was universally adored by those he with whom he worked, contrary to some of the assertions made after his death. Crosby was the epitome of warmth and kindness in his movies and after exhaustive research, Giddins declares him to be the genuine article.

In a recent program of Will Friedwald's Clip Joint, Giddins discusses one of his favorite Crosby Christmas tunes, the recording of "Mele Kalikimaka" with the Andrews Sisters. The swinging song was written by Andy Anderson who played golf with Bing. Crosby surprised Anderson with the recording in 1950 for Decca. In 1955 the song became part of Crosby's famous compilation album "Merry Christmas."

The lyrics of the Hawaiian song are reminiscent of Berlin's deleted verse, "Mele Kalikimaka is the thing to say on a bright Hawaiian Christmas Day / That's the islands greeting that we send to you from the land where palm trees sway / Here we know that Christmas will be green and bright / The sun to shine by day and all the stars at night / Mele Kalikimaka is Hawaii's way to say Merry Christmas to you."

Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun. Write to her at pshstracy@gmail.com.