

IF THAT ISN'T CHRISTMAS, WHAT IS?

By Freddie Downs

30 IMPORTANT EVENTS IN THE HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS MUSIC

A sample

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour who is Christ the Lord."

..... Matthew 1: 16

The most dramatic and meaningful event in human history was the birth of Jesus Christ and what his life and resurrection means for the hope of mankind. Yet we really don't know for certain the exact day that Jesus was born so December 25 was selected. Through the centuries controversy erupted over whether or not music should be a part of Christmas services. Puritanism and Protestantism in Europe banned music from Mass including Christmas for nearly 400 years, until the mid-1800s.

Once music was accepted, a debate raged over how it should be performed. Organs were the designated instrument most widely utilized. In some instances pianos were acceptable. But Father Joseph Mohr, the author of "Silent Night", was expelled from the church for utilizing the guitar in his services, an instrument believed to be far too undignified.

Among the earliest hymns were chants which were replaced over the years by the carol, a song that frequently strayed from the confines of liturgy to focus solely on the happiness and merriment of the holiday. The real life St. Nicholas of Turkey (280-341 A.D.) was systematically transformed into the mythical gift giver

Santa Claus delighting children worldwide and becoming the subject of as many Christmas songs as Jesus.

Popular culture pulled Christmas in many different directions. Gift giving. Christmas trees and cards. Family feasts. Charitable acts for the needy. The singing of carols door to door. Midnight Christmas Eve church services to welcome the holiday. We relished in the tribulation that Ebenezer Scrooge endured to discover his humanity in Charles Dicken's "A Christmas Carol" and noticed a similarity when the very humane George Bailey gave so much of himself to others in the movie "It's A Wonderful Life" that nothing remained for him but suicide. Both characters had to endure the chrysalis of the holiday to attain or re-attain their proper footing.

Christmas has that magic effect on people, re-connecting them with their inner GPS device. The young married couple Jim and Della Young from O. Henry's "Gift Of The Magi" sacrifice their most cherished possessions - his antique watch and her beautiful hair - to buy the ultimate Christmas gifts for each other - a watch fob and decorative combs for her hair. Because of their blind faith both gifts become useless yet their sacrifice itself was the importance of the story - to put yourself aside in order to bring happiness to someone that you love.

In the trenches of World War 1 on Christmas Eve, 1914 the military on both sides of the conflict arrived at the same conclusion - Why are we killing each other at this holiest time of the year? Such thinking was treason yet the combatants lay down their guns to bury their dead, share food, song and a soccer contest, a short-lived but historic episode proving the power of Christmas to bring out the best in people. More commonly what we witness are compassionate people holding the door open at the post office to assist someone with their arms full of packages to mail or the considerate motorist allowing the other car to pass first while he waits.

Every dollar spared for the Salvation Army kettle is another indication.

Around that foundation much of our popular holiday culture has been constructed. Fred Church, an editorial writer for The New York Sun, in 1897 reinforced the trust of an eight year old girl when he declared; "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus". In a moment of confusion during the TV special "A Charlie Brown Christmas" (1965) when Charlie pleads for the meaning of Christmas his friend Linus volunteers the original passages from the Bible about Jesus' birth, concluding, "And that's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown."

For many it's Ralphie's quest for a Red Ryder b.b. gun as the ultimate holiday gift in the 1983 film "A Christmas Story" or six-year old Timmy's desire for an electric train set which ignites romance between his mother and the unemployed store clerk she helped to get fired in "Holiday Affair" (1949). It's Kris Kringle undergoing an insanity hearing in "Miracle On 34th Street" (1947) , only to be judged sane by the actions of The U.S. Postal Service. It's Sgt. Joe Friday in the classic 1953 "Dragnet" attempting to retrieve a statue of the baby Jesus with less than twenty four hours before the early morning Christmas service.

It's Dr. Suess' Grinch who steals the gifts from Whoville at Christmastime only to realize that the holiday will happen anyway so he returns the gifts and becomes part of the celebration instead of depriving others. It's Bill Vaughan's timeless 1950s newspaper column in The Kansas City Star "A Story Of Christmas" where a father has exhausted all possible bedtime stories about puppies, trees and reindeer finally appeasing his daughter with the tale of The Nativity.

It's also a group of superstar rock musicians who gathered together in 1984 to record "Do They Know It's Christmas?" raising \$11 million to address the famine in Ethiopia. It's Bing Crosby crooning "White Christmas", Nat King Cole

waxing nostalgic with "The Christmas Song", Gene Autry reluctantly giving in to sing "Rudolph The Red Nosed Reindeer" and Elvis Presley jerking the music into the rock idiom with "Santa Claus Is Back In Town" which Straight No Chaser would ride to epic satire in 2009.

Christmas music has everything under its umbrella today - pop, rock, country, jazz, blues, folk, classical and comedy because Christmas belongs to everyone. Most Christmas songs are happy and positive but because the holiday is so steeped in tradition the standards rule the airwaves while a new original song has a difficult uphill battle to create its own niche. Because some songs are aired repeatedly the over saturation point is quickly reached. We can only imagine what the founding fathers of the holiday might have thought of George Strait twanging a country diddy or Charles Brown bringing the blues to Christmas. Some of the purists thought that the guitar was blasphemy in a service! Even "fa la la la la" was too frivolous.

Yet Christmas music continues to evolve and change in ways that would not have been originally imagined through jingle bells and sleigh rides, little girls dreaming of nutcrackers, a reverent "Hallelujah Chorus" or "Silent Night". The songs, movies and TV shows that reinforce our values will endure each holiday. And Jesus who opened Heaven to all of us would probably feel that anything that brings out our best behavior is accomplishing something that He would want on His birthday.