

Five Things

You Didn't Know
about

Christmas Songs

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#1. "White Christmas" is the best-selling song of all time.

In January of 1940, American composer Irving Berlin was working on his assignment to write a song about each of the major holidays of the year. Paramount Pictures planned to use them in *Holiday Inn*, a musical comedy film set to premier in August 1942.

Berlin, who could neither read nor write music, taught himself to pick out tunes on the piano, and he often stayed up all night pulling melodies from the keys. His assistant, Helmy Kresa, transformed them into the proper musical form. Early on Monday morning, January 8, 1940, Berlin told his secretary, *"I want you to take down a song I wrote over the weekend. It's the best song I ever wrote. It's the best song anybody ever wrote!"*



Irving Berlin 1940

Baseball great Dizzy Dean once said, "It ain't bragging if you can do it!" Berlin wasn't bragging. He was talking about "White Christmas."

Bing Crosby, a popular singer and the star of *Holiday Inn*, introduced the song to America during a live radio broadcast on December 25, 1941, but nothing spectacular happened. He recorded it as a single for Decca records in May of 1942. When *Holiday Inn* came out in August, "Be Careful. It's My Heart," not "White Christmas," was the hit. A couple of months later, however, as Crosby's recording started being broadcast overseas to homesick American troops entrenched in World War II, things changed dramatically.



Bing Crosby and Marjorie Reynolds singing "White Christmas"
Holiday Inn Trailer 1942

Americans at home and abroad loved the song's holiday nostalgia and its simple portrayal of peace, home, and family. From 1942 to 1947, Crosby's "White Christmas" kept coming back year after year until it had sold more than 30 million copies. In 1954, Paramount gave the song its own movie, another musical comedy also starring Bing Crosby. In 1955, it was listed in the first-ever *Guinness Book of World Records* as the world's best-selling single.

#1. "White Christmas" is the best-selling song of all time.

Questions

Write answers to the following questions in the spaces provided.

- _____ 1. Irving Berlin wrote "White Christmas" in 1940
 (A) as the title song in Paramount Pictures' *White Christmas*.
 (B) for the Paramount Pictures movie *Holiday Inn*.
 (C) as part of a Bing Crosby Christmas album.
 (D) for a Broadway musical that was never produced.
- _____ 2. Based on the information presented in the second paragraph, the reader can conclude that (RI. 6.1, 7.1, 8.1)
 (A) by the time he wrote "White Christmas," Irving Berlin could read a little music.
 (B) Helmy Kresa could read and write music.
 (C) Irving Berlin woke up Helmy Kresa to take down "White Christmas."
 (D) Irving Berlin was humble about his abilities as a composer.
3. Supply the *Effect* for each of the following *Causes*.
Cause: Paramount Pictures needed a song for each major holiday of the year for a musical comedy film they planned to premier in August 1942.
Effect: _____

- Cause:* "Be Careful, It's My Heart" was the most popular song in *Holiday Inn*.
Effect: _____

- Cause:* Bing Crosby's recording of "White Christmas" was broadcast overseas to American troops fighting in World War II.
Effect: _____

- _____ 4. Which paragraph explains how "White Christmas" became the world's best-selling single and was first officially recorded as such?
 (A) paragraph 2
 (B) paragraph 3
 (C) paragraph 4
 (D) paragraph 5
- _____ 5. The central idea of paragraph 6 is
 (A) how "White Christmas" beat its only challenger as the world's best-selling song.
 (B) why "White Christmas" permanently lost it's #1 spot to Elton John's "Candle in the Wind"
 (C) why "Candle in the Wind" was able to challenge "White Christmas."
 (D) how many other artists besides Bing Crosby have recorded "White Christmas."

#4: "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" was recorded by a 13-year-old girl.

In the world of music, adults are usually the hit makers, but that was not the case when 13-year-old Brenda Lee recorded "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree," in July of 1958. As a matter of fact, she already had 7 years of professional experience to her credit.

Brenda Mae Tarpley (later shortened to "Lee") was born in Atlanta, Georgia, on December 11, 1944. At the age of five, she won a local school singing contest. Soon she was performing for pay on Atlanta radio and TV shows. By the time she was 10, her voice was her family's major source of income. In 1956 she turned down a \$30 job for a chance to sing for her idol, country music super star Red Foley, who was in town to promote his T.V. show *Ozark Jubilee*. A local DJ, who worked with Brenda, talked Foley into letting her open his show without hearing her sing first. He agreed.

At the time Foley had sold over 25 million records in his lifetime. Ten-year-old Brenda Lee was poised to leave her idol's record in the dust.

Brenda belted out Hank William's "Jambalaya," and the audience went wild. She sang three more songs before they would let her leave the state. Foley said of her performance, "*I still get chills thinking about the first time I heard that voice. There I stood. . . with my mouth open two miles wide and a glassy stare in my eyes. . .*" He signed her to a 5 year contract, a move that would launch her into super-stardom. "Little Miss Dynamite," as she came to be known, was on her way. The fact that she stood 4 feet 9 inches and was not yet a teenager didn't matter.

In July of 1956, Brenda began recording for Decca Records. After a string of semi-successful recordings, including "Dynamite," the song that gave her the nickname, she went into a Nashville studio to record a new Christmas song written by Johnny Marks, the man who wrote "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and "A Holly, Jolly Christmas." It was July 1958. The song was "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree." Brenda Lee was 13 years old.



Brenda Lee
"Little Miss Dynamite."
Publicity Photo 1977