

Title: Birth of Christmas Carols

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BIRTH OF CHRISTMAS CAROLS

Play and or sing “Jingle Bells.” Other carols are sung after telling origin of each.

Christmas Carols... What is a Christmas carol?

Is the song we just heard – “Jingle Bells” – a carol? How many say it is? It isn’t?

A carol is defined as a song—especially of joy—A Christmas song or hymn—to praise or celebrate in song.

Wassail songs and mumming songs such as “The Twelve Days of Christmas” belong not to Christmas but to the turn of the year. They are pagan and magical in origin but they have made their way into the corpus of Christmas carols. Other tunes definitely a part of Christmas but not classified as carols are “Jingle Bells,” “Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly,” Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer” and others.

Carols came into English social life way back in the 14th century.

Church and drama have played an important part in the evolution of the carol. The setting up of the crib of the infant savior and the Holy family was an early occasion for the singing of carols—both in church and in the home. This custom is said to have been originated by St. Francis of Assisi. St. Francis was born in 1182 and his life was devoted to founding the Franciscan order of friars in Italy.

The great age of the English carol was the 15th century. Then with the Reformation and Puritanism, which was a gloomy period—carols began to die.

Two centuries later, emotions changed. Carols were published on broadsheets. Then came the publishing of Christmas carol books. This brought carols back into church, the home and open air.

Here are the origins of a few of the familiar and favorite carols. These were written in the 1700s and 1800s—not only in England but all countries and especially in the United States.

Silent Night

The words “Silent Night, Holy Night” were first sung in the snow-clad Austrian village of Oberndorf 163 years ago. The world’s best known and most beloved Christmas carol

has gained in popularity since then. In the little church of this village, the organ was out of order on Christmas Eve 1818. One story says mice had eaten into the bellows of the organ. The twenty-six year old pastor, Joseph Mohr, thought something special should be done to make up for the mishap and he wrote the words of "Silent Night." His friend, Franz Gruber, the village schoolmaster and also church organist, wrote the music. They wrote the hymn for two voices, bass and tenor, and sang it themselves. Gruber furnished a guitar accompaniment. It has been recorded that Rev. Mohr was an illegitimate child who spent most of his life as an outcast. When he died, Mohr was buried in a pauper's grave and left a few small debts. But his carol "Silent Night" has been performed and recorded in untold numbers of languages and versions.

O Little Town of Bethlehem

Bishop Phillip Brooks of Massachusetts made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Holy Land in 1867, when he was still a young man. Late one night from a hilltop, he looked down upon the sleeping village of Bethlehem and received inspiration for his greatest hymn. He gave the poem to his organist and Sunday School teacher, Lewis H. Redner, who waited until the following Christmas Eve before composing the tune. Had not this carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," met with instant success, the origin might have been lost to posterity, because the author forgot to sign it.

Hark the Herald Angels Sing

Anyone asked to name a few of his favorite Christmas hymns would probably include the well-known "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." The words were written by Charles Wesley in 1739 and sung every year since. It is considered Wesley's best writing, second only to "Jesus, Lover of My Soul." The tune was written by Felix Mendelssohn. Each section of the hymn is based on biblical verses. The spirited tune seems quite appropriate for the hymn, emphasizing the miracle of Christ's coming and the glorious victory won through His great sacrifice for humanity.

Away In A Manger

Another favorite Christmas hymn has always been known as "Luther's Cradle Hymn." Hymnologists, however, and especially biographers of Luther, were disturbed by the fact that it is not to be found in any of his works, nor does it conform to his style. After great research, the facts are: the words are anonymous, probably written about 1880, and there is no doubt that the tune was written by James R. Murray in 1887 and first appeared in a book of songs for children copyrighted by the John Church Co. of Cincinnati. This carol is "Away In A Manger."

It Came Upon A Midnight Clear

An American hymn written in Boston in 1849 is "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear." It is based on the Unitarian conviction of the writers—two American ministers—Edmund

Sears, who wrote the words, and Richard Willis, who set them to music. Their feelings reflected a radical position in that day, and the hymn was not published for some time. There were originally four verses. The third stanza—no longer used—exemplifies this attitude and is applicable to modern times. It is:

“Beneath the angels’ strain have rolled two thousand years of wrong
Yet with the woes of sin and strife the world has suffered long;
And man, at war with man, hears not the love song which they bring;
Oh, hush the noise, ye men of strife, and hear the angels sing!”

O Come All Ye Faithful

The hymn “O Come All Ye Faithful” in its Latin form (*Adeste Fideles*) has been popular since 1700 at least. It was sung in France before reaching England. It may still be considered anonymous, but an early manuscript recently found may point to Wade, a copyist of the early 18th century, as the author. Canon Frederick Oakley, an English clergyman, is credited with the words—his second translation. But there seems to be much disagreement about the words as well as the tune.

Joy To The World

The stirring words of this inspiring carol, “Joy To The World,” were penned by Sir Isaac Watts. They give a joyful interpretation to the beautiful 98th Psalm. Isaac Watts was a retired minister who devoted his life to the writing of hymns after a serious illness forced his retirement from active duty. In 1830, Lowell Mason, an American musician, set the words to the wonderful music of Handel. He combined two of Handel’s themes—“Lift Up Your Heads” and “Comfort Ye”—both from “The Messiah.”