

The Stories Behind The Carols

Hark the Herald Angels Sing

1. Sometimes one plus one equals five. This song has been called “the gospel in one song” and is, by any measure, one of the top few carols of all times, but neither the writer of the words or the music would have liked it as it is today.
2. Charles Wesley, the brother of John Wesley, wrote over 600 songs during his lifetime. When he wrote this song he kept to one of his rules: important, theologically deep songs must be coupled with slow and solemn music. His tune was labored, majestic, and overwrought.
3. Enter Felix Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn was a Jew who did not approve of religious music and certainly disapproved of chapel style Christian worship. He made it very clear that his music was only to be used for secular purposes.
4. Long after both Wesley and Mendelssohn were dead, Dr. William Cummings joined the joyous, happy music of Mendelssohn with Wesley’s powerful words to create a carol we know and love today.
5. And if you listen very carefully while you sing... you might just hear a whirring sound. That’s the sound of Mendelssohn and Wesley turning over in their graves.

[sing “Hark the Herald Angels Sing”]

“What Child Is This?”

1. The tune for this song is a very old one. Shakespeare mentions it in one of his plays. It was considered a rude, uncultured tune; a tune sung by common people rather than by professionals (who were almost entirely tied to the church). Hundreds of variations of the tune and hundreds of different sets of lyrics – some of them very coarse – have been found going back to around the year 1500.

2. William Dix was born in Bristol, England in 1837. His was a literary family with a great love for poets and songs. He moved up to Glasgow, Scotland as an insurance salesman – a job he kept the rest of his life. His real love was the writing and collecting of hymns. Forty of his hymns still exist and are sung in some churches, though you wouldn't know any of them.
3. His one song we sing was written when he was only 29. He was stricken by a serious illness and was bedfast for some time. Rather than focus on his illness or feel sorry for himself, he purposeful focused on Jesus, starting at his birth.
4. He wrote a long poem called "The Manger Throne." The first part of that poem he then placed into the old tune "Greensleeves" and we have the wonderful carol "What Child Is This?"

Silent Night

1. This is a carol that was written because some mice damaged a church. The year was 1818 and a roving band of actors came to Oberndorf, a village near Salzburg. They were scheduled to perform the story of Christ's birth in the Church of St. Nicholas.
2. The church organ wasn't working. It was found full of mice whose chewing and litter had damaged it. It couldn't be repaired in time for Christmas. The actors presented their play in a private home where a congregant had a small organ, but there was still the problem of Christmas: how could they put on a large production in a large church without music?
3. The assistant pastor, Joseph Mohr, walked home from that smaller performance. He was in a contemplative mood so he took the long way home. He took a path that led up a mountainside overlooking the village. While watching the snow covered village, he remembered a poem he had written two years earlier. He decided that would make a good carol for the congregation for Christmas Eve... but he had no music.

4. The next day, Mohr went to see the church organist, Franz Gruber. Gruber only had a few hours to come up with a tune that could be sung with a guitar (unheard of in those days). The next night, the little church heard the song for the first time.
5. Weeks later, a well known organ builder came by to fix the organ. When he finished, he stepped back and had Gruber try it out. Gruber used the tune of the new song they'd just written. Deeply impressed, the organ repairman took the music and words of "Silent Night" back to his own Alpine village. There, two well known families of singers heard the song. Captivated, they both put it in their repertoires.
6. The Strasser sisters spread the carol throughout northern Europe, eventually performing it for King Frederick William IV of Prussia in 1834. He ordered his cathedral choir to sing it every Christmas from then on.
7. The Rainers brought the song to the United States, performing it in 1839 – in German – in New York City. In 1863, nearly fifty years after it was written, Silent Night was translated into English. By then, it was Europe's favorite carol... a carol that would have never come to us were it not for mice damaging a church organ in a tiny Alpine village in 1818.

I Heard The Bells on Christmas Day

1. This song, and the next one, are not so well known. Henry Longfellow married his sweetheart, Francis Appleton, in Cambridge, Massachusetts in July 1843. Their son, Charles, was born a year later and eventually they had five children – Charles, Ernest, Alice, Edith, and Allegra.
2. The nation, and the Longfellows, experienced tragedy beginning in the spring of 1861. In April, the American Civil War commenced with the attack on Fort Sumter. Two months later, Henry's wife, Francis, was fatally burned in an accident at their home.

3. The heat of that summer had been ferocious. Francis had decided to give her girls some relief and trimmed their curls. Wanting to preserve the curls in sealing wax, she dropped some burning wick on her dress. It immediately went up in flames and there was nothing anyone could do to save her. Henry tried to smother the flames with a rug and with his own body, severely burning his face, arms, and hands. His wife died the next day.
4. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was so badly burned by his attempt to save his wife that he was unable to attend her funeral. His trademark full beard was grown to hide his facial scars. He lived in grief. The first Christmas after his wife's death he wrote "How inexpressibly sad are all holidays." The next year he wrote "I can make no record of these days. Better leave them wrapped in silence. Perhaps someday God will give me peace." And then, "A merry Christmas, say the children, but that is no more for me."
5. Almost a year later, Henry received word that his firstborn son, Charles, had been severely wounded as he served in the Army of the Potomac. Charles would live, but would be crippled for life. That Christmas, 1864, the bells rang all over the land as they always did, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote this impassioned carol – one of sorrow, fear, pain and, finally, faith.
6. If you know the words, sing along. If not, listen, read, and meditate on one of the more powerful carols ever written.

Christmas In the Trenches

1. It was Christmas, 1914. The war in Europe was mired in trench warfare, mud, snipers, machine guns, barbed wire... And one of the most remarkable war stories ever told was about to unfold.
2. The English lines reported something strange to their officers: the Germans were decorating their trenches for Christmas. Trees were lit, Christmas lights were strung. The English smelled a trap, a diversion. They were ordered not to fire, but to

observe. That night, Christmas night, they heard the Germans singing songs... and one of them was familiar.

3. First, it came over German radio. An internationally known opera singer was singing "Stille Nacht"... or "Silent Night." The English recognized the tune and calls went up and down the trenches to listen. The opera singer who sang that night, was singing live into a microphone with tears in her eyes...for she had one son in the British army and one in the German. She hoped that one or both of them could hear her voice that night, her prayer for her sons.
4. When the song was done, the British sang out "Silent Night" in English. The Germans called out their appreciation and applauded them... but still huddled behind the parapets. They then sang "The First Noel." The Germans sang back "O Tannenbaum." And so it went on for hours until the British soldiers began singing "O Come All Ye Faithful" and the Germans joined in, singing it in German.
5. Two armies, singing one carol, in two languages, in the middle of a cold, frosty, war zone. Over no man's land, the hymn was shared.
6. And then... a German stood up. He approached the middle of no man's land as the British tensed, holding their fire, wondering what was going to happen next. The German had a white scarf on a stick, a crude flag of truce. He calmly lit a cigarette and waited.
7. Some Scots from the Black Watch regiment stood up. No shots rang out. They walked to the middle of the battle zone and exchanged cigarettes and drinks of illegal moonshine (poteen) from their canteens. Soon others from both sides joined them, sharing photos of home, small gifts, jokes, and songs.
8. And in a flare-lit soccer game, it was the Germans and the British, sometimes mixing sides, getting to know each other as men, not just as enemies. They played through the evening and

until nearly dawn when the ball hit a barbed wire roll and deflated.

9. All along the trenches, the same thing was happening. Some men shook hands and agreed with each other – if you don't fire at us, we won't fire at you – and the truce stayed on until New Year's Day. Some bodies of the fallen were gathered and they held joint burial services, in German and English.
10. It couldn't last. A shot rang out somewhere, a misguided flare raced towards the other line... something happened and each side ran to their trenches. The truce was over, but a legend was born. Rather than sing "Silent Night" again, listen to a tune written by the folk singer John McCutcheon and remember what happens when we let carols enter our hearts.

Joy To The World

1. Our last song tonight is one you know. What you might NOT know is that this most important and greatly loved Christmas carol isn't – a Christmas carol, I mean. Isaac Watts (best known in our fellowship for "When I Survey The Wondrous Cross") wrote this as a version of the last half of Psalm 98. It is a call of celebration for the coming of Jesus, the Lord and King who will judge all creation in the last day.
2. [read Psalm 98 – the font of many songs!] This Jesus, this Christ, this Son of God, can still transform lives today. He can take the words of one man and put them with the music of another man, neither of whom like each other, and create a wonderful carol.
3. He can take a young man far from home, confined to his bed, sick and have him redeem a fallen tune by putting holy words to it.
4. He can take some mice, have them break an organ, and then arrange to have the resulting, simple song spread throughout the world from the courts of the King of Prussia to the farmlands

of the United States and to No Man's Land in the middle of war... and it transforms whoever takes the message in.

5. He can take the pain of a father who has nearly lost his son, a widower who grieves still for his lost wife, and create a testimony of faith in the middle of the darkest of days.
6. So we sing with the writer of Psalm 98, and with Isaac Watts, that this child born in Bethlehem is the Son of God, Christ the King, the Judge of the World, and our Savior.