



# It's the Best Time of the Year

*The American Christmas, like the songs that celebrate it, makes room for everybody under the rainbow. Is that why so many people seem to be hostile to it?*

by Mark Steyn

This time last year, I happened to be in the town of Santa Claus, Indiana, chartered on Christmas Eve, 1852. I drove down Candy Cane Lane, hung a right on Rudolph Drive, then swung left on Mistletoe Circle, a pleasant journey only slightly marred by the fact that all these agreeable thoroughfares are part of the exclusive Christmas Lake development. You have to go through an armed security gate to get in. As an image of the beleaguered American Christmas, it's hard to beat: defensive, ring-fenced, and largely seen as the preserve of middle-class whites.



Those who gang up on Christmas are usually the gung-ho PC schoolteachers, who insist that depictions of Frosty The Snowman are grossly offensive to those of the non-Frosty faiths. But a year ago even Postmaster-General Marvin Runyon weighed in, declaring that the 1994 Christmas stamps would be the last, as a federal agency had no business promoting the symbols of a particular sect. Runyon, however, has aggressively promoted several other sects: Elvis, for one, who since his inconclusive death has become a one-man Presleyterian church with a brisk trade in sacred relics for the devoted. (To launch the Elvis stamp, the Postal Service advised its staff to dress up in leathers, bobby sox, etc. My own postmistress in New Hampshire refused on the grounds that, as Elvis was a fat guy full of drugs who died on the toilet, he was an inappropriate subject for a postal issue.)

Anyway, within a few weeks, the Postmaster's plan was returned to sender.

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While in Santa Claus, Indiana, I went to the Post Office. "Merry Christmas," I said provocatively. But Postmistress Sandy Colyon was ready for me. "A week ago," she said, "I'd have had to say 'Happy Holidays,' but we've now been given a special dispensation from the Postmaster-General allowing us to say 'Merry Christmas.' So Merry Christmas." Phew. The great American Christmas is saved for another season.

**W**hy have Runyon, and the PC schoolmarms, and everybody else, got it in for Santa and his reindeer? If the worry is separation of church and state, the American Christmas is surely the most successful separation ever devised. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph are for home and church; Santa, Rudolph, and Frosty are for everybody. Early on Christmas Eve, most radio stations send their employees home for the holiday and go over to an automated format of prerecorded seasonal favorites. A couple of years back, one of the tape machines at my local station jammed, and for about four hours, until someone got in through the snow to fix it, every other record was Barbra Streisand singing "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas." Hardly anyone noticed. The other stations, after all, were playing "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" too.

We don't have popular popular culture any more but, uniquely in today's fragmented market, seasonal songs cross all boundaries.

The Natalie Cole, Phil Spector, Dolly Parton, Motown, Bruce Springsteen, and Jessye Norman Christmas records all draw from the same limited repertoire—"Winter Wonderland," "Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!" and "The Christmas Song." As our society shrinks into its auto-apartheid ghettos—the black despair of Cabrini Green and the white paranoia of Christmas Lake—these Christmas songs will be the last songs we all share.

Mary Ellin Barrett, Irving Berlin's daughter, says that her father "believed in the secular American Christmas. There's a lot of controversy about that, about whether there should be, apart from the Christian celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, a general festive celebration that *anyone* can join in with." When she was grown up, Barrett discovered that she'd had an older brother who had died on his first Christmas Day. After the children left home, the Berlins stopped observing Christmas.

It's a poignant image: the man who helped create the modern American Christmas unable to celebrate it himself. Berlin was raised a Jew and ended his life as an agnostic. But, whatever his doubts about God, he kept faith with America—and

that faith is what you hear in "White Christmas." They had white Christmases in Siberia, where he was born, but those weren't the same. "White Christmas" isn't about the weather, it's about America. Those homesick GIs, fighting the Japs out in the Pacific, understood that. They made the song a hit. It's no coincidence that Christmas songs are among the biggest-selling of all time: "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" sold 113 million copies between 1949 and 1976, and Gene Autry's recording is one of the top ten best-selling singles of all time. The biggest seller of all remains Bing Crosby's version of "White Christmas." These aren't just hit records by a favorite singer; they speak to a universal, inclusive, aspirational sense of America.

So no wonder Christmas gets a hard time in our hyphenated, segregationist culture: It's the most potent example of the melting-pot, cooked up by Germans and Dutch, and set to music by Jews—not just heavyweights like Berlin, but dozens of anonymous Tin Pan Alley men like J. Fred Coots.

You may have seen *Corinna*, *Corinna*, starring Whoopi Goldberg and Ray Liotta as an upfront black housekeeper and shy Jewish employer who find love through their mutual enjoyment of Billie Holiday singing "You Go to My Head." The assumption, of course, is familiar—relaxed, vernacular black culture liberates uptight honkies.

I don't want to get picky about this and yes, Billie's is a great recording, but who wrote the damn song? J. Fred Coots, one of those uptight honkies. He didn't write it as

a black song or a Jewish song; he wrote it for everyone. And it was J. Fred who composed the first Christmas pop standard:

*He's making a list  
And checking it twice,  
He's gonna find out  
Who's naughty or nice—  
Santa Claus Is Coming To Town.*

You may prefer the Bruce Springsteen version, or the Perry Como, or the Jackson Five, or the Andrews Sisters, but I'll bet you know those words.

**T**he soundtrack to the American Christmas dates from Coots's 1934 seasonal staple to "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree," written by Johnny Marks thirty years later. Every Christmas standard you can name—"Frosty," "Silver Bells," "Sleigh Ride"—comes from that period, the apogee of mainstream American popular culture at its most confident and embracing.

It's not surprising, then, that the last three decades have

failed to produce a single Yuletide song of any lasting impact. Broadcasting has degenerated into narrowcasting, pop music has split into mutually antagonistic minority interests like grunge and gangsta rap, and, following the same pattern of fragmentation, Christmas has begun to subdivide, too. If the American Christmas is a triumph of the American ideal—*E Pluribus Unum*—then the pseudo-African festival of Kwanzaa is surely the reverse. It exemplifies the trend of recent years, whereby large groups of Americans go to great lengths to make themselves more foreign than they really are. The language of Kwanzaa is Swahili, and the underlying philosophy of its seven “Principles” is the distinctively incompetent Afro-Marxism that bankrupted Africa’s richest countries. To placate disgruntled kids, Kwanzaa has since been obliged to introduce its own Santa figure—a wise man called Nia Umoja. But what was wrong with the old Santa figure? Will our society really benefit from Santa separatism?

In Vermont the first school board of the season has already declared that songs about Santa, Rudolph, and Frosty are offensive to those of other backgrounds. Really? The hallmark of democratic American culture used to be that it was simultaneously universal and specific. In denigrating the secular Christmas as it has evolved over 200 years, these groups are moving beyond the separation of church and state to the separation of American from American; they’re saying that the very notion of any common culture is suspect. In fact, left to themselves, all kinds of folks discover that the great quality of these songs is their elasticity, their endless versatility. There’s a peachy rap version of “’Twas the Night Before Christmas” (though “Ho! Ho! Ho!” likely carries a different shade of meaning), and there are many fine Hispanic renderings of “*Rudolfo el Reno de Nariz Roja*.” In the 1980s even the London Borough of Brent, one of Britain’s sternest loony-left councils but far more sporting than the Scrooge-packed American school boards, permitted municipal performances of “I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus” as long as, with non-heterosexist evenhandedness, it was accompanied by “I Saw Daddy Kissing Santa Claus.” The New York Gay Men’s Chorus, for their part, are wont to elongate and harmonically embellish the last word of the second line of the second quatrain of “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas”: “Make the Yuletide gay.”

But, as is the fashion, they also have their own anthem, “Coming Out for Christmas”—sung to the tune of “Hark the Herald Angels Sing”—about discreetly broaching the subject during the big family dinner:

*Tasty turkey! Perfect peas!  
Will someone pass (I’m gay) the cheese?*

For me, the trouble with this number is that the gayness overrides the Christmasness. This Christmas, we should heed above all the lesson of that *Reductio ad Absurdum* of the hyphenation era, the O.J. verdict. Encouraging Americans to think of themselves as members of societal sub-groups leads only to the inevitable banality of typecasting. There’s lots of black women on this jury, so will their concerns about racism, as blacks, outweigh their concerns, as women, about spousal abuse? At Columbia Records they used to joke that they liked the Johnny Mathis Christmas Album so much they re-released it every year in a different color. Today, we’d be expected to choose Johnny Mathis, like Henry Ford’s Model T, in one color only: black. But Mathis is also gay, so the hyphen junkies would be trying to figure whether they should aim the album at blacks, or gays, or maybe black gays. But if there’s any hope for America, we should all accept—and I quote from the Johnny Mathis Christmas Album, Side 1, Track 7—that some things are “for kids from one to ninety-two”:

African-American, gay, everybody.

As to the scars of prejudice, “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” is still the pithiest lesson in overcoming disadvantage. “They discriminated against Rudolph for not being just like every other reindeer in the herd,” observed *Life* magazine in 1950. “They drew the color line against his nose.” But the editorial also correctly noted why Rudolph was so effective in rising above the

deeply ingrained erubescophobia. “The run-of-the-sled reindeer began shouting his praises, not because they really loved Rudolph, but because Rudolph was suddenly a Big Shot.” There’s the most American lesson of all—and far more pertinent to today’s blacks than *ujamaa*, Kwanzaa’s “cooperative economics.”

In 1966, the same year Kwanzaa was invented, Jerry Herman, composer of *Hello, Dolly!* and *La Cage aux Folles*, wrote what looks like the last Christmas standard. “I snuck in just in time,” he told me. “We don’t really have Christmas songs anymore and we don’t really have songs that step out of shows and get taken up by jazz singers and country singers. But every year I get another half-dozen different recordings by different artists.” And, in his frail songwriter’s croak, he began to warble:

*We need a little Christmas  
Right this very minute  
Candles in the hallway  
Carols on the spinet . . .*

Well, maybe not the spinet. But we do need a little Christmas. Right this very minute. □

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Michael J. McGrorty

# I Won't Be Home for Christmas

*The author was spending his Christmas Eve thousands of miles away in a foreign land, scrubbing dishes and surrounded by drunken sailors. Then things really got depressing.*

There is no Christmas in Japan. It hardly matters now, but when I was 19 it seemed a terrible thing, an unfair condition imposed upon an already homesick young sailor thousands of miles from home. If I had been on a ship things would have been different. Aboard ship it doesn't matter whether you're sailing the Pacific or moored along the Nile, they make a big deal out of the holidays; the cooks lay on a tremendous banquet that extinguishes homesickness beneath the labors of digestion, and the Old Man kicks in a cigar for all hands.

But I wasn't on a ship that Christmas. It was 1975, and my ship, the USS *Packer*, a destroyer escort, sat nursing melancholy in the grimy fastness of a drydock, trailing wires and hoses from the places her insides had been. And I was stuck ashore, in old barracks that were no more than a wretched old pile of sticks, built by the Japanese long before the Second World War. To call the accommodations spartan was to offer extravagant praise. Pipes, radiators, and ceilings all leaked rusty water, and my favorite amenities were the giant biting centipedes and the shower heads, which switched at random from ice water to live steam during one's ablutions.

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I shared a cell with three other men, one of whom had once tried to throw me out the third floor window while drunk. Failing that, he sent the furniture instead. The other two inmates were a religious fanatic who prostrated himself and begged the forgiveness of Jesus at all hours of the night, and a drifty old boatswain's mate who, I swear, never bathed in the months of our acquaintance. They regarded me as odd.

Instead of the snug galley of the *Packer* we were to have our Christmas Eve supper among the general horde of civilians, Marines, and Army personnel at the base cafeteria, a spot closer to Woolworth's than the Waldorf. There was nothing holiday-like about it. There were no decorations in the shop windows outside the base gates, and the only cheer to be had in town on Christmas Eve was the same cheer available any other night: a lethal mix of plum wine and gin known as Mojo, for which the smoky dives of Yokosuka were justly renowned. Most decided to take their chances with the Mojo.

But I didn't have to. I had something close by to divert me. For a long time I'd been moonlighting as a dishwasher at the Officer's Club; an evening spent rinsing cigarette butts out of beer mugs got me forty dollars in cash, an excellent return compared to my \$400 monthly pay. There was only one drawback: Enlisted men like me were forbidden to work on the base. We