

## RETRO REPLAY



NAT KING COLE  
first recorded  
"The Christmas  
Song" in 1946.

Pop Music

## HOLIDAY CHESTNUT TURNS 75

Classic Christmas tune still aglow with Yuletide cheer.

BY MARY-LIZ SHAW

Many people call it by its first line, "Chestnuts roasting on an open fire"—not surprising, considering its actual title, "The Christmas Song," sounds oddly generic, as if the songwriters always meant to come up with something better. Yet this seasonal favorite, composed on a blistering hot July day by Mel Torme and Robert Wells and first recorded by Nat King Cole in 1946, may be the most finely crafted tune in the holiday canon.

Torme's haunting jazz ballad aligns perfectly with the lyrical storytelling, which is a tribute

to all the special moments that "help to make the season bright": Jack Frost nipping at your nose, Yuletide carols being sung by a choir, and a turkey and some mistletoe.

The song's most unique feature is its structure: It has no chorus. Instead, it builds with a progressive chord sequence to the final "simple phrase" of "Merry Christmas to you."

And completing the masterwork is Cole's incomparable voice, warm as an embrace.

If you aren't humming "The Christmas Song" by now, perhaps these musical notes about it will help you along.

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

### SPEED WRITING

Torme (below) went to Wells' home in Toluca Lake, California, on one of the hottest days of 1945 and saw what became the first verse of "The Christmas Song" scribbled on a notepad. Wells said the heat was so oppressive that he thought he might cool off by writing about a chilly winter's day. Torme tried a few notes on the piano and they had their new song in about 45 minutes.



### LET'S ASK NAT!

As Mel's son James told National Public Radio in 2017, Torme and Wells knew their holiday tune was something special. They took it to a music publisher, where they got a big, fat no. Nobody wants a song that can only be played at Christmas, the publisher explained. Undeterred, they went to Nat Cole, who was playing at the Trocadero nightclub in Los Angeles.

"I told him (Torme) it was beautiful," Cole told jazz writer Leonard Feather in 1961. "But I didn't feel it would be right to do it with just a trio."

**COLE SINGS** as Mel Torme plays piano with King Cole Trio members Irving Ashby and Johnny Miller on bass, ca. 1945.

TORME: GENE LESTER/GETTY IMAGES; ALBUM: BLUEEE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; TRIO: METRONOME/GETTY IMAGES



### MANY TIMES, MANY WAYS

Despite his reservations about recording "The Christmas Song" with only his King Cole Trio, Cole did just that at a New York studio in June 1946. Two months later he persuaded Capitol Records to let him try again, this time with a light string arrangement over the jazz trio.

Cole went on to record two more versions, in 1953 and 1961, each time with even more strings. Cole's first 1946 version was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame, but it's his '61 recording that most people know.

The song is one of the most recorded Christmas

hits of all time, with treatments by artists as varied as Ella Fitzgerald, George Strait, Christina Aguilera and Michael Buble. A very popular version is from Frank Sinatra, who sang it on his first Christmas LP in 1957 (left).

### WHY NOT MEL?

Though less well known than Cole at the time, Torme was himself an accomplished jazz performer with a silver-toned voice. Some have wondered why he didn't record "The Christmas Song" first.

"Nat Cole was simply exploding at that particular moment in time," James Torme told NPR. It made more sense for Cole to run with it.

### MULTITASKER

A child prodigy in music, Torme wrote his first hit, "Lament for Love"—for

Harry James' orchestra, no less—at age 15. He also was an expert drummer, pianist and arranger. In his later years, he took up writing, penning a well-regarded book about Judy Garland, *The Other Side of the Rainbow*, and his autobiography, *It Wasn't All Velvet*—a reference to his nickname, the Velvet Fog, which he never liked.

### THE GIFT THAT KEEPS GIVING

Though occasionally befuddled by the wild popularity of his most famous composition—written when he was just 19—Torme enjoyed its returns. He wrote that Cole's recording of "The Christmas Song" resulted in his "financial pleasure" and once joked that the tune was "my annuity."

Torme wrote at least one other holiday song, "The Christmas Feeling." His son James, also a jazz singer, now performs it. ●

