



IRVING BERLIN wrote it. Bing Crosby sang it. And to date, the cherished yuletide tune stands as the world's best-selling single of all time.

The song, of course, is *White Christmas* – played in heavy rotation every holiday season on radio stations and in shopping centres worldwide.

Ironically, the warble about snowy winters in the North began as nothing more than a satirical ditty set in sunny Southern California. Yes, really:

*The sun is shining, the grass is green,
The orange and palm trees sway.
There's never been such a day
in Beverly Hills, L.A.
But it's December 24,
And I am longing to be up North...*

Berlin had been tasked with writing a selection of tracks representing different holidays for the 1942 film, *Holiday Inn*, starring Crosby and Fred Astaire.

The legendary composer would pen an estimated 1,500 songs during his 60-year career, including such classics as *Puttin' on the Ritz*, *Cheek to Cheek*, and *There's No Business Like Show Business*.

At the time, *White Christmas* merely added to the pile. A few twists of fate, however, would change everything.

First, the original opening stanzas were cut, fundamentally changing the song's mood. The timing of its release would also contribute to its appeal, airing shortly after the United States plunged into WWII.

As millions of American soldiers were being shipped overseas, the sentimental melody evoked strong emotions fuelled by past holiday memories and longing for home.

ALTHOUGH CROSBY, a descendant of Irish immigrants, provided the soothing voice behind the ballad, he later admitted, "a jackdaw with a cleft palate" could have made it successful just as easily. Doubtful.

But the candid remark served as another way of paying tribute to the genius of Berlin – a Russian Jewish



White Christmas

By Christopher Warner

immigrant who virtually invented the secular Christmas music genre.

Growing up in New York City's lower east side's tenements, Berlin was far more familiar with saloons in the Bowery than sleigh bells in the snow. So how did he conjure up such powerful imagery of a rural New England winter?

He simply made it up. Berlin then added the perfect musical arrangement to create a mythic golden past derived entirely from his imagination.

On December 25, 1941, Crosby debuted the serenade on his weekly live NBC radio show, the Kraft Music Hall, at the corner of Sunset and Vine in Hollywood.

The popular crooner later recorded the number with the John Scott Trotter Orchestra and the Ken Darby Singers for Decca Records on May 29, 1942, as part of an album of six 78-rpm discs for the soundtrack of *Holiday Inn*.

The Paramount Pictures musical benefitted from several hits, including *Be Careful, It's My Heart*. But by the end of 1942, *White Christmas* stood atop the charts during a stretch that included an astonishing 11 weeks at number one.

For his efforts, Berlin took home the Oscar that year for Best Song.

He actually handed the award to himself while serving as a presenter during the ceremony.

When he opened the envelope and saw his name, Berlin told the audience, "I'm glad to present the award. I've known him for a long time."

BY 1947, the master recording for *White Christmas* had been severely damaged because of its frequent use. Crosby subsequently returned to Decca studios, using the same crew to reproduce the original session as closely as possible. The resulting re-issue has become the most familiar version heard by the public today.

Not surprisingly, "Bing" made another rendition – this time for Paramount's musical, *White Christmas*, which co-starred Danny Kaye and Rosemary Clooney, and became the highest-grossing film of 1954.

Over the years, the song has been recorded more than 500 times in countless languages (including Swahili) by artists ranging from Andrea Bocelli to Garth Brooks.

In 1957, Berlin attempted to stop Elvis Presley from recording it (the composer wasn't a fan of rock 'n' roll) and even launched a campaign to have radio stations ban the King's version. Nonetheless, *Elvis' Christmas Album* soared to No. 1 on the Billboard charts.

White Christmas would also have the distinction of marking the end of the Vietnam War.

Around 11:00 AM on April 29, 1975, American and South Vietnamese personnel were ordered to report to the nearest assembly point, resulting in a mad scramble as the enemy forces surrounded the capital city.

The cue to evacuate had been a radio announcement that Saigon's temperature was "105 degrees and rising", followed by the beloved Christmas carol about peace and happier times. ■

