

A HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS CAROLS

A history lesson of our favorite Christmas carols through the ages

A History of the Carol

O, how we enjoy singing of Christmas! Familiar old hymns and popular modern songs. Magnificent pieces by the great masters; solemn religious chants and tender lullabies. Catchy tunes about winter fun; children's favorites – Santa Claus, animals, flowers and trees, legends and myths, nostalgic Bible verses, airs from other lands and times. And, most of all, Christmas Carols!

The word "Carol" once meant "to dance in a ring" (from the old French "caroler", the Latin "choraula", and the Greek "choraules". Early use of the circling dance in religious dramas combined with singing; thus evolved most of the "Carols" we know today.

Authentic Carols touched on religious themes (in this case, the Nativity story). These were spontaneous expressions of the rustic commoners; down-to-earth, marked by humor, gaiety and even hilarity, but also by tenderness and compassion. Everyday language described simple human responses to the religious stories which had for so long been obscured by solemn Latin phrases and droning music heard only in church and written by clergymen obviously terrified of expressing simple uncluttered faith and unbridled joy. Frowned upon by the church, any indulgence in Carol singing remained confined to the Village Green, humble homes and hearths, and streets of the towns.

Finally, as the Dark Ages ended, Carol singing began to flourish openly, enjoying nearly 250 years of a golden age of authentic ancient Carols. Unhappily, Oliver Cromwell's Puritan edicts against music sent Carols scurrying underground again, some to be lost forever, and some still awaiting revival. We can thank later-day musicologists and composers for the re-introduction of this precious heritage of Christian folk music, the Christmas Carol.

Why do we today love Carols and folk songs in the Carol style? Because we also are "common folk"; because our faith and our beliefs also are simple and uncomplicated; because we also can relate tenderly to the Nativity story using our own language and our own real-life experiences; because our joy can also be expressed by responding to the rhythms of the dance which underlie all Carols.

Now let's sing together some of these ancient Carols that are still familiar to us all.

A Carol Sampler

In Dulce Jubilo – “Good Christian Men, Rejoice”

One of the oldest Carols on record, this one came from well before 1400; it was later printed in the Leipzig, Germany, Gesanbuck, with a stanza actually added by Martin Luther himself! An interesting legend tells how the original words were sung by angels on an occasion before 1366, witnessed by a mystic named Henry Suso, a Dominican Friar. He “thereupon burst into a dance with his heavenly visitors”. Suso recovered from this experience and eventually wrote down the entire musical score presented by the angels.

In Dulce Jubilo

“Good Christian men, rejoice
With heart and soul and voice;
Give ye heed to what we say:
Jesus Christ is born today;
Ox and ass before Him bow,
And He is in the manger now.
Christ is born today! Christ is born today!”

Carol of the Crib

At the turn of the 16th century, this German Carol surfaced as part of a mystery play in Leipzig. A tradition of realistically staged displays had begun when St. Francis of Assisi assembled the first crib scene, or “cresche”, using actual farm animals, people, and barnyard paraphernalia in an effort to present the Nativity story in familiar terms to his peasant parishioners. In this Carol, verses were sung alternately between Mary and Joseph with some singing by children portraying servants, shepherds, wise men, and even angels! The “cresche” still delights children of all ages, as it did in Medieval times.

Song of the Crib

“Joseph dearest, Joseph mine,
Help me cradle the child divine;
God reward thee and all that’s thine
In Paradise.
He comes among us at Christmas tide,
At Christmas tide, in Bethlehem;
Men shall bring Him from far and wide
Love’s diadem: Jesus, Jesus.
Lo, He comes, and loves, and saves, and frees us!”

What Child is This?

(Tune: "Greensleeves")

We had to include this one! It wasn't a true Carol to begin with, since it was strictly of secular origin. "Greensleeves" was a popular folk song about the affairs of a certain "Ladie Greene Sleeves". This song obviously lacked the religious subject matter required by the definition of a Carol. However, years later, in 1865, the hymnist William Dix wrote a poem about the Holy Birth; he set this to the tune of an ancient Carol, it sings like one, and has become today one of our most beloved Carols.

What Child is This?

"What child is this, who, laid to rest,
 On Mary's lap is sleeping?
 Whom Angels greet with anthems sweet
 While Shepherds watch are keeping?
 This, this is Christ the King,
 Whom Shepherds guard and Angels sing;
 Haste, haste to bring Him laud,
 The babe, the Son of Mary!"

Coventry Carol

In the 14th and 15th centuries, dramas of the Nativity story were popular in the city of Coventry. In a Coventry play called "Pageant of the Shearmen and Tailors", this poignant lullaby was introduced to describe the sorrow of Jewish mothers following the slaughter of their baby boys by King Herod. These plays were fashionable among commoners and royalty alike; Kings Henry VI and VII were recorded in attendance at this production in 1456 and 1492.

Coventry Carol

"Lully, lullay, thou little tiny child,
 By by, lully, lullay.
 Thou little tiny child, by by, lully, lullay.
 Sisters too, how may we do
 For to preserve this day
 This poor youngling, for whom we do sing,
 By by, lully, lullay?"

Patapan

This is the finest example of a true Christmas Carol. The music is in classic dance style; even the original French words have remained unaltered in translation over the centuries. Emphasis is on a religious theme celebrated joyously by every method

available to humble villagers: singing, dancing, festival processions and rustic instruments, featuring a small hand drum, the “tambourine”.

Patapam

“Willie, take your little drum,
With your whistle, Robin, come!
When we hear the fife and drum,
Tu-re-lu-re-lu, pat-a-pat-a-pan,
When we hear the fife and drum,
Christmas should be frolicsome.”

The First Nowell

First published in 1833, this Carol is at least 250 or 300 years older; it being one of the oldest Ballad Carols on record (Ballads have repeated choruses after each verse). It has been frequently used as an Epiphany processional, because several verses refer to the wise men and the Star. In misspelling the work “Nowell” to read “Noel”, this Carol has mistakenly been attributed to France. “Not so,” say renowned musicologists. “The First Nowell” is as English as plum pudding!

The First Nowell

“The first Nowell the angel did say
Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as the lay;
In fields where they lay, keeping their sheep,
On a cold winter’s night that was so deep.
Nowell, Nowell, Nowell, Nowell,
Born is the King of Israel!”

Es ist Ein’ Ros – “Lo, How a Rose”

This early 15th century German Carol was beautifully harmonized by Praetorius in his “Musae Sionial” in 1609. The melody possibly came from an ancient spinning song, which shows up in the syncopated rhythm; the words come from Isaiah 11:1, loosely translated in the 8th century “Rod of the Root of Jesse, Thou, Flower of Mary Born”.

Es ist Ein’ Ros

“Lo, how a Rose e’er blooming
From tender stem hath sprung!
Of Jesse’s lineage coming,
As men of old have sung.
It came, a flow’ret bright,
Amid the cold of winter,
When half-spent was the night.”

God Rest You Merry Gentlemen

Called the “most popular of Christmas Carols”, often mentioned in history and literature (Scrooge chased away with his ruler a poor boy singing this very song!); this is a Carol of the City. It continued to be sung on the streets of London even after the rise of Oliver Cromwell and his edicts forbidding music in general and Christmas Carols in particular. So, Carol-singing went underground, but many continued to flourish even in the Puritan dominated colonies of America. Some ancient Carols did become almost extinct, but scholars and musicians continue to bring more and more of them into the light of Christmas today for our pleasure and joy and “Soli Deo Gloria” (“to the Glory of God”).

God Rest You Merry Gentlemen

“God rest you merry gentlemen,
 Let nothing you dismay,
 Remember Christ our Savior
 Was born on Christmas Day,
 To save poor souls from Satan’s power
 Which had long time gone astray,
 And it’s tidings of comfort and joy,
 Comfort and joy.
 And it’s tidings of comfort and joy.”

Special Christmas Solo (performed by chapter member)

Thou That Tellest Good Tidings of Zion – Handel
 Cantique de Noel (O Holy Night) - Adam

Favorite Carols (sung by entire chapter)

We Wish You a Merry Christmas
 O Christmas Tree
 Joy to the World
 Silent Night

Nancy Benes & Esther Hodgkinson
 Chapter DU
 12/14/95