**I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas**

**How an obscure tune from a so-so film**

**became the greatest hit of all time**

**The song that helped to make Christmas what it is today begins with a 16-bar introductory verse that almost no one knows and even fewer people sing:**

**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 the twenty-fourth,**

**And I'm longing to be up north. ...**

**And then follows one of the world's best-known tunes: "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas ..." Its status as the biggest pop song of all time is even more remarkable because at first, "White Christmas" didn't impress much of anyone. Even Bing Crosby, the song's best-known interpreter, initially failed to see its promise.**

**The one man who did believe was songwriter Irving Berlin. The story goes that on a January morning in 1940, Berlin arrived at his New York City office and immediately announced to Helmy Kresa, his longtime musical assistant: "I want you to take down a song I wrote over the weekend. Not only is it the best song I ever wrote, it's the best song anybody's ever wrote."**

**It wasn't until April 1941, when Berlin and film director, Mark Sandrich began a new movie, Holiday Inn, that the songwriter found a vehicle for his Christmas creation. From the day he arrived at Paramount Studios to begin work on the picture, Berlin was obsessed with "White Christmas."**

**Walter Scharf, a Paramount staff arranger, was charged with turning Berlin's tunes into full-fledged orchestral numbers. Irving Berlin may have been a genius as a songwriter, but he actually wasn't much of a musician. Famously self-taught, he routinely flouted "rules" he didn't know existed; asked once how greater technical knowledge would impact his songwriting, Berlin answered succinctly: "Ruin it."**

**Scharf remembered Berlin's first piano performance of his new Christmas number as a halting, "very rough" rendition that left listeners scratching their heads. Bing Crosby's reaction was befuddlement. When Scharf later privately told the singer that he thought "White Christmas" would turn out well, Crosby rolled his eyes. "I hope so."**

**Working on the orchestrations with Scharf, Berlin would hum the music he heard in his head and the arranger would attempt to replicate the sounds, noodling on the piano. For Berlin, it was, Scharf remembered, "a tremendously traumatic experience. It was as if he were going to have a baby when he was working on that song.**

**Holiday Inn premiered at New York's Paramount Theater on August 4, 1942. By the next morning Berlin was able to wire Mark Sandrich in Hollywood and report unanimous praise. But he must have been disappointed when scarcely a single reviewer mentioned "White Christmas."**

**Soon after the premiere, though, something extraordinary began to happen. Suddenly, without a lick of promotion to nudge it along, "White Christmas" was becoming a hit. After Crosby's 1942 recording traveled abroad to American GIs, the song began an astounding chart-topping run. The United States had entered World War II, and Christmas 1942 was the first that millions of Americans would spend away from home. The song offered them a vision of cozy, domestic serenity.**

**As a member of the USO's traveling ensemble, wherever Bing Crosby went, no matter the season, he was asked to sing "White Christmas." Once, entertaining a paratroop unit in France, he was approached by a gruff, square-jawed sergeant. "You gonna sing "White Christmas?" Yes, Crosby replied. "Well, in that case, I guess I'll duck out," the sergeant said. "I think you'll like the other numbers," Crosby said. "Why not stick around?" "I like the song all right," the sergeant explained. "But I'll listen from behind the portable kitchen. It's no good for the men's morale to see their sergeant crying."**

**Since then, "White Christmas" has been sung by over 150 different performers, who run the musical gamut from the Mormon Tabernacle Choir to Alvin and the Chipmunks. Bing Crosby's version alone was deemed the all-time top single by the Guinness Book of World Records, which cited sales of more than 30 million copies. The Crosby recording was briefly unseated from first place by Elton John's tribute to Princess Diana, "Candle in the Wind '97," but has since regained its status.**

**By the end of his life, Bing Crosby had come to appreciate "that wonderful song and all it's done for me," as he wrote to Irving Berlin. But that didn't stop Berlin from continuing to plug his cherished tune. In December 1976, the 73-year-old Crosby arrived in new York for a two-week run of a new show, Bing Crosby on Broadway. Before the first concert, Berlin wired the singer:**

**Dear Bing: Good luck tonight ... if you're stuck for a finish I've got a song about Christmas that I wrote some years ago. Love, Irving**

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***(Jody Rosen, from the December, 2002 issue of Reader's Digest, on page 120)***