

# CHRISTMAS CAROLS

On November 1<sup>st</sup>, a local radio station changes its standard eclectic offerings to “Christmas Music.” Songs of Santa and angels, Christ and sleigh bells, holy nights and mistletoe, belt across the airways and herald the coming of Christmas!

No other season or holiday can even come close to the sounds dedicated to Christmas. Songs will be sung to mark the occasion by those who sing with adoration and others who sing with sparkling dresses. At Disney World, around front room pianos, on televised concerts, church cathedrals, stadiums, malls, and on the street, the sound of Christmas fills the air like nothing else. These songs known so well, and often referred to as carols, mark the season as much as any tree could. But why sing so much at Christmas?



## THE STORY

The story of caroling and singing Christmas carols is a bit different than our other stories. There is no singular character inventing, proclaiming, giving. Instead, there is a host of saints throughout the years declaring in body and words the praise and joy of Christ come. There is another unique feature of this tradition; it began by approaching a cultural practice through the story of Jesus.

Carols were first sung in Europe thousands of years ago, but they were not Christmas carols or related to Christ in any way. They were pagan songs, sung at the winter solstice celebrations as people danced round stone circles. These winter solstice traditions took place on the shortest day of the year, usually around the 22nd of December. In fact, the word *carol* actually means dance or a song of praise and joy! Carols used to be written and sung during all four seasons, but only the tradition of singing them at Christmas has survived.



Early Christians took the pagan solstice celebrations and interpreted them through the story of Jesus' birth, thus giving people songs of Christ to sing. In 129 AD, a Roman Bishop said that a song called "Angel's Hymn" should be sung at a Christmas service in Rome, and thus the Christmas carol was instituted. Another famous early Christmas hymn was written in 760, by Comas of Jerusalem, for the Greek Orthodox Church. Soon after, many composers all over Europe began to write 'Christmas carols.' However, not many people liked them as they were written and sung in Latin, a language that the ordinary person couldn't understand. Partly because of this disconnect, by the middle of the Middle Ages (the 900s -1200s), most people had lost interest in celebrating Christmas altogether, which included singing carols.



This all changed in 1223 when St. Francis of Assisi started his [Nativity Plays](#) in [Italy](#).

The people in his plays sang songs or 'canticles' that told the story of Jesus' birth during the performances. Sometimes, the choruses of these new carols were in Latin; but usually, the entire play was in a language that the people watching could understand and, most importantly, join in the singing! Because of his efforts, the singing of Christmas carols once again began to spread throughout Europe. Most of these new carols were not based strictly on Scripture but were simply light-hearted stories, sung by traveling minstrels and changed from town to town to fit the desires of various communities. These carols were rarely sung in church. Instead, the music resounded from the streets and in the homes.

During the Reformation (beginning in 1570), there was a revival of hymns, including the singing of Christmas carols in the language of the people. And although it would be many years before the Christmas carol would come into its own, new freedoms were coming to the common people, including the right to worship as they chose, and singing music how, when and where they pleased.

Because the carols were not strictly Scriptural, and not written in Latin, there were those who considered them inappropriate. With the coming of the Puritans to power in England in 1647, the celebration of Christmas and the singing of carols once again disappeared from church services. Yet the love of Christmas and its music survived in secret, in pubs, and in people's homes.

Carols remained mainly unsung publicly until Victorian times (the 1800s), when two men, William Sandys and Davis Gilbert, collected and published old and new Christmas music from villages across England.





And thus, the singing of Christmas carols was revived once more! People began singing on the streets, in homes, in churches, for money and for free. The tradition of 'Caroling' from home to home was born, along with the giving of alms (money, food, wassail, gifts) to the singers.

The overflowing love expressed in music, filled England once again, and spread throughout Europe and eventually to the New World.



## TODAY

The love that produced the first Christmas cannot be contained in liturgy or prayers. It must be sung! And so we sing! We sing! We sing in our homes, on the streets, in our cars, and together in our Gatherings. We sing and dance in praise and joy full of the love that was shown to us and out of the love that we reflect, shining a light lit by the light of life that came into the world.

In honor of the angels' announcement in song to the shepherds and of the star leading the wise men, the custom of lighting candles while singing on Christmas Eve was instituted. Like the angels and the star, the music announces to the curious, and those that happen just to be there, joy to the world, peace on earth, the Christ has come, hope is here, and love has a name: Jesus!

This custom remains popular today and is often referred to as the Candlelight Service.

May the songs of the season, and our songs as a family of faith, flow from the abundance of the love we have received in Jesus. A love that compelled him to give his life so that we might have eternal life, life in abundance forever, as we love as we have been loved.

