

HAVE YOURSELF A MERRY LITTLE CHRISTMAS NOW, OR, LISTENING TO YOUR INNER WOUNDED (SOLDIER) CHRISTMAS SONG

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HAVE YOURSELF A MERRY LITTLE HOLIDAYS NOW

Beneath Those Songs of Holiday Cheer, Some Sad Notes

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By Glen Skoler

It's that magical time of the year again, as we are ceaselessly surrounded by secular seasonal songs depicting an idyllic Christmas life, from which we often feel dissociated.

Do you have "Blue Decorations" on your Christmas tree, like BB King? Are you having a "Blue Christmas" like Elvis? Or do you have "The Christmas Blues," like Bob Dylan and Willie Nelson?

But listen carefully to the lyrics of our American Christmas classics, and you'll realize the holidays weren't supposed to be as full of unadulterated cheer as you were led to believe. Many of these classic holiday songs were first introduced or embraced at a time of dread, demoralization, and separation from loved ones -- during World War II.

Judy Garland's wartime performances of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" brought tears to the eyes of soldiers, sailors, and Marines - who didn't know if they'd live to see another Christmas - as Garland sang, "Someday soon we all will be together / If the fates allow / Until then we'll have to muddle through somehow / So have yourself a merry little Christmas now."

During the war, Bing Crosby introduced "I'll Be Home for Christmas," evoking an idyllic family Christmas reunion. However, the likely perspective of the song, that of a combat soldier, is not revealed until the last pained lyric: "I'll be home for Christmas - if only in my dreams."

Sometimes, the universality and metaphor of a song imbue it with a historical and

archetypal significance far beyond its conscious intent. Five for Fighting's "Superman (It's Not Easy)" was written prior to 9/11, yet became the anthem for emergency responders. The year before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Irving Berlin was simply longing for a "White Christmas" from California.

The song that moved soldiers to tears during World War II, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," was written for the musical, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, which told the story of a family's unwanted move to New York before the opening of the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. Yet the original lyrics, sung by Garland, captured the mood of the war years:

"Have yourself a merry little Christmas / Let your heart be light / Next year all our troubles will be out of sight"

"Someday soon, we all will be together / If the fates allow / Until then, we'll have to muddle through somehow / So have yourself a merry little Christmas now."

Yet, these aren't the lyrics we hear today. What happened?

Frank Sinatra.

It was the post-World War II 1950s and Sinatra wanted to up the Christmas cheer; after all, his album was titled *A Jolly Christmas*. Lyricist Hugh Martin complied with alterations to suggest the presence, not the absence, of loved ones. And the line "Until then we'll have to muddle through somehow" was changed to "Hang a shining star upon the highest bough." This is the version we usually hear today. A notable exception is a recording by James Taylor, who presciently used the original lyrics, more appropriate for a post-9/11 New York City. Nobel laureate, Bob Dylan, also uses the original lyrics on his Christmas album.

Many holiday classics that were introduced or embraced during World War II evoke a hope, a wish, a dream, a faith in Christmases past and future, during a difficult Christmas present. Even "White Christmas" concludes with the wish and blessing: "And may all your Christmases be white," perhaps a recognition that, through the course of our lives, some Christmases will be white, some will be gray, and some will be black, perhaps even as black as the Christmas Eve of the suicidal George Bailey in, *It's a Wonderful Life*.

So the next time you're walking through a store this holiday season, feeling discouraged and disconnected from the expectations of an impossibly perfect Christmas, fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings, of at least a little joy: Many of these songs were never meant to suggest that your Christmas was supposed to be perfect.

Instead, to quote another song, from another war era, "it's time we stop, hey, what's that sound, everybody look what's going down," and it's time we say, "Thank you for your service." Military personnel around the globe are also listening to these Christmas songs. And somewhere, a soldier, wounded and recovering from surgery, is lying in a hospital bed, wondering if anyone will ever want her or him again.

One of the most common symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder is clinical "dissociation," the surreal sensations of feeling disconnected from others, one's surroundings, one's own body, even from time itself. Yet, for some, the same Christmas songs that make you feel disconnected at the mall, may help them feel less dissociated, more integrated and connected to the hope of home and Christmas future.

Listen to "I'll Be Home for Christmas" or "White Christmas" from the troops' perspective. Then download Judy Garland's "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," with the original

lyrics. Do you hear what they hear?

And may all your Christmases be white.

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