

By Krystal Sato

# 国際交流員コーナー

## CIR's Corner



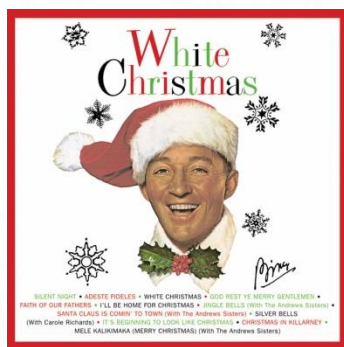
### December 2024 – Issue #31

Hello everyone! "CIR's Corner" is my monthly article about international exchange and cultures around the world. I will introduce a variety of interesting international topics.

### This Month's Topic: Christmas Songs

When Thanksgiving is over in the United States, the Christmas season officially begins. That means Christmas songs start playing everywhere. Even some radio stations only play Christmas songs! Christmas songs are popular in Japan, too. If you listen closely to the lyrics, you can learn a lot about Western Christmas customs. For Western people, Christmas is a precious time to spend with family. Therefore, listening to Christmas songs can bring back many memories of home. This month, I'm going to introduce a few Christmas songs that are special to me. (If you click on the song titles, you can listen to the songs on YouTube.)

#### **"White Christmas" – Bing Crosby**



This song was featured in the 1942 musical *Holiday Inn*, but even if you haven't seen the movie, you have surely heard this song. That's because it is not only the best-selling

Christmas song, but it is the best-selling single of all time!

"White Christmas" means exactly what the lyrics describe: a white, snowy Christmas. However, it rarely snows in my hometown, Seattle. Since records began in 1891, snow has fallen on Christmas only eight times. Out of those eight times, I have experienced a snowy Christmas only once, when two centimeters fell in 1990.

Therefore, I always longed for a white Christmas. Every night before bed in December, I prayed for snow on Christmas.

After I grew up, I moved to Hokkaido, where a white Christmas is pretty much a sure thing every year. Snow definitely makes the atmosphere feel more Christmassy!

#### **"Last Christmas" – Wham!**

This is a bittersweet song about being dumped the day after Christmas. It's a long-time favorite of mine thanks to the song's soothing melody and the smooth voice of George Michael. However, not everyone likes it. Many people hate this song due to it being overplayed on Christmas radio stations. In recent years, a game called "Whamageddon" has been trending on social media. It started on German message boards, and then went viral around the world.

The rules are simple. If you listen to "Last Christmas" by Wham!, you're out! You have to go as long as possible without listening to it. Of course, you lose if you play the song yourself, but you also lose just by hearing it while out during the Christmas season. It's difficult to avoid since it's often played in shopping malls and restaurants. In addition, it's not against the rules to send players



the link to the video of “Last Christmas” to try to trick them into listening to it. If you lose, you must announce “#Whamageddon” on social media. If you can last until midnight on December 25, you win the game.

One thing to note is that “Whamageddon” only applies to the original version of “Last Christmas” by Wham! Remixes and cover versions are allowed. So that means readers in Japan who would like to play “Whamageddon” may listen to the EXILE version all they want!

Since I really like the song “Last Christmas,” I don’t play “Whamageddon.” I defiantly listen to it on Black Friday. By the time I post this article in December, I have already lost the game.

### **“Fairytale of New York” – The Pogues**



The Pogues are a Celtic punk band from England, but I had never heard this song until I came to Japan. The lyrics are about a couple fighting on Christmas Eve, so this song is also a bittersweet one. However, I grew to love this song because of the fond memories I have of it.

Many international students and young English teachers living in Japan return home for the winter holidays, but for various reasons, many remain here. Christmas can be very lonely without family. So, some foreigners have Christmas parties with their friends.

I usually don’t go home for Christmas. In 2011, an Australian friend living in Nanporo and I decided to host a Christmas party for all of our “orphan” foreign friends who also weren’t going home for Christmas. I was in charge of the Christmas playlist. I added all of my favorite Christmas songs, and then I asked my Australian co-hostess if she had any to add. Her request was “Fairytale of New York.” It’s not a staple Christmas song in America, so it was the first time I had heard of it. When I listened to the first part of the song, my impression was, “This guy is a terrible singer!” Nevertheless, when I played the song at the party, not

only my Australian friend who requested it, but all of my British and Irish friends lit up and said, “This is such a great song!” They knew all the words and sang along. “Fairytale of New York” is not popular in America, but it is one of the most popular Christmas songs in the UK, Ireland, and Australia. It’s one of the many cultural differences between America and other English-speaking countries.

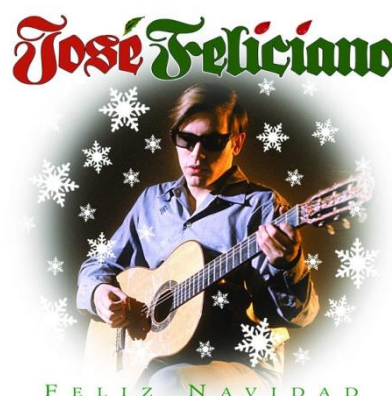
Now whenever I listen to this song, I think about my Australian friend and the fun Christmas party we had. I’ve also learned the female part to sing at karaoke. It’s so much fun to sing it with non-American English-speakers, because they get really into it!

### **“Feliz Navidad” – José Feliciano**

José Feliciano, a Puerto Rican singer-songwriter, wrote this song in 1970. He was alone in Los Angeles while the rest of his family was at home in New York. He became homesick, and wrote this simple, heartfelt song. “Feliz Navidad” means “Merry Christmas” in Spanish, and this song contains both English and Spanish lyrics.

I actually like this song because my mother hates it. This song is also well known and arguably overplayed in America, so every time it came on the radio, my mother declared, “I hate this song!” She never told me why she hates it, but I got the feeling it had something to do with an ex-boyfriend of hers. My brother and I always thought her reaction to this song was funny, so we often sang it to her to tease her.

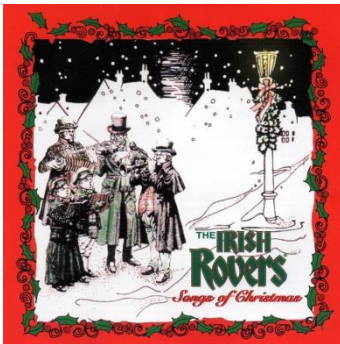
About three years ago, I was listening to Christmas music at home, and my daughter said, “I want to listen to ‘Please Maria!’” I had no idea what song she meant, but since Maria is another name for Jesus’s mother Mary, it made sense that those lyrics might be in a Christmas song. My husband and I struggled to come up with the song she wanted to hear. We played all sorts of Christmas songs for her, but she said, “NO!” to each one. We eventually gave up.





Then, a few days later when I was listening to “Feliz Navidad,” my daughter exclaimed, “This one! ‘Please Maria!’” and started singing along. She had misheard “Feliz Navidad” as “Please Maria.” I took this opportunity to explain to her that there are many languages in the world other than English and Japanese, and this song was in Spanish. Actually, for a while after that, my daughter called the Spanish language itself “Feliz Navidad.” For example, she said my Mexican-American friends speak “Feliz Navidad.” It was an adorable mistake.

### **“Christmas in Killarney”**



Since I told you about my mother’s least favorite Christmas song, I’ll tell you about her favorite one as well. This song is an Irish-American Christmas song, and even though it doesn’t seem to be well known in America, we listened to it every year on a Christmas music cassette tape that my mother had.

The tape broke when I was in college, so for my mother’s Christmas present that year, I wanted to burn a CD of the same songs. It was easy to find and download the popular Christmas songs from the internet, but “Christmas in Killarney” had a few different versions. I unfortunately couldn’t remember who sang the version on my mom’s tape. There was a Bing Crosby version among the search results, but there was something off about it. The one on my mother’s tape had a more authentic Irish feel.

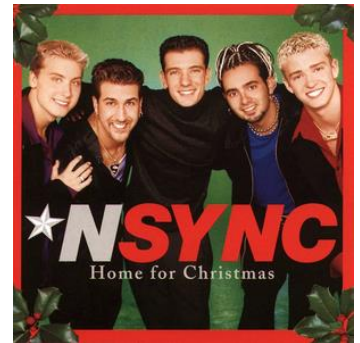
Eventually I settled on a version by a band called the Irish Rovers. It was different from the one on the cassette tape, but sounded similar enough. When I gave the CD to my mom, she was so happy. She played “Christmas in Killarney” right away and said, “This is the one! This is my favorite Christmas song!” My mother actually thought it was the same as the one on her old tape. No disrespect to the “King of Christmas” Bing Crosby, but this song sounds better with an Irish accent!

### **“O Holy Night”**

Finally, I’ll talk about a traditional Christmas carol. Many traditional Christmas carols are about the birth of Jesus Christ, and this one is no exception. It was originally a poem written by French poet Placide Cappeau in 1847, and composer Adolphe Adam set the poem to music that same year. Then, an American minister, John Sullivan Dwight, translated it into English in 1855.

Numerous artists have sung this song over the years. There are 1130 English versions, 550 French versions, and recordings in many other languages as well. Pop artists such as Celine Dion and Mariah Carey have released versions of this song, but my favorite pop version is by the boy band, NSYNC.

I loved NSYNC when I was a teenager. They debuted in America in the spring of 1998, and released the Christmas album, *Home for Christmas*, in the fall of that year. There are



mostly original Christmas songs on the album, but it also includes an acapella version of the traditional Christmas carol “O Holy Night.” Many boy bands are famous for their looks rather than their voices, but not NSYNC. Their five angelic voices harmonize so beautifully in this song that I am nearly moved to tears whenever I listen to it. I highly recommend this version!

By the way, the song ["Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays"](#) is from the same album, and has become a modern-day Christmas favorite. You can hear it nearly as often as Wham! and Mariah Carey on Christmas radio stations across America. It has a charming music video, so click the link above to watch it! Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays, everyone! ★

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