

Keyboard Reflections



James Walls, Writer /Editor / Creative Director

Holiday Blessings & Happy New Year: For the Joy of Music With Family, Friends, and Community.

This issue devotes three pages to IRVING BERLIN, the legendary American composer.

Featured are two of Berlin's most beloved songs: *White Christmas* and *God Bless America*.

Berlin was Jewish and Crosby was Catholic — and they both loved Christmas.



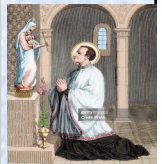
Irving Berlin at the piano, while American “crooner” Bing Crosby looks on. Crosby made Berlin's *White Christmas* an enduring hit!

Berlin and Crosby were affectionately called “the Dynamic Duo,” thus they helped create a holiday that **everyone** could celebrate.



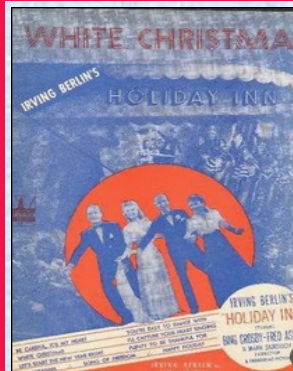
By 1940, Berlin had come up with his lyrics. In his Manhattan office, he sat at his piano and asked his arranger to take down the notes. Berlin had connected his lonesome Christmas to the broader turmoil of the time, including the outbreak of World War II and overburdened debates about America's role in the world.

The Roman Catholic Church played an important role in Crosby's upbringing and life. A native of Spokane, Washington, Bing was raised in the shadows of Gonzaga University and High School — an institution run by the Jesuit order — named after Saint Aloysius Gonzaga, Italian Jesuit Priest (1568-1591).



INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

God Bless America	2
Sea to Shining Sea	2
U.S. Emigrants	3
Prolific Songwriter	3
Epilogue	4



This is a screen shot of the original sheet music that I have in my music library.

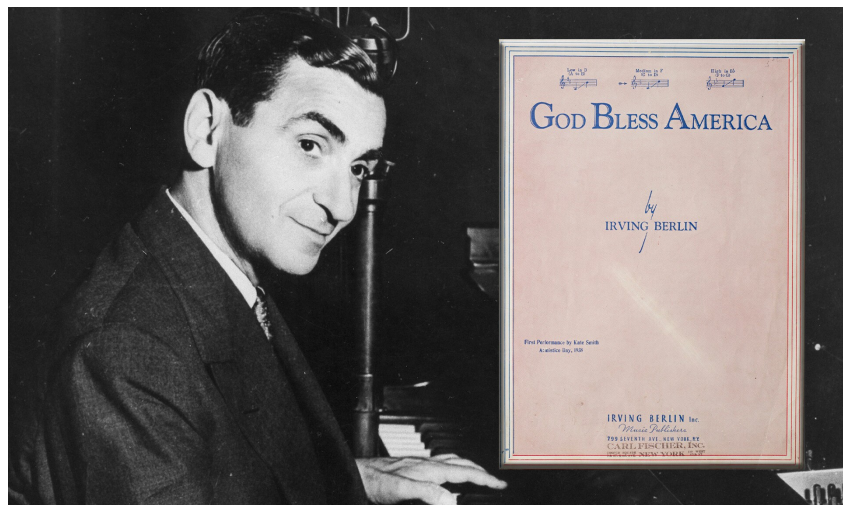
“Not only is it the best song I ever wrote,” Berlin promised, “it's the best song anybody ever wrote.” This new song reflected his response: a dream of better times and places. It evoked a small town of yesteryear in which horse-drawn sleighs crossed freshly fallen snow.



This was a new kind of Christmas carol. It did not mention the birth of Jesus, angels, wise men, or Santa Claus. It imagined a future in which dark days would once again be **“merry and bright.”**

“

While the Storm Clouds Gather...



Irving Berlin 1888-1989
(Born in Russia as Israel Baline)

Irving Berlin, the famous American songwriter who wrote “GOD BLESS AMERICA,” was born in Russia in 1888 and immigrated to the United States as a child.

According to *Steinway & Sons* and *the Kennedy Center*, Irving Berlin was born Israel Baline in the village of Tyumen, Russia. His family fled to escape the region's persecution of the Jewish community and settled in New York City in the mid-1890s.

Berlin's beloved verse to *God Bless America* (shown below) is sung at ball games, patriotic events, and can probably be sung by heart by many flag-waving Americans. However, the full lyrics (in bold) below are not as well known.

**"While the storm clouds gather far across the sea,
Let us swear allegiance to a land that's free.
Let us all be grateful for a land so fair,
As we raise our voices in a solemn prayer:**

(Verse) God bless America, land that I love,
Stand beside her and guide her
Through the night with a light from above.
From the mountains, to the prairies,
To the oceans white with foam,
God bless America,
My home sweet home."



Irving Berlin (born Israel Isidore Beilin) was a Russian-born American composer and songwriter. His music forms a large part of the *Great American Songbook*. Berlin received numerous honors including an Academy Award, a Grammy Award, and a Tony Award. He also received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Gerald R. Ford in 1977. The broadcast journalist Walter Cronkite stated that he "helped write the story of this country, capturing the best of who we are and the dreams that shape our lives".

The Berlins were one of hundreds of thousands of Jewish families who emigrated to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century, escaping discrimination, poverty and brutal **pogroms** — a term used when the Nazis began a pogrom against Jewish people in Germany, driving many westwards to the United States. [Origin: late 19th century: Yiddish and Russian, literally 'devastation', from pogromit 'destroy by the use of violence'.]



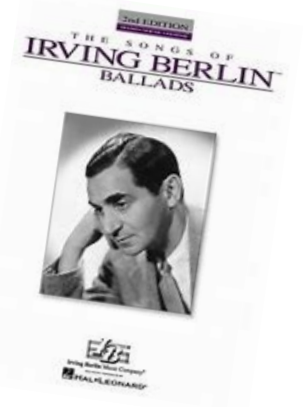
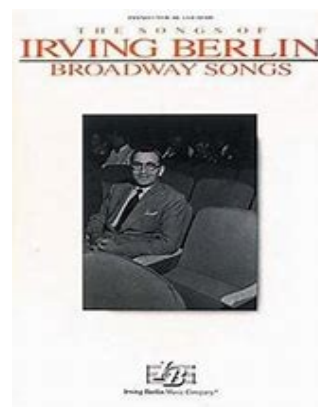
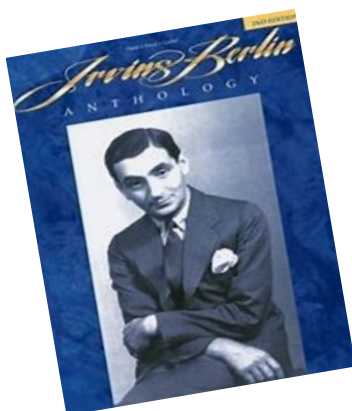
Irving Berlin arrived in the United States at the age of five. In 1910 the Berlin family settled in New York on the Lower East Side without money or resources. With only a few years of schooling, eight-year-old Berlin began helping to support his family. He became a newspaper boy, hawking *The Evening Journal*. One day while delivering newspapers, he stopped to look at a ship departing for China and became so entranced that he did not see a swinging crane, which knocked him into the river. When he was fished out after going down for the third time, he was still holding in his clenched fist the five pennies he earned that day. Years later, his first lyric, written with a café pianist, earned him a royalty of thirty-seven cents.



“ I was unaware of being raised in abject poverty since I had known no other life. ”

—Famous Berlin quote as an adult

During his 101 years of life Irving Berlin became America's most prolific songwriter, credited with writing over 1,250 songs — with classics like “White Christmas” and “God Bless America” being, perhaps, his best known. But his long list of enduring hits which have remained among today's favorites include *Blue Skies*, *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, *Always*, *Cheek to Cheek*, *I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm*, *Puttin' On the Ritz*, *Easter Parade*, and many others, as found in numerous published volumes.



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Epilogue:

By Jim Walls

An epilogue often wraps up a story's action, as in the one for a famous Shakespeare play that ends "For never was a story of more woe, than this of Juliet and her Romeo." Motion pictures also often have a kind of epilogue--maybe a scene after the exciting climax when the surviving lovers meet in a café to talk about their future.



Irving Berlin and his wife Ellin Mackay

Berlin's Marriage Got Off To A Rocky Start

Irving Berlin's music is so much a part of American history that it's difficult to remember he was a real person. But Berlin's life as a Russian-born Jew in America was fraught with antisemitism, as were many other American lives. As a Jew, his interfaith marriage to debutante Ellin Mackay, a devout Roman Catholic, set tongues wagging in the 1920s. Mackay was a writer who had published several short stories in *The New Yorker*.

Ellin's multimillionaire father Clarence Mackay disapproved of Berlin because he was Jewish; and, reportedly, disowned his daughter when she married Berlin in a secret ceremony in 1926. However, for the married couple, their interfaith marriage was not an issue. They comprised and raised their four children in the Protestant faith. It is recorded, however, that Ellin Mackay Berlin attended New York's iconic St. Patrick's Cathedral.

For nearly three years Clarence Mackay refused to speak to the Berlins. They reconciled after the death of the Berlin's son, Irving Berlin Jr., who died on Christmas Day in 1928, less than one month after he was born. The Berlins were married for 63 years until her death in 1988.



Berlin wrote two special songs
to honor Ellin and her family:
Always and *Easter Parade*.

