

COPY

"WHITE CHRISTMAS"

Tony Stewart

Bradford introduced via
80 Years of VistaVista

10th April 2014

"WHITE CHRISTMAS"

10th APRIL 2014

① "HOLIDAY INN" clip

"White Christmas", words and music by Irving Berlin - you saw Marjorie Reynolds - many of you will remember her as William Bendix's long-suffering wife in the television series "The Life of Riley", or perhaps as Ray Milland's co-star in Fritz Lang's "Ministry of Fear" - Together ^{here} with Bing Crosby, in the dramatic climax of the 1942 Paramount wartime musical "Holiday Inn" and you also glimpsed Crosby's real co-star, Fred Astaire, at the end, there, with Walter Abel.

"Holiday Inn" was a smash-hit in its day; each song was tailored to a specific American holiday, and in 1942 each holiday was tinged with wartime relevance. Did the fake film setting of the Holiday Inn itself look familiar? Well, as surely as film feeds upon itself, that was the actual set of the Inn reworked as the Inn featuring in the film within a film.

And in the film that you're about to see - "White Christmas" itself, you'll recognise yet another reworking of the very same set, twelve

(1)

years later!

"Holiday Inn" success was immeasurable.

The Irving Berlin score ~~was~~ resounded with hits, none more successful than 'White Christmas', the record of which by Bing Crosby was to become the biggest selling, most successful popular single record of all time, especially after America's entry into World War II, when the song took on a new simultaneous, mistle and prophetic tinge, Bing Crosby's voice ~~appearing~~ seeming to capture a nostalgia for peacetime and the soldier's returning from the war fronts far, far away from the U.S.A. itself.

The "Holiday Inn" teaming of Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire also proved popular, and Paramount set about to re-team them, this time using a wispy plot centered around the Irving Berlin songbook, only this time they would film in Technicolor, almost mandatory for screen musicals by 1948, although no-studio could equal the taste and style of Paramount's rival, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, MGM itself.

Crosby and Astaire had done much charity

work during the war, work that was both risky and dangerous, and here in Europe both men played army bases, and performed under fire. Paramount, not missing a trick, incorporated similar moments into the scenario of their new Technicolor musical, which was to be called "Blue Skies", appropriate title since it appeared post-war, when the skies themselves had been cleared by the Allies; and since it utilized many existing compositions by Irving Berlin. And yes, room was found in the film's narrative for Bing Crosby to croon 'White Christmas: here's that oh-so-nostalgic clip from 'Blue Skies': —

② 'BLUE SKIES' clip

Needless to add, sales of "White Christmas" by Bing skyrocketed once again, and Bing and Fred Astaire proved, for the second time in Paramount's history, to be a viable and commercial screen partnership: it would make sense to team them for a third time, and so Paramount commissioned yet another picture to feature Irving Berlin's music, only this time it

was to be an original, and hopefully farical,
score, but was also to include that now hardly
perennial "White Christmas" itself.

When George Gershwin was allegedly
asked by a journalist "what was Irving Berlin's
contribution to America music?" Gershwin replied
"Irving Berlin is American music" — and at
the time Paramount were making the film of
"White Christmas", Irving Berlin had just
completed two of the most successful Broadway
musicals ever — "Annie Get Your Gun" and "Call
Me Madam" (filmed by MGM and 20th Century-
Fox respectively) and among his ^{own} successful films
include two huge hits each based around his own
songbook: "Alexander's Ragtime Band" and "Easter
Parade".

Paramount commissioned a new score from
Berlin for the film that was to be entitled
"White Christmas", after his biggest (and bigger
than anybody else's!) greatest hit. Since "Holiday
Inn" had been based on an original idea
by Berlin himself (and is duly credited), Paramount

had to pay him again for the remake rights.
Additionally, the way Berlin also listed on a
possession ~~credit~~ credit: in all advertising the film
would be referred to as Irving Berlin's "White
Christmas." Although Berlin didn't physically
write the screenplay - that was credited to
Norman Krasna,
Norman Panama, and Melvin Frank - it was
Berlin's idea to utilize a serious, and then
very contemporary, theme. What happens to
a high-ranking army officer when the war is
over? In these pre-'West Side Story' days, a
very serious theme ^{indeed} for a musical. The
plan was to re-team Crosby and Astaire, naturally,
and seek a well-known 'serious' actor for the
feasibly-retired General, and Dean Jagger, who
has just won the Academy Award for Best
Supporting Actor in "12 O'Clock High", was
suitably cast.

But by 1953, the movies themselves were
changing: television had grabbed the one-vest

Saturday night audience, and perhaps Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire might not be quite enough to pull in the crowds. Paramount could wonder one of Hollywood's best directors: - Michael Curtiz, he of 'Casablanca' and 'Yankee Doodle Dandy', had decamped from Warners to Paramount, and was available, and there was something else on the horizon: cinema screens were growing bigger to combat television, and Paramount realised that as well as Crosby, Astaire, and now Irving Berlin songs, something else, something 'special' yet perhaps intangible, was needed to guarantee both commercial and critical success.

And then Fred Astaire pulled out. Although he had agreed to appear in the film in late 1953, Fred became ill, and temporarily uninsurable, and was swiftly replaced by Donald O'Connor. But Paramount already had another big star under contract, a musical comedy star who they'd just loaned out to Samuel Goldwyn, and who had scored a smash success with 'Hans

Christina Anderson: Danny Kaye. But Kaye was not definitely a solo item - how would he react to co-starring with Bing Crosby? Was it Bob Hope Bing's stooge? And Kaye was no stooge. But when Kaye realized he would be directed by Curtiz ^{would be} singing Berlin, he was in, to Paramount's relief.

And there was that something else, that something very special, that we are all here, 70 years later, to celebrate. 20th Century-Fox had achieved a tremendous success with its new anamorphic screen process entitled CinemaScope, and the other studios were impressed. Paramount, however, decided it was time to develop their own process, after all in those early days of 'Scope there were, indeed, mitigating factors against its use: anamorphic lenses, high grain, poor focus, low depth of field... all, of course, corrected in time.

Paramount remembered a film process that dated way back to 1928, a process once-known as Panoramio Alberini, that utilised a regular 35 mm. frame but which exposed, and subsequently projected, a double

35mm frame in the camera horizontally, and projected it likewise - Vista, instant 70mm! Paramount researched into their own past, and after experimentation developed the so-called Paramount Lazy 8 Butterfly Camera, and renamed the process - VistaVision. With a variable ratio, prints would be provided for projection at 1.85:1 or even 'Scope ratio (as in today's 16:9 widescreen television releases or DVD or BluRay) but they would not require an anamorphic lens. 'Scope prints were, in fact, provided for early engagements, and the system was to be incorporated in the filming of "White Christmas". How important was it to the success of that film? Very.

③ 'White Christmas' Theatrical trailer.

"White Christmas" premiered, in VistaVision, at the Radio City Music Hall, New York, on April 27th, 1954, with a unique horizontal 35mm print and a special projector

resulting in a huge image with an aspect
ratio of 2:1. Yes, ~~approximately~~ ^{exactly} 80-count rem-
80 years ago. — Why did "White Christmas"
premiere at Springtime? — Only Paramount's
marketing department could have answered that
question, but it has remained a Christmas
perennial ever since. The casting of Danny
Kaye helped ensure its success, and also its
timelessness. Kaye's 'camp' chimes beautifully with
Crosby's understated performance, and he can
clearly handle Robert Alton's choreography — oh,
and among the chorus boys watch out for the
uncredited George Clooney, whose Oscar-winning
performance you are about to witness soon in "West
Side Story". Incidentally, among the chorus girls is
the talented Barrie Chase, who would partner
Fred Astaire in his Emmy-winning television specials,
'3 Guys with Fred Astaire'. Watch, too, for
W.C. Fields' stooge Grady Sutton in a party
scene, and the self-styled Mayor of Hollywood
the uncredited Johnny Grant as one Ed

Harrison, clearly a jab at me - then -
all-important Ed Sullivan. Oh, ^{and} the G.I. in the
photograph is ex-'Our Gang' member Carl
'Alfalfa' Switzer, and Gordo's leading man Gavin
Gordon plays the uncredited General Gordon in
the film's finale....

But you don't need me to point out
the other pleasures of this classic in the wonder:
VistaVision: here, in all its Technicolor glory, is
"White Christmas".

Tony Stone
April 1st 2014