

Christmas Songs

"A Carolina Christmas Carol"

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I might as well go ahead and tell you right up front: I believe in Santa Claus. Now, you can believe or not believe, but I'm here to tell you for a fact that there is a Santa Claus, and he does bring toys and stuff like that on Christmas Eve night.

I know, I know. It sounds like I've had too much eggnog, don't it? All I ask is that you wait till I get through telling my story before you make up your mind.

When I was a kid, Christmas time had a magic to it that no other season of the year had. There was just something in the air, something that you couldn't put your finger on, but it was there, and it affected everybody.

It seemed like everybody smiled and laughed more at that time of year, even the people who didn't hardly smile and laugh the rest of the year. "You reckon it's gonna snow? I sure do wish it'd snow this year. Do you reckon it's gonna?" Heck no, it won't gonna snow. As far as I know, it ain't never snowed in Wilmington, North Carolina, at Christmas time in the whole history of man. It seemed like everybody in the world had snow at Christmas except us.

In the funny papers, Nancy and Sluggo and Little Orphaned Annie had snow to frolic around in at Christmas time. The Christmas cards had snow. Bing Crosby even had snow to sing about.

But not one flake fell on Wilmington, North Carolina.
But that didn't
dampen our spirits one little bit.

Our family celebrated Christmas to the hilt. We were a big, close-knit family, and we'd gather up at Grandma's house every year. My grandparents lived on a farm in Bladen County, about fifty miles from Wilmington, and I just couldn't wait to get up there. They lived in a great big old farmhouse, and every Christmas they'd fill it up with their children and grandchildren. We'd always stay from the night of the twenty-third through the morning of the twenty-sixth. There'd be Uncle Clyde and Aunt Martha, Uncle Lacy and Aunt Selma, Uncle Leroy and Aunt Mollie, Uncle Stewart and Aunt Opal, and my mama and daddy, Ernest and Nadine. I won;t even go into how many children were there, but take my word for it, there were a bunch.

There'd be people sleeping all over that big old house. We kids would sleep on pallets on the floor, and we'd giggle and play till some of the grown-ups would come and make us be quiet. All the usual ground rules about eating were off for those days at Grandma's house. You could eat as much pie and cake and candy as you could hold, and your mama wouldn't say a word to you. My grandma would cook from sunup to sundown and love every minute of it. She'd have cakes, pies candy, fruit and nuts setting out all the time, and on top of that, she'd cook three big meals a day. I mean, we eat like pigs.

Christmas was also the only time that my Granddaddy would take a drink. It was a Southern custom of the time not to drink in front of small children, so Granddaddy kept his drinking whiskey hid in the

barn. When he'd want to go out there and get him a snort, he'd say that he had to go see if the mare had had her foal yet. It was a good, good time. A little old-fashioned by some peoples standards, but it suited us just fine.

If I'm not mistaken, it was the year I was five years old that my cousin Buford told me that there wasn't any Santa Claus. Buford was about nine at the time. He always was a mean-natured cuss. Still is. Well, I just refused to believe him. I said, "You're telling a great big fib, Buford Ray, 'cause Santa Claus comes to see me every Christmas, right here at Grandma and Granddaddy's house."

"That ain't Santa Claus. That's your mama and daddy." One thing led to another and I got so upset about the prospect of no Santa Claus that I went running into the house crying.

"Grandma, Grandma! Buford says there ain't no Santa Claus! There is a Santa Claus, ain't they, Grandma?"
"Of course there is, Curtis. Buford was just joking with you."

Aunt Selma heard me talking to Grandma and walked to the door. "Buford Ray, get yourself in this house right this minute!"

When he came in, Aunt Selma grabbed him by the ear, led him into the front room and swatted him.

Granddaddy was also a big defender of Santa Claus. He would talk about Santa Claus like he was a personal friend of his. And the more he went to check on the mare, the more he talked about Santa Claus, or "Sandy Claws," as he called him.

"Yes, children, old Sandy Claws will be hitching up

them reindeers
and heading on down this a-way before long,. Wonder
what he's gonna
bring this year?"

He'd have us so excited by the time we went to bed that
I reckon if
visions of sugarplums ever danced in anybody's
heads, it was ours.

Christmas Eve night, after we had eat about as much
supper as we
could hold, we'd go in the front room. There'd always
be a big log
fire crackling in the fireplace, and Granddaddy would
always say the
same thing.

"Children, do y'all know why we have Christmas every
year?"

"Cause that's when the Baby Jesus was born."

"That's right. We're celebrating the Lord's birthday. Do
y'all know
where He was born at?"

"In Bethlehem," we would all chime in.

"That's right, He was born in a stable in Bethlehem
almost two
thousand years ago."

Then Granddaddy would put on his spectacles and
read Saint Luke's
version of the Christmas story. Then, after we'd had
family prayer,
Granddaddy would always get a twinkle in his eye. "I
reckon I'd
better step out to the barn and see if that old mare
hashad her baby
yet."

There was always a chorus of, "Can I go with you,
Granddaddy?"

"Y'all had better stay in here by the fire. It's mighty cold
outside.I'll be right back."

When Granddaddy came back in the house, he'd
always say, "I was on my

way back from the barn while ago, and I heard something that sounded like bells a-tinkling, way back off yonder in the woods. I just can't figure why bells would be ringing back in the woods this time of night."

"It's Santa Claus! It's Santa Claus!"

"Well, now, I never thought of that. I wonder if it was old Sandy Claws. You children better get to bed. You know he won't come to see you as long as you're awake."

Then it was time to say good night. All the grandchildren would go around hugging all the grown-ups. "Good night Grandma, good night Granddaddy, good night Uncle Clyde, good night Aunt Mollie," and so forth.

We would always try to stay awake, lying on our pallets until Santa Claus got there, but we always lost the battle. It sounded like the Third World War at Grandma's house on Christmas morning. There was cap pistols going off and baby dolls crying, and all the children hollering at the top of their lungs.

By the time the next school year started, I was six years old and in the first grade. I kept thinking about what Buford had said. I didn't want to believe it, but it kept slipping into the back door of my mind.

At school, Buford was three grades ahead of me, but I'd still see him sometimes. Every time he'd see me that whole year, he'd make it a point to rub it in about Santa Claus.

He'd do something like get me around a bunch of his older buddies and say, "Hey , you fellers, Curtis still believes in Santa

Claus." And
they'd all laugh and point.

Away from any adult persuasion, I guess Buford finally
wore me out. I
returned to Grandma's house the next year not
believing that there
was a Santa Claus. Christmas lost a little of its
mystique. Oh, I
still enjoyed it. I even pretended that I believed in
"Sandy Claws"
for Granddaddy's benefit, but it wasn't the same.

Well, as you know, time marches on, children grow up
and leave home,
including me.
I was living in Denver, Colorado, married, with a child,
and I hadn't
been home for Christmas since our little daughter had
been born. Dawn
was three that year, and this would be the first time
that she really
knew about Santa Claus, and she was some kind of
excited.

We had the best time shopping for her, buying all the
little toys
that she wanted.

Daddy called me about three weeks before Christmas
and said, "Son,
you know that your grandparents are getting old.
They've requested
that all the children, grandchildren and great-
grandchildren come
home the way we used to. Can you make it, son?"

"We'll be there, Daddy."

I couldn't think of a better place in the whole world for
little Dawn
to spend her first real Christmas, so we packed up and
headed for
North Carolina.

Grandma was eighty-two years old, but she still cooked
all day long,
and she still enjoyed every minute of it.

Granddaddy was eighty-four, but he still had a twinkle
in his eye and

a mare in the barn.

The old house was fuller than ever, with a whole new generation of children in it. Even Buford. He had married, but he didn't have any children. He didn't want any. One of my cousins said he figured Buford was too stingy to have children.

Buford was still the same, except that he had changed from a boy with a mean nature to a full-grown man with a cynical nature and a know-it-all attitude.

Just before we went into the front room for family prayer and the reading of the Christmas story, I overheard him say to somebody, "I don't know why Granddaddy keeps filling the children's heads full of that Santa Claus nonsense. I think it's ridiculous. If I had children, I wouldn't let him tell them all that junk."

I looked hard at Buford. I had never liked him, and I liked him even less now.

Our little daughter was so excited when Granddaddy started talking about "Sandy Claws" that she jumped up and down and clapped her hands.

When I took her up to bed, there was pure excitement in those big brown eyes. "Santa Claus is coming, Daddy! Santa Claus is coming, Daddy!"

I got a warm feeling all over, and I sure was glad to be back at Grandma's house at Christmas time.

After all the children had gone to sleep, the grown-ups started going out to their cars to get the toys they had brought for Santa Claus to leave under the Christmas tree.

I decided to wait until everybody else had finished

before I put
Dawn's presents out. This was a special time for me
and I wanted to
enjoy it.

After everybody had gone up to bed, I went to the car
to get Dawn's
toys. To my shock, I couldn't find them. I ran back into
the house to
my wife. "Sylvia, where did you pack Dawn's Christmas
presents?"

"I thought you packed them."

I was close to panic, but I didn't want Sylvia to know it. I
said, "Oh well, you just go on to bed, honey, and I'll
look again. I
probably just overlooked them." I kissed my wife
goodnight and went
back downstairs.

I knew I hadn't overlooked them. We had somehow
forgot to pack them,
and they were two thousand miles away in Denver,
Colorado.

I was a miserable man. I just didn't feel like I could face
little
Dawn the next morning. She'd be so disappointed. All
the other
children would have the toys that Santa had brought
them, and my
beloved little daughter wouldn't have anything.

How could I have been so dumb? Here it was, twelve
o'clock Christmas
Eve night, all the stores closed, everybody in bed, and
me without a
single present for little Dawn. I was heartbroken.

I went into the front room and sat by the dying fire,
dejected and
hopeless.

I don't know how long I sat there staring at the embers,
but sometime
later on I heard a rustle behind me and somebody
said, "You got a
match, son?"

I turned around and almost fell on the floor.

Standing not ten feet from me was a short , fat little man in a red suit, with a long white beard and a pipe sticking out of his mouth.

I couldn't move, I couldn't speak. He looked at me and chuckled.

"Have you got a match, son? I ran out and I want to get this pipe going."

When I finally got my voice back, all I could say was, "Who are you?"

"Well, people call me by different names in different parts of the world, but around here they call me Santa Claus."

"No, I mean who are you really?"

I just told you, son. How about that match?"

I stumbled to the mantelpiece, got a kitchen match and gave it to him.

"Much obliged." He stood there lighting his pipe, with me looking at him like he was a ghost or something.

"How did you get in here?"

"Oh, I've got my ways."

"I thought you were supposed to slide down the chimney."

"That's a common misconception. Would you slide down a chimney with a fire at the bottom?"

"Well, no. I mean, no, sir."

"Well, neither would I."

"How did you get here?"

"I've got a sturdy sleigh and the finest team of reindeer a man could have."

"But we ain't got snow."

Santa Claus laughed so hard that his considerable belly shook. "I don't need snow. Half the places I go in the world don't have snow. Besides, I like to get out of the snow once in a while. We have it year-round at the North Pole, you know."

"You mean you really live at the North Pole?"

"Of course, I've always lived at the North Pole. Don't you know anything about Santa Claus, son?"

"Well, yeah, but I thought it was all a big put-on for the children."

"That's the trouble with you grown-ups. You think that everything you can't see is a put-on. It's a shame grown people can't be more like children. They don't have any trouble believing in me."

"You mean you've really got a sleigh, with reindeer named Donner and Blitzen and stuff like that?"

"That's right, son. There's Comet and Cupid and Donner and Blitzen and Dasher and Dancer and Prancer and Vixen. Of course, there's no Rudolph with the red nose. I don't know who came up with that one. Rudolph really is a put-on."

"But what are you doing here? Why did you come?"

"Because there's a little girl in this house who believes in me very much. Now, she'd be mighty disappointed to wake up Christmas morning and have nothing under the tree."

"You mean you came all the way here just because one little girl believes in you?"

"That's right, son. There's magic in believing. Besides,

she's not
the only one in this house who believes in me."

"Who else?"

"Why, your grandfather, of course."

"You mean Granddaddy wasn't putting us on all those
years? He really
believed in you?"

"Of course he believed in me."

"Well, why do you do this?"

"It's my way of celebrating the most important birthday
in the
history of man. Our Lord has given us so much. How
can we do less?"

Santa Claus consulted a piece of paper he pulled out of
his pocket
and started taking a doll and other toys out of a big
bag he had
brought with him.

"Well, I've got to go, son. I've got a lot of stops to make
before
sunup. It's been really nice talking to you. Thanks for
the match."

"Can I help you with your bag, Santa Claus?"

"No, that's all right, son. I'm used to carrying it."

I walked outside with him. "Where's your sleigh, Santa
Claus?"

"It's parked right over there in the edge of the woods.
You can come
over and see it if you like."

I started walking over to his sleigh with him, but then I
had a
thought.

"I'm gonna have to miss seeing your sleigh and
reindeer. Thank you so
very much. You saved my life. God bless you, Santa
Claus. I'll see
you next year."

"God bless you, too, son and a Merry Christmas to you and yours."

Santa Claus started across the yard toward his sleigh, and I went running back in the house like a wild man. I raced up the stairs.

"Buford, Buford, get up!"

"What's the matter, is the house on fire?"

"No, but hurry. Come out on the upstairs porch."

Buford grumbled as he got up and followed me out on the upstairs porch.

"What the heck do you want? It's cold out here."

"Just hush up and listen."

Well, we listened by a full minute and nothing happened.

"You're crazy. I'm going back to bed."

"Buford, if you go back in the house, you're gonna miss something that I want you, above all people, to see."

We waited for a little while longer and I had almost given up when I heard it. It was just a little tinkle at first, hanging on the frosty air and getting louder by the second. It was sleigh bells!

Buford looked at me and said, "Curtis, is this some kind of joke or something?"

"No, Buford, I swear it ain't. Just wait a minute now!"

The sound of sleigh bells was getting louder and Buford's face was getting whiter. "You got somebody out there doing that, ain't you? Admit it! You got somebody out there, ain't you?"

I didn't say a word. All of a sudden it sounded like somebody had flushed a covey of quail. That sleigh came up out of the woods and headed west, hovering just above the treetops.

Buford was speechless. I thought he was gonna pass out. He held on to the banister and took deep breaths. Even if you believe so far, I know you ain't gonna believe this next part, but it really happened. Santa Claus made a big circle and turned and flew right around the house. I bet he won't over twenty feet from the upstairs porch when he passes by me and Buford.

Old Santa Claus could really handle them reindeer. Then he headed west again, moving at a pretty good clip this time.

I hate to even tell you this next part, 'cause you'll think I took it right out of the book, but I didn't. Anyway, just about the time he was getting out of our hearing, he hollered, "Merry Christmas, everybody!"

And then he was gone.

"Curtis, do you know where Granddaddy keeps that bottle hid in the barn? I need me a drink."

I don't believe that Buford ever told anybody about seeing Santa Claus.

I know I didn't, not until now. But I just had to tell somebody about it. It's been hard keeping it to myself all these years.

I'm a granddaddy myself now. That little girl that caused all this to happen with her faith in Santa Claus is grown and married and has a three-year-old girl and a five-year-old boy.

Me and Sylvia moved back to North Carolina many

years ago and bought
a big old farmhouse. Now my grandchildren come and
spend Christmas
with me and their grandmother. There's not as many of
us as there was
at Grandma's house, but we have just as big a time
and celebrate
Christmas just as hard.

In fact, Christmas is about the only time a year I'll take
a drink. I
always get me a pint of Old Granddad at Christmas
time. Since the
grandchildren are so small, I don't like to drink in front
of them,
so I keep my drinking whiskey hid out in the barn.

When I want to go out there and get me a snort, I
always tell the
grandchildren that I've got to see if the cows got corn.
Of course,
all the grown-ups know why I'm going out to the barn,
or at least
they think they do.

I always make my last trip to the barn after I've read the
Christmas
story and had family prayer. Everybody thinks I'm
going out to get me
a snort, but they're wrong.

I'm just going out to hear the sleigh bells ring.

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