

# Noteworthy at Christmas



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For your listening pleasure

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The sounds of Christmas are everywhere: in the mall, in the supermarket, in the pizza shop, on radio and on television. Could you imagine Christmas without music? Of course not, and how could it be otherwise, when there probably was plenty of singing by the “multitude of the heavenly host” at the first Christmas.

Come Christmas Eve, my family will gather around the antique Steinway in our living room and sing Christmas carols and songs. It’s an annual tradition, helped along by having three generations of well-accomplished pianists present.

What is it about Christmas music that’s both so joyous and evokes such memories and yet, by Dec. 26, you’re just as happy to bid it farewell for another 11 months? I thought much about this question in preparing this article and, frankly, I don’t have a real sensible answer, except that by the time that month or five weeks passes, maybe were just all Christmas-ated out. Still, we do seem to enjoy the sounds of the season while they’re here.

Music has been around since long before Christmas, but it seems there’s more music associated with this celebration than any other. I consider “Messiah,” by George Friderich Handel, one of the best pieces of music ever written of any kind. But while “Messiah” is commonly associated with Christmas, it was written for Lent/Eastern celebrations and later hijacked for Christmas fare in late 18th century England. Handel was dead by then, so I suppose he didn’t mind. Then again, who remembers Easter music, anyway?

My first Christmas song memory is “Silent Night,” the venerable Austrian song, but it wasn’t played or sung by anyone memorable. It was inside a music box that was part of a manger scene my grandparents would put on top of their upright piano — one that nobody ever played because I don’t think anyone knew how — high enough to keep it out of little hands. There were lights you plugged in, including a star atop the stable, and there was a windup key that not only activated the music box but also started part of the thing rotating, so the three wise men kept coming through the door to the stable to Mary’s right. Oh, it was a grand sight, indeed.

In those days, people did a lot of caroling in the neighborhoods, singing the traditional songs from Germany and England. But the big favorite, to the point of monotony, was “Jingle Bells,” which, surprise of surprises, was not originally a Christmas song, but written for a Thanksgiving church service.

Growing up in the 1950s, the usual Christmas music fare at first was provided by Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Nat Cole, Perry Como and Gene Autry. And most of this stuff is around today, still churning out royalties for a lot of dead people’s estates. Crosby’s rendition of “White Christmas” is generally considered the largest selling record in history, with some 50 million copies in the United States alone, but it’s remarkable they can keep track of such things when the first recording of the Irving Berlin song by Crosby dates back to 1942. I’ve read a few places that Cole’s version of “The Christmas Song,” written by Mel Torme, is actually the most played Christmas song on the radio, but how would anyone really know? Then again, is there a more memorable lyric to begin any song than Bob Wells’ “Chestnuts roasting on an open fire.” I don’t think so.

It’s interesting to me that three songs from this era

Please see **TUNES, AA5**

## A holiday present to ourselves: energy independence

Etc.



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One of the things we could give ourselves this Christmas when the subject of energy independence is high on the political agenda is one of the most common elements on the surface of our planet.

It’s silicon, an element every bit as common as mud. Those quartz rocks you see all over the place — the crystals that look like they could be valuable but aren’t because they’re so plentiful — they’re silicon. So is most waterproofing spray for shoes and camping gear.

And it figures prominently in science fiction. That’s because on the periodic table of elements, it falls in the same period (or vertical row) as carbon. That means it has many of the same reactive properties as carbon. This means, at least in sci-fi theory, it could be the basis of life forms on another planet.

But a very real aspect of silicon is that, in certain crystal forms, it has the property of being able to convert light energy into electric energy. There’s nothing new about this. It’s the magic behind those no-battery calculators.

So what? How can this be a Christmas present that leads to energy independence?

Here’s what: Though photoelectric technology has been around for decades, it has advanced over the years, and there’s promise it can be advanced further. And so long as the sun shines, that translates into a potentially unlimited source of electricity. This has been a reality known by the scientific world since the time of Edison; indeed, he is quoted as having made reference to the fantastic potential of the sun as a source of controllable energy.

Sure, T. Boone Pickens is on to something when it comes to harnessing wind as a source of electricity. But the wind isn’t the only thing that’s free.

This isn’t to say that light and wind energy are free, though. Just like coal and oil are in the ground, presumably free for the taking, getting it out has a cost. So, too, do windmill-generators and photoelectric arrays have their costs.

Unlike coal and oil, though, the supply and location of sunlight and wind are unlimited (though some places are sunnier and windier than others).

But wait, there’s more. When a photoelectric cell produces electricity, it produces direct current, or DC power, just like what comes out of batteries.

That’s one reason it’s so easy to power pocket calculators with photo cells.

This means photo cell electricity can also be used to separate ordinary water into its component elements, hydrogen and oxygen. Hydrogen can be used to power many existing internal combustion engines (though there are serious problems with storage that have to be tackled). Still, there is potential for a homegrown source of energy, and one that produces water vapor when it is burned, making it that much better. Heck, you can order toys out of those offbeat catalogs that show up this time of year that take advantage of this concept.

Sure, there are other ways we could pursue energy independence, but those that involve drilling or digging are doomed in the long run because there’s only so much oil and coal out there.

Silicon, similarly, is ultimately in limited supply, though it is one of the most common elements on the earth’s surface. But the big difference is when you use it to make electricity, you can keep on using the same piece. And anything you keep on using makes a pretty good Christmas present.