

Christmas Eve 2024      Peace on Earth

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It has been called the most unlikely, unusual, bizarre, and weird music collaboration of all time. The now 47-year-old Christmas duet was so strange, some say almost didn't happen. But, fortunately for us it did, and we have what has become a cherished Christmas classic.

In 1977, the then 30-year-old taboo shattering glam rock star David Bowie made an unexpected appearance on then 73-year-old supporter of military veterans, movie star, and classic crooner Bing Crosby's Christmas television special called *Merrie Olde Christmas*. Maybe some of you remember watching it. While both singers are considered legends who had powerful influence in the music industry, they were from two totally different walks of life. Their differences, especially in their appearances, were so startling, Bing Crosby's children doubted the two singers could work together. However, they witnessed when the two legends sat down at a piano together, their mutual respect for one another showed and they were able work well together quite well.

The show's writers, Larry Crossman and Buz Kohan remember Crosby was excited to work with Bowie, hopeful working with modern musicians would expand his appeal; and was up to the challenge of making room for Bowie's unique personality while remaining his usual, laid-back self. Bowie was said to be doing the show because he was interested in expanding his appeal to American audiences, but later said the real reason was because his mother loved Bing Crosby.

They were scheduled to sing a duet of the classic Christmas Carol, *the Little Drummer Boy*. But when he showed up at the Elstree Studio in London to record their duet, Bowie refused to sing it, saying he hated the song and asked if there was something else he could sing instead. The writers agreed Bowie's voice was not the right register for the song, but the accompanying music had already been recorded, so they were stuck with it. What I most appreciate about this story is that instead of panicking or blaming, the song writers got to work problem solving. They found a piano in the studio and in less than hour wrote what they call a counter melody called *Peace on Earth*; a new song Bowie could sing that would fill in the spaces in *Little Drummer Boy*. Bowie and Crosby both liked the idea and after a brief rehearsal, recorded the duet in one take.

Sadly, Bing Crosby died a month after recording his Christmas special, so he never got to witness how his duet with David Bowie, something people didn't think would work, became a Christmas classic. After the 1977 special aired, the song was forgotten until the early 1980s after the launch of the new music video channel on cable television called MTV. Because MTV did not have many Christmas videos, they frequently played the clip of Crosby and Bowie's duet, which led to it being released as a record, just as Bing Crosby had hoped. Sales and radio play went through the roof. And to this day their duet of *Little Drummer Boy/Peace on Earth* is played on any of the holiday music channels on Sirius XM radio. You can also watch the video on any social media platform. If you have never heard the song, it is worth the little over two minutes to listen to it; all you have to do is Google Bing Crosby and David Bowie, and it will come up.

Not only is it a classic, the duet influenced other musicians from different genres to collaborate. There is something about two very different, you could almost say disparate, musicians singing together so beautifully that makes an impression that is both meaningful and difficult to express. For example, reflecting on Bowie and Crosby's classic duet, one musician said he realized that there is something enthralling in the song, something he took for granted because he heard it so frequently. The two legends didn't just sing together. Bowie was opening up the traditional carol of *The Little Drummer Boy* while Crosby held it steady. Then they came together for a stately harmonious section, after which they both left the carol behind to sing a new song – *Peace on Earth* - together.

While some have tried to figure out what magic happened when Bing Crosby and David Bowie sang their duet, I believe I know what happened. It is the same thing we celebrate this evening. Christmas.

While we all might like to celebrate Christmas by singing or listening to traditional hymns and carols, the Scriptures we just read tell us the Mystery of the Incarnation is an occasion for singing *new* songs, like in the Psalm, because God is up to something new, like the angels' song states.

The new song celebrates what God is doing through Jesus' birth: lifting up humanity to the divine, becoming one so that redemption can be lived out in our lives here on this earth. This is the peace the angels and David Bowie sang about. In the Peace of God, there aren't disparate differences between the holy and profane. Through the Incarnation, both are one, and there is no place God isn't, and no person God doesn't come close to. No matter how hard we might try to keep God out of certain places or keep the world out of other places, God has other intentions, intentions God fulfilled that night we read about in Luke's Gospel, when Jesus was born.

Through the Nativity, a church word for Jesus' birth, all life is restored to God, that includes you and me, and even two different musicians from different places, backgrounds, and styles who might have come together for a collaboration they hoped would make them both more popular but accomplished something deeper with the old and the new. We can too often make the mistake of assuming the new diminishes or devalues the old, making the old somehow wrong or bad or irrelevant. But that is not what God is up to. Christmas happens when what *was* makes room for Jesus and they join together to form the new. Like in the duet, the holy opens up what the worldly has been holding steady, joining together in harmony, until together they begin singing a new song of peace on earth and goodwill to all.

This nativity happens whenever there is forgiveness. Whenever there is mercy. Wherever there is kindness. Whenever we make room for each other and God. It might be in small things, in people who are not as well-known as two superstars, it happens any time two different people from different backgrounds respect one other. These might seem like small things, but remember it was in a small village that Jesus was born, in a small dwelling, because God loves the small. One of the truths Jesus birth reveals is nothing and no one is insignificant to God.

I do not know what kind of Christmas you will be going to from here: if it is large, noisy, full of family, friends, food and gifts; or if it is small, simple, and quiet; if it will carry the joy and beauty of our celebration or will be touched by the sorrow of loss. There are different kinds of Christmases, just as there are many different kinds of people and families, some so different it seems unlikely they would ever be together or work together, and yet they do.

I hope whatever kind of Christmas waits for you, you will remember the magic of Christmas isn't in the jolly parts, or the sad parts. Christmas is when what seems like two disparate parts make room for each other to form something new, which is God's peace on this earth, in your life, and the stuff of goodwill to share with each other.

Merry Christmas