

# When the Sisters of Charity Lit Up Christmas Trees on Mars

By Tonya Crawford, SCL Archivist

In October 1959, the Community contemplated a \$3 million expansion for the crowded Saint Mary College. As a serious financial undertaking, there were questions about how to raise enough money. Treasurer Sister Mary Florentia Schouten had a brainstorm—Christmas was coming and Christmas music was always popular. Why couldn't the Sisters try their hand at creating their own Christmas song?

Sister Mary Madeleva Ditmar and Sister Rose Anne Colvin took on the task of putting their composing talents to use. Sister Madeleva wrote the music while Sister Rose Anne came up with the lyrics. The song that emerged in November was *When Christmas Bells Are Ringing*—a call to peace and love, which incorporated a bit of *Silent Night* in the middle.

Through Saint John's Hospital in Santa Monica, California, the Community had made many contacts in the recording industry and they reached out for a crooner to record the song for them. Bing Crosby (who had recorded material to raise funds for Saint John's in the past), Perry Como, and Pat Boone were just a few of those they approached. To their dismay, all told them it was too late to record anything for sale that year.

Temporarily set back, the Sisters put the song on the shelf until August of 1960. Revisiting the idea, the Council decided they would arrange a record themselves! Unfortunately, to produce their own record, they would need another song to fill the 'B' side. Sisters Madeleva and Rose Anne returned to their composing—deciding to go with something lively, a bit humorous, and touching on what was popular at the time. And what was popular at the start of a new decade? Outer space of course! Therefore, *Space Age Santa Claus* was born.

The Sisters found a recording studio and music publisher, Delhi Records in Washington State, and Sisters Madeleva and Rose Anne traveled by train from Leavenworth to Yakima to oversee the recording and publishing. Sometime during the process, the order of the songs flipped and *Space Age Santa Claus* became the 'A' side song while *When Christmas Bells Are Ringing* became the 'B' side.

Studio singer Patty Marie Jay provided the vocals and session band The Hal Bradley Orchestra played the music. Of



Sister Mary Madeleva (without suitcase) and Sister Rose Anne Colvin (with suitcase) prepare to board the train to Yakima, Wash., to record the songs, November 1960.

course, there were also legal matters to attend to—contracts and copyright. Sisters Madeleva and Rose Anne, not seeking acclaim for the work, came up with a legal pseudonym—Ross Christman. A tribute to foundress Mother Xavier Ross and Christ, the center of their faith.

With the recordings completed and the sheet music printed, the Community began promoting their new record. Both *When Christmas Bells Are Ringing* and *Space Age Santa Claus* received airtime from radio stations across the country and the Community fulfilled orders for copies of the 45-vinyl record and sheet music.

Contacted by a representative of the Willis Music Company, who received a copy of the record from a friend, the Community sold the publication and copyrights in the spring of 1961. This opened up the record to the international market and assured the Community of a percentage of the profits.

It was Christmas of 1961, however, when the song truly took off. In May of that year, Alan Shepard became the first American in space. *Space Age Santa Claus* took on new meaning in this era of space exploration. Hudson's Department Store in Detroit, Mich., even chose to feature the song in their Christmas parade and once again, it graced the airwaves all over the country.

As with many things, however, *Space Age Santa Claus* did not have the lasting influence of songs like Nat King Cole's *The Christmas Song*, or *The Little Drummer Boy*, or Elvis Presley's *Blue Christmas*. The song, though, is not without its fans to this day. Some stumble across it by accident and are charmed by the optimism and joy of the era it embodies. Some seek it out, simply liking the aesthetic of the early 1960's 'space age'—when so much seemed possible. Very few of them know the story, nor the two Sisters behind it—who started out to raise funds for better facilities to educate women, preparing them for that new, 'space age' world ahead.

**Listen to Space Age Santa online at:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UTJ2AzcaZA>.

### ***About the author:***

*An archivist since 1998, Tonya Crawford has served as the head archivist for the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth since 2017.*



**Either Sister Madeleva or Rose Anne stand in the middle of the Dehli Recording Studio in Yakima, Wash., as The Hal Bradley Orchestra and Patty Marie Jay rehearse.**



**Sister Rose Anne Colvin (right) holds the printed sheet music for "Space Age Santa Claus" while Sister Mary Madeleva holds "When Christmas Bells are Ringing."**