

Philadelphia's Museum of American Jewish History hails Hanukkah...and Christmas: Not far by car

By Ann Witmer

December 17, 2014

There's a peaceful, cozy space overlooking Philadelphia's Independence Mall. It's a perfect spot to take time out from the bustle of the season to reflect on two beautiful holidays that share December.



"Twas the Night Before Hanukkah" blends American and Jewish holiday music from the 20th and 21st centuries. NMAJH

One began Tuesday night, December 16, at sundown when Jewish families lit the first of eight candles on the menorah to begin Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights.

The other one has been building for weeks toward Christmas Day on December 25.

"Twas the Night Before Hanukkah," an exhibit at the National Museum of American Jewish History, tells the story of

the blending of American and Jewish holiday music traditions in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Both holidays have religious significance. Hanukkah commemorates Jews' recovery of the Second Temple in Jerusalem from oppressive Greeks in the 2nd century BC and the miracle of a small vial of olive oil that kept the temple's menorah alight for eight days. Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

But both holidays have also become occasions for secular joy, laughter, and mirth. And both are enriched by the music we hum to ourselves as we decorate our homes or sing aloud as we celebrate with friends and families.

At home on the mall

The long narrow space where "'Twas" lives doesn't feel museumy. It's more like your family room, except it overlooks the cradle of religious freedom.



"'Twas the Night Before Hanukkah" mixes music and toys, menorahs and iPads. *NMAJH*

"It's a nontraditional format," said co-curator Ivy Weingram. "We tried to create a fun and comfortable place where people could sit back, listen and appreciate holiday related objects.

The exhibit was done in collaboration with the Idelsohn Society for Musical Preservation. It's a mix of games and toys, books and menorahs, and a slew of iPads.

Sinking down in a chair, you help yourself to an iPad (they are all identical). It contains 18 Christmas and 18 Hanukkah songs with background on each. There are non-Jews singing Hanukkah songs and cantors singing about Christmas.

There are also images of the museum's holiday artifacts and some video clips of classic holiday performances like Adam Sandler's "Hanukkah Song."

First performed on "Saturday Night Live" in 1994, and later updated, Sandler took on "the dilemma," Jewish children feeling alienated during the Christmas season.

"You don't need "Deck the Halls" or "Jingle Bell Rock," it went, "'cause you can spin a dreidel with Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock (both Jewish)."

Dreidel, Dreidel, Dreidel



"'Twas the Night Before Hanukkah" is a respite from holiday bustle with wonderful music and artifacts. *NMAJH*

a Yiddish poet? Guthrie identified the problems of the Jews with those of his fellow Oklahomans and other oppressed people.

The exuberance of other Hanukkah songs, like Cantor Sol Zim's performance of "Mo'Oz Tsur" and Eastern European klezmer dance music will keep you in the spirit of whatever holiday you choose to celebrate.

Most of us have heard the dreidel song about the little four-sided top. But perhaps we've never heard it sung in the simple, direct style of African-American performer Ella Jenkins, the "first lady of children's folk song."

Maybe we didn't know that the little top is the centerpiece of a traditional Hanukkah game where you win (or lose) chocolate gelt (coins) depending on which Hebrew letter is "up" when the top stops spinning.

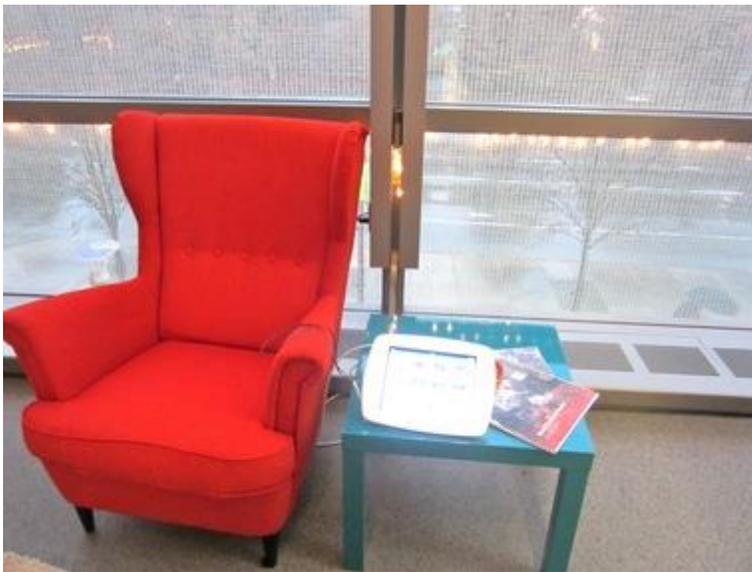
You may have followed Woody Guthrie's long career. But did you know that he took to writing Jewish inflected songs like "Clap your hands, Happy Hanukky" after being introduced to the Jewish community by his mother-in-law,

Jewish take on Christmas

Equally fascinating is that Jewish songwriters and performers have written some of the most beloved Christmas songs as they embraced their new American identity and as Christmas has become a national, rather than a strictly religious, holiday.

Irving Berlin wrote "White Christmas." And Mel Torme penned "chestnuts roasting on an open fire" in 40 minutes on a sweltering day in 1944. He said he was "trying to stay cool by thinking cool."

Jewish songwriter Johnny Marks kept Christmas hits coming one right after another: "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree," "A Holly Jolly Christmas," "Run Rudolph Run"



If you need a "time out" from the bustle of the holidays, "'Twas the Night Before Hanukkah," overlooking Philadelphia's Independence Mall, provides a respite. *Anne Witmer*

and the 1949 blockbuster, "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer."

Most of these songs are warm, nostalgic and secular, celebrating the beauty of the season with its snow, reindeer, chestnuts and Santa. It's estimated that half of the 25 most popular holiday songs were written by composers of Jewish origin.

Many of the museum's holiday artifacts are pictured and

explained on the iPads. But you can also take a self-guided tour through the museum to see others, like Irving Berlin's piano, a menorah lit by President Obama at last year's White House Hanukkah party, and a blue and white stocking. (Is that for Christmas or for Hanukkah? You decide.)

"We hope people will come and relax as they would in their own home, pick up an iPad and listen and watch. And enjoy other faiths' observations of the holidays," Weingram said.

If you go:

"Twas the Night Before Hanukkah"

(through March 1, 2015)

National Museum of American Jewish History

5th and Market Streets

Philadelphia

215-923-3811

www.nmajh.org

Hours: Tue-Fri 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Sat-Sun 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m.

Admission: Adults \$12, Youth 13-21 \$11, children 12 and under (and military) free.

Special Family Program: On December 25, the museum will be open for a day of family fun called "Being [_____] at Christmas." Families are encouraged to come and fill in the blank with whatever word fits, be it snowy, Jewish, happy, caring, Buddhist, generous, friendly, or sparkly.

Plans include dancing, clay play, comedy, stories, crafts and face painting.