

# A Packet of Poignant Letters in Song



Glenn Miller - Wikimedia Commons

by Kathy Warnes

During World War II, letters helped boost and maintain the morale of soldiers on the front lines and their families at home. English song writer Arthur Askey wrote a touching song about a little boy who wrote a letter for Santa Claus asking for his father's return for a Christmas gift. Glenn Miller orchestrated a song written by two GI's who had witnessed the disappointment of many soldiers who didn't receive letters from home and famous blues Singer Billie Holiday sang Johnny Mercer's letter song *P.S. I Love You* with the fervor of a wife sitting in a rose garden under peaceful blue skies writing to a soldier in a dog fight over England or on the front lines in Germany.

## **I'm Sending A Letter to Santa Claus**

British performer in radio, television, and pantomime [Arthur Askey](#) also did well writing songs for children's records. He wrote [I'm Sending A Letter to Santa Claus](#) and in 1939 English singer, songwriter and actress [Vera Lynn](#) recorded the song.

I'm Sending a Letter to Santa Claus,

I met a little fellow with a letter in his hand,  
He asked me if I'd post it in the box for Fairyland,  
I slipped it in the mailbox for that little curly head,  
It seemed to make him very happy as he smiled, and said,  
I'm sending a letter to Santa Claus,

My letter I hope he'll receive,  
Oh, I wonder if he will please remember me,  
When he calls on Christmas Eve .  
He'll get a lot of letters for playthings,  
From other girls and boys,  
But I want my soldier daddy,  
He's better than all the toys,  
And so I'm sending my letter to Santa Claus,  
To bring daddy safely home to me.

Vera Lynn interpreted the *I'm Sending a Letter to Santa Claus* with feeling as she performed it with a strong, vibrant soprano. The song remained popular all during World War II and tragically the words have remained relevant through several wars after "the Good War." Several artists including Gracie Fields and Phyllis Robbins have featured the song on Christmas albums.

### **Soldier Let Me Read Your Letter- Glenn Miller**

Letters from home were the highlight of a many a lonesome GI's life, but they didn't always receive letters from home. Two GI's, Tim Pasma, a guitar playing minister's son from Rockville, Indiana, and his friend Pat Fallon from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania knew this fact from personal experience. In their army camp, they had watched hundreds of hopeful soldiers waiting for letters and turn away disappointed.

As Charles Kiley, a correspondent from the Stars and Stripes, wrote in a story published on December 3, 1942, "there were letters for some, but the rest...well, perhaps tomorrow."

Tim and Pat used the delighted or disappointed soldiers at mail call as inspiration to write a song that they called, Soldier *Let Me Read Your Letter*.

The words to [\*Soldier Let Me Read Your Letter\*](#) are:

Soldier, let me read your letter,  
Let me pretend it's mine,  
I haven't got a sweetheart,  
I left no one behind,  
Let me dream of the girl that I know isn't there,  
As I read between the lines,  
Soldier let me read your letter,  
Let me pretend it's mine."

Although they weren't professional musicians and Pat didn't even play an instrument, they wrote the words and music for what would become one of the most popular songs to come from an army camp in World War II. Now they needed a few luck breaks to publicize their song.

In the *Stars and Stripes* story, Pat explained how they got their few luck breaks.

"After we worked out the words and music we went up to Washington, D.C. from Fort Mead,

Maryland. Glenn Miller's band was playing there in the Capitol Theater. I know Bill May, Miller's Trumpeter. We played the song for him and he, in turn, brought it to Glenn's attention. That was our big break."

[Glenn Miller](#) immediately recognized *Soldier Let Me Read Your Letter*'s potential and he featured the song on his Saturday night radio broadcasts to Army camps and on his coast to coast Moonlight Serenade radio series for Chesterfield cigarettes which CBS aired three times a week. Sympathetic girls felt so sorry for the soldier in the song and by extension the songwriters Tim and Pat, that they sent thousands of letters to Tim and Pat. Eventually, Glenn Miller's Orchestra record *Soldier Let Me Read Your Letter*, and juke boxes across the country played it. Mutual Music, Inc., picked up the song and transcribed it on sheet music and [Sydney Lippman](#) helped score the song.

On April 2, 1942, Glenn Miller and his orchestra recorded [Soldier Let Me Read Your Letter](#) with [Ray Eberle and the Modernaires](#). It came out on jukeboxes everywhere and Mutual Music, Inc., picked it up and put it on sheet music. Pat and Tim signed a contract awarding them 25 % each from sales of records and sheet music and basked in the glow of writing one of the most popular songs of World War II.

### **P.S. I Love You- Johnny Mercer and Billie Holiday**

Homesick soldiers often imagined their loved ones sitting in familiar surroundings that they achingly missed while writing letters to them in the war theaters around the world. Sometimes a GI or an airman would keep a tenuous grip on sanity by imaging a wife or mother writing letters to them surrounded by flowers in a peaceful garden. Soldiers and nurses eagerly devoured news and tender sentiments from home.

In 1934, [Johnny Mercer](#) and [Gordon Jenkins](#) wrote the lyrics and music for the song [P.S. I Love You](#) which captured these sentiments or the feelings of anyone missing a loved one.

#### **P.S. I Love You**

Dear, I thought I drop a line  
The weather is cool  
The folks are fine  
I'm in bed each night at nine  
PS I love you.  
Yesterday we had some rain  
But all in all I can't complain  
Was it dusty on the train?  
PS I love you.  
Write to the Brown's just as soon as you're able,  
They came around to call,  
And not burn a hole in the dining room table,  
Now let me think; I guess that's all,  
Nothing else for me to say,

And so I'll close, but by the way,  
Everybody's thinking of you,  
P.S. I love you.

Many artists including the Hilltoppers have recorded versions of [\*P.S. I Love You\*](#), but in 1954, singer Billie Holiday recorded the song and in her album *Stormy Blues* Verve she captures the spirit of *P.S. I Love You* and gives it sultry undertones.

Billie Holiday had a tumultuous life and a tumultuous career and fought addictions to drugs and alcohol. Rumors of deterioration in her voice accompanied her to two concerts at [Carnegie Hall](#) on November 10, 1956. She sang some of her standard hits including *Body and Soul* and *Lady Sings the Blues* to packed audiences, a major accomplishment for a black artist in that era in America.

Gilbert Millstein of the New York Times served as the narrator in Billy Holliday's Carnegie Hall concerts and he noted that her rehearsal had been desultory and her voice sounded tinny and trailed off. [He wrote](#), "... But I will not forget the metamorphosis that night. The lights went down, the musicians began to play and the narration began. Miss Holiday stepped from between the curtains, into the white spotlight awaiting her, wearing a white evening gown and white gardenias in her black hair. She was erect and beautiful; poised and smiling. And when the first section of narration was ended, she sang – with strength undiminished – with all of the art that was hers. I was very much moved. In the darkness, my face burned and my eyes. I recall only one thing. I smiled."

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