

This Day in History... December 9, 1965

Debut of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*

On December 9, 1965, *A Charlie Brown Christmas* first aired on television.

Peanuts creator Charles Schulz had his first cartoon series published at the age of 25. Entitled *Li'l Folks*, it featured a character named Charlie Brown. When the syndicate opted not to renew the strip, Schulz developed a new one, named *Peanuts*, which debuted on October 2, 1950, in seven newspapers.

Schulz's comic strip *Peanuts* had become a worldwide phenomenon by the mid-60s. After the *Peanuts* gang was pictured on the cover of *Time Magazine*, Coca-Cola commissioned a Christmas special starring the characters.

A Charlie Brown Christmas was written and animated in just six months. The script was simple, sparse, and heavily influenced by Schulz's background. Deeply religious, he wanted to focus on what he believed the "true meaning of Christmas" to be. Schulz then added secular themes taken from his Minnesota childhood, including a school play, falling snow, and ice-skating.

Professional child actors were only used for the voices of Charlie Brown and Linus. Schulz convinced the producers to use regular children for the remaining characters. Studio employees took tape recorders home and had their children audition for the part. Gibberish was recorded for Snoopy and sped up to make his unique sound. Schulz also resisted the use of a laugh track, which was widely used during the '60s.

Television producer Lee Mendelson was the driving force behind *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Composer and conductor Vince Guaraldi provided jazzy original songs, resulting in a fresh, up-tempo holiday sound unlike any before it.

Mendelson was a 32-year-old documentary maker whose first work was about Willie Mays. Seeing a *Peanuts* comic strip about Charlie Brown's baseball team, he decided he had "done the world's greatest baseball player, now he should do the world's worst..." Charles Schulz agreed, beginning a 30-year collaboration that resulted in over 40 animated *Peanuts* specials.

As he began production on *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, Mendelson approached Guaraldi to arrange the soundtrack. Guaraldi wrote "Linus and Lucy" and "Christmas Time Is Here" for the special. A choir of children, some chosen because they were slightly off-key, was selected to record the songs. Sessions ran late into the night and ended with rewards of ice cream.



Stamps issued in 2015 for the 50th anniversary of the special

This Day in History... December 9, 1965 continued



Stamps issued for Charles Schulz's 100th birthday in 2022.

The soundtrack, described as being filled with “small, observant miracles,” is a piano-based jazz score which was unheard of in programming for children. Combining an upbeat tempo with the lovable *Peanuts* characters introduced jazz music to an entire generation. Its charm has made it the tenth best-selling holiday album in history.

Work on *A Charlie Brown Christmas* was completed just 10 days before its scheduled premiere. Executives previewing the special thought it was terrible, one claiming, “My golly, we’ve killed it.” One animator, however, deemed it “the best special... this show is going to run for a hundred years.”

A Charlie Brown Christmas premiered on December 9, 1965, at 7:30 p.m. It was watched by some 45 percent of the viewing audience that night – an estimated 15,490,000 homes. It was the number two show in the ratings that night, after *Bonanza*. In spite of the executives’ fears, it was very well received by viewers and critics alike. It was described as “delightfully novel and amusing” and “fascinating and haunting.” Another critic accurately predicted that “the Peanuts characters last night staked out a claim to a major television future.”



Stamp pictures Snoopy as a WWI ace fighting the Red Baron.

Fresh and innovative, *A Charlie Brown Christmas* featured a number of entertainment “firsts.” Together with its creator, the animated musical special also influenced the television industry, ushering in a host of changes.

A Charlie Brown Christmas was the first to use children to voice animated characters. It also established the half-hour animated special as a holiday tradition, inspiring other classics like *Frosty the Snowman* and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.

A Charlie Brown Christmas was also groundbreaking in its biblical references. When executives tried to talk Schulz out of them, he replied, “If we don’t do it, who will?” As it turned out, Linus’s recitation from the Gospel of Luke is considered one of the most powerful moments in the film.

A Charlie Brown Christmas went on to earn an Emmy and a Peabody Award and has become a holiday tradition for millions of Americans.

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