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Bledsoe: More holiday music than mortal men can handle

By [Wayne Bledsoe](#) ([Contact](#))
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Every Christmas Santa's bag dumps a stack of Christmas CDs on my desk about two months before Christmas. And this year there was actually a few Hanukkah CDs. Here's a brief run-down: "Songs of Joy & Peace," Yo-Yo Ma & Friends (Sony Classical)

Cellist Yo-Yo Ma gathers a diverse group of buddies for a beautiful and entertaining set. Jazz artists Diana Krall, Dave Brubeck and Joshua Redman, Americana's Alison Krauss and Chris Thile, ukulele virtuoso Jake Shimabukuro and singer-songwriter James Taylor are among the guests. There's something for everybody, but everyone is likely to like it all.

"Come Darkness, Come Light: Twelve Songs of Christmas," Mary Chapin Carpenter (Zoe)

OK, Mary Chapin Carpenter gets points just by reviving the great Red Clay Ramblers song "Hot Buttered Run" as a Christmas number, but the rest of this unassuming disc of new, mostly Carpenter original Christmas songs is a very pleasant surprise, too. One of the year's best.

"The Singing Saw at Christmastime," Paul Koster (Merge)

While some of this disc is actually very pretty, most of it is unnerving - Christmas carols played on a mournful-sounding saw.

"Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" features multiple saws and a sleigh bell element that sounds like the junk cart trundling by. It could bring a moment of curious silence to any Christmas party.

"A Midwinter Night's Dream," Lorena McKennitt (Quinlan Road)

Couldn't have Lorena McKennitt opened her disc with something that didn't make the hackles stand up on the back of my neck? The rest of the disc is in that realm between mysterious, ethereal and sometimes beautiful Celtic sounds and overblown, dramatic acoustic goo.

"A Kick Ass Celtic Christmas," Reilly (Oglio)

This Celtic rock disc starts out just fine but gets increasingly irritating as it wears on.

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"Home for Christmas," Sheryl Crow (Hallmark)

Classy and soulful, Sheryl Crow even manages to deliver a pretty good original Christmas song. It's not over-produced and Crow doesn't over-sing it.

"Joy To the World," Faith Hill (Warner Bros.)

Country diva Faith Hill delivers an old-time pull-out-all-the-orchestras-and-choir-stops type of Christmas album. If you like this sort of thing it's done well.

"A Swingin' Christmas," Tony Bennett (RPM/Columbia)

Teamed up with the Count Basie Big Band, pianist Monty Alexander and (on one song) his daughter Antonia, Tony Bennett sounds terrific. Classic stuff.

"Not Your Father's Klezmer Band," Dor L' Dor (www.dorldor-klezmer.com)

This is not necessarily a Hanukkah CD, but what better excuse to listen to this excellent album? The group's instrumentation is pleasantly surprising and the arrangements are terrific. Highlights include the Hanukkah song "Lights" blended with the spiritual "This Little Light of Mine" and a klezmer version of "This Land Is Your Land." Listen during the holidays and you're likely to bring it out throughout the rest of the year.

"Yuletide Dreams," Walker Johnson (<http://houseofdenver.spaces.live.com>)

Knoxville radio personality Walker Johnson releases his CD debut with this nice set of Christmas standards, along with a couple of urban folk-era favorites and one new one. It's simple, unpretentious and likeable.

"Christmas Spirit," Los Lonely Boys (Epic)

Most of this disc is likeable rock-based takes on traditional Christmas songs, but not too exciting. However, the band's Tex-Mex work-out on "Carol of the Bells" and sweet version of "Away In a Manger" elevate the album to gotta-hear-it status.

"Evergreen," Alison Brown Quartet with Joe Craven (Compass)

Banjo ace Alison Brown and her band shine best when combining tunes from "A Charlie Brown Christmas" with other tunes. It's jazzy and likeable throughout.

"Jingle All the Way," Bela Fleck and the Flecktones (Rounder)

Bela Fleck has nearly reinvented the banjo. And this funky, fanciful, jazzy and psychedelically grassy set with Flecktones nearly reinvents the Christmas disc. Be prepared for a trip.

"We Wish You a Metal Xmas and a Headbanging New Year," Various Artists (Armory)

This should be just awful, but it's actually kind of fun. Lemmy roars out "Run Rudolph Run"; Ronnie Dio does his cheesiest operatic vocal gymnastics on "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" and Alice Cooper croons "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" with Santa sounding like a psychopath. This Christmas could get ugly!

"The Miracle of Christmas," Neil Sedaka (Razor & Tie)

Neil Sedaka says fans have been asking him to record a Christmas album for 50 years, but no one would've expected Neil to record two discs, one of originals and one of standards, or to write and record "What a Lousy Rotten Christmas," which includes lines about flatulence and dog droppings.

Should we laugh or cry?

Maybe both.

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"Christmasville," Mannheim Steamroller (American Gramophone)

Synthesizers go with Christmas like MSG goes with your favorite foods: A can enhance the flavor. A lot makes you throw up. This one has less MSG than earlier Mannheim albums.

"Bishop T.D. Jakes Presents The Gift That Remains," Various Artists (Rhino)

I think there are more cheesy synthesizers on this collection than on Mannheim Steamroller's disc. Modern gospel and R&B artists gather for this sickeningly sweet, too smooth batch of songs. Stop already!

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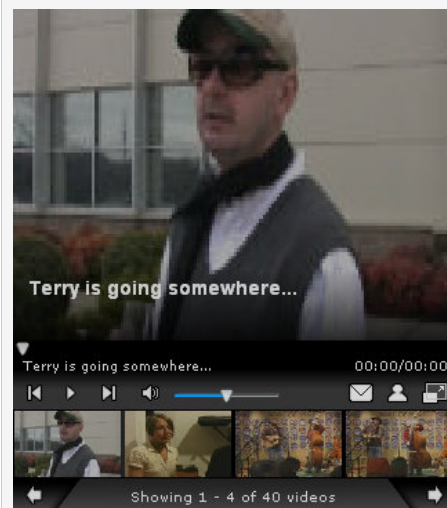
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"I'll Be Home for Christmas," Brian McKnight (Razor & Tie)

While McKnight contributes to the above snoozefest, his own slightly refrained disc is a little better.

"A Sexy Christmas," Various Artists (TimeLife)

Yes, I know what you want for Christmas, but you're probably not going to get it, so listen to all these breathy voices and imagine. Vanessa Williams, Aaron Neville, Toni Braxton, Diana Krall and Elvis Presley are all here. Listen, it sounds like Christina Aguilera is gargling before her kiss!

"Songs In the Key of Hanukkah," Erran Baron Cohen (New Line)

Brother to "Borat" star Sacha Baron Cohen, Erran Baron presents an album of Hanukkah music. Good tracks feature vocalist Yasmin Levy, but those are few. If you really need to hear a Hanukkah rap (one that isn't funny) it's a good choice. Otherwise, the jokes on you.

"I Love Chanukah!," Mama Doni (www.mamadoni.com)

This little four-song collection has a rap, too, but it's far more fun. The snort-heavy "You Say Hanukkah (I Say Chanukah)" is funny for all ages.

"Verve Remixed: Christmas," Various Artists (Verve)

Sorry, modern remixers messing with classic jazz artists' tracks just makes me nervous. Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, Dinah Washington and other greats don't need this kind of help.

"A Jazz and Blues Christmas," Various Artists (Putumayo)

It's just what the title says with B.B. King, Charles Brown, Ray Charles, Ramsey Lewis and other artists checking in with good numbers.

"Ten Out of Tenn Christmas," Various Artists (Ten Out of Tenn)

Each of 10 Nashville-based singer-songwriters adds a track here. KS Rhoads' "Why Are Mom & Daddy Fighting on Christmas" and Erin McCarley actually changes "Little Drummer Boy" enough that it's kind of listenable.

"A Night Before Christmas," Spyro Gyra (Heads Up)

Acts I normally dislike often create Christmas CDs that I do like. Lite jazz act Spyro Gyra normally snooze me out. This disc, though, is very pleasant.

"The Essential Now That's What I Call Christmas," Various Artists (UMG)

Here's 25 essential and non-essential tracks, including Elvis Presley's "Blue Christmas" and Burl Ives' "Holly Jolly Christmas" (essential) and Paul McCartney's "Wonderful Christmastime" and Wham!'s "Last Christmas" (definitely non-essential). Definitely a mixed bag.

"Appalachian Christmas," The Nashville Sessions (OS Productions)

Nashville pickers deliver nice acoustic versions of Christmas standards.\



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