



Christmas Compilation

by Dennis Flannigan

We are all, I suggest, frustrated record producers—certainly, I think, *Cool and Strange Music!* Magazine readers. Another group of frustrated A&R folks must be those of us who make annual Christmas tapes and CDs for family, friends and folks who couldn't give a rip, but are very nice about it. People like me.

Would you, I ask, write a book even if only ten other people on the whole planet wanted to read it, or agreed to read it, or, for whatever reason, *did* read it? I suspect many would. Christmas season means someone must hear the musical trick we're pulling. It's doubtful many would listen to a Columbus Day tape, or *Songs of the Turkey*... but Christmas opens nearly everyone's ears. It is that split second of holiday kindness we exploit.

Each year Christmas/X-mas tapers seek more ways to charm and bewilder listeners. (Christmas or X-mas?—same genre, the "X" seems to appear when reverence disappears.) We don't produce simple, comfortable collections of Nat King Cole, Mel Torme, or der Bingle's jingles.



- For Christmas - The Goodies
- Jesus - Rocki Lane & The Gross Group
- Jesus Mama - Bill Cosby
- Jesus - Jim Backus & Daws Butler
- Jesus - Jason & The Strap Tones
- Homemade Theatre
- Barry Richards
- Jesus - Sascha Burland
- The Radudes
- Christmas - The Goons
- Water - Sheb Wooley
- Robert Brooke
- & The Chipmunks
- Steve Allen & Ricky Vera
- Byron
- Christina Schwartz
- Cycle Choir
- Happy Sales
- Jesus and Lambchop
- Craig Malon
- Jesus - Leappo (The Frog)
- Kitt The Amazing Car Of Tomorrow
- Red-Nosed Reindeer - U.S. Arm Band
- Christmas - Frank Evans & Santa's Helpers
- Out Of My Mind (It's Christmas Time) - Duck's Breath
- Santa & The Touchables - Dickie Goodman
- The Merry Old Philosopher - Eddie Lawrence

We offer songs you've seldom or never heard and we love it.

We've discovered such songs in places honest people won't go. Flea market vendors point at piles of scratched 45s and 78s, and mutter, "Five bucks for the whole box. I'm sure there's Christmas music in there." We throw the money, load up the wagon and head for home, happy as one-hit wonders interviewed on an oldies station.

This year, I'm already euphoric. I found "Death May Be Your Santa Claus," by Rev. J. M. Gates, circa 1926. An extraordinary title and record. Last year, I liberated a copy of a 1950 Capitol Records' 45 RPM Christmas promo for record stores, "I Tawt I Taw A Record Dealer," by Mel Blanc, Baby Snooks, Bozo, and others. I had it de-noised, de-clicked and delivered in time for my 1998 holiday helper.

I think creating annual Christmas tapes was spawned by the invention of the cassette tape, and enhanced by Dolby B. Collectors existed before cassette decks, but there were few reel-to-reel tapeheads. Christmas gives us a reason for making tapes. We simply call them gifts and people have to listen. It's perfect.

Recently I questioned some of the genre's best practitioners; Rob Barth, Eddie Gorodetsky, David Miller and Tim Sewell. All create holiday sound jewels—tapes and CDs with wit, imagination and surprise. I envy their talents. Tim Sewell and "Eddie G." are legends. Tim's the Bard—the rest of us are just *Cliff Notes*. His collection has "currently 3,000 45s, 100 LPs, 200 CDs, 30 78s and 200 cassettes (plus about 6 videos)." Tim's been a consultant for Rhino Records' various Christmas compilations.

Sewell knows virtually every Christmas single. Few records elude him, but currently he wants, The Stompers' "Stompin' 'Round The Christmas Tree, Part 1 and 2," (Gone 5120). "Don't ask me why, I've never heard it. I just want it," says Sewell. It must be rare if Tim can't find it. Favorites from his collection include the following: Canned Heat and the Chipmunks' "Chipmunk Song/Christmas

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—Rob Barth
Christmas music collector

Blues" (Liberty 56079); Soupy Sales' "Santa Claus Is Surfing To Town/Santa Claus Is Coming To Town," (Reprise 244), of which he says, "It was number one on my want list for YEARS...not a particularly good record, but I finally found a copy." He has a mint copy of Jimi Hendrix's "Medley: Little Drummer Boy/Silent Night/Auld Lang Syne," and says, "to me it's a *dreadful* record."

He pointed out two great records: *Blame It On Christmas, Vol.1* (Schoolkids' Records SKR 3101), which he says, "is the BEST Christmas CD ever recorded. Search this one out." Another rare favorite in his collection is Albert Brooks' "A Daddy's Christmas," (an Asylum promo with picture sleeve), which Tim notes, "I've never even seen it offered."

All four collectors got hooked young. Rob Barth remembers, "As a kid, I liked that Christmas came along and wiped out reality for a few weeks. It was the only time of the year that was 'branded'...The music represented it best, because radio began to mutate [to Christmas songs] until on the 25th you couldn't hear anything else! It was like a *beautiful disease*." Kind of like record collecting.

"I started collecting around 1973, after I heard my first Dr. Demento radio show on KMET, Los Angeles," says Sewell. He made his first personal Christmas tape in 1977. David Miller began trading tapes 10 years ago. His hobby, he says, "satisfies my obsessive compulsive dysfunction and penny-pinching personality." I could have said that. David likes that other collectors ignore his treasures, "I come along after them, whistling a happy tune and scoop them up, pay 50 cents a disc and skip to the car...I also enjoy that it satisfies the child in me, and also the dirty old man."

Eddie G.'s (Gorodetsky) a special case. He's an Emmy Award-winning television writer, currently a writer-producer with ABC's *Dharma & Greg*. His 1990 Christmas compilation, *Christmas Party With Eddie G.*, has been issued commercially on a major label, *Strikin' It Rich/Columbia* (CK 46919). It's in print and is an accessible introduction to Christmas collect

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ing. Eddie's CD features The Eddie G. Singers, Eddie Lawrence, Bobby Lloyd and the Skeletons, Augie Rios, Byron Lee and the Dragonaires, Louis Prima, Untamed Youth, Rufus Thomas, Foghat, Debbie Dabney, Monty and Marsha Brown, and ephemera. A sure hint Christmas collectors don't hoe the same old row. Gorodetsky's *Strikin' It Rich* label is rumored to be funded by Bob Dylan. Eddie wouldn't comment, but note, Dylan recently made a rare appearance on the October 12, 1999, episode of *Dharma & Greg*. Imagine, Dylan on a sitcom.

It was as a college radio station announcer that Eddie Gorodetsky discovered Christmas music's appeal. "At Christmas time I would play all the goofy Christmas songs. You know, everything from 'Christmas in Jail,' by The Youngsters to Huey Piano Smith and the Clowns' Christmas record. And it got more response, and I realized, Christmas is the one time of the year when people will listen to any kind of music if it happens to be a Christmas song...you can tear down the walls at Christmas time, and open up people's ears, not in a preachy way...I love ephemera. I love Christmas jingles." That's the nubbins of Christmas collecting—the music comes in every style and fashion. Great songs jump out of every genre. One can be eclectic and unite it under one roof.

David Miller seeks records made in a particular style, "I have a Barbershop X-mas record, a truck-driving X-mas record album, exotica X-mas, a hipster-jazz X-mas record and one, a kid who sings off-key Christmas record." About his Christmas compilations, Rob Barth notes, "The 'exclusivity' is going. For me, this shifts the importance from how rare is it, to how well-programmed is it. Previously, it was good enough to just throw a bunch of stuff [on it] because no one else had it." He keeps looking though. Barth says, "I want the Art Carney 'The Night Before Xmas' on 78. Otherwise, I take what comes."

Barth and Miller add exceptional design graphics to their Christmas

gifts. I think they'd be welcome in graphics journals like *U&Lc*, or *Communication Arts* annuals. I've received tapes from Tim Sewell, and they're great Christmas finds—often I wouldn't know a single song. The Bard collects with an ear for the good, the quirky and the unusual. Each year he delivers. Especially good are his annual *Off-The-Wall Christmas* and *Awfully Painful Christmas* compilations.

My niche is different. I look for 78s, internal business items like an Avon Christmas sales pitch album, old radio shows (usually December 25th broadcasts), and television snippets. For me, a perfect Christmas ditty is "Dusty, The Christmas Dust-Buster," by Maurice Poobey and the Pubescents. This ode celebrates Santa's vacuum cleaner, the ultimate variant on the "Rudolph, The Red-Nosed Reindeer" genre. I also love finding one-of-a-kind songs like Max Vlahovich's home studio recording of "All I Want For Christmas Is A Marshall Stack," and a recording of my daughter singing, "Rudolph" when she was five. Each a treasure.

Recently, I searched the Internet for MP3 files—a new resource for Christmas collectors. Some MP3 finds are: "Santa Was My Cell Mate," by Big Bad Tough Guy; "Santa Rides A Hog," by Dave Lasher; the Punk Funk Honkey's "X-mas In Seattle," and The Fabric Indicator's "Huber's the Beer for Christmas." Search the net and see what you find.

Finally, a tip of Santa's cap to Christmas music heroes from the past. Artists like Stan Freberg, Spike Jones, Eddie Lawrence, Darlene Love, Charles Brown, The Youngsters, Louis Prima, Louis Armstrong, and hundreds of others who made wonderful, findable Christmas recordings. Thank you.

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If you're interested in Christmas records and collecting, I suggest Tim Neely's, *Goldmine Christmas Record Price Guide* (Krause Publications, 1997). Tim Sewell's database and insights were essential to its production. Another nice read is *Merry Christmas Baby (Holiday Music From Bing To Sting)*, by Dave Marsh and Steve Propes (Little Brown and Company, 1993). On the internet, a great website for people wanting to get a sense of the strangeness and variety of Christmas music is: <http://www.wfmu.org/Playlists/KBC1998.html> on the great WFMU web site. The station also hosts Rob Barth's radio show—worth checking out, too. If you produce an annual Christmas tape or CD drop me an e-mail at Krabgrass@aol.com. Let's trade.

—Dennis Flannigan

