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Carols to get you into the Christmas spirit

If you're tired of increasingly commercialized holiday standards, here are some alternative Christmas songs

By R.D. Heldenfels
Akron Beacon Journal television writer

It's time for holiday songs, and with them the themes of the season.

Drunkenness. Poverty. Sex. Failed romance.

Yes, for every *Silver Bells* and *White Christmas*, there's a *Christmas in Prison* and *Daddy's Drinking Up Our Christmas*.

The Everly Brothers put their anguished harmonies to work on *Christmas Eve Can Kill You* "when you're trying to hitch a ride to anywhere." The Pogues' superb *Fairytale of New York* begins on Christmas Eve "in the drunk tank." Jim Croce's *It Doesn't Have To Be That Way* lamented that "the Christmas carols sound like blues" because a romance "should never have ended."

I confess to owning all those songs, and a few hundred more. I love Christmas music. But I especially love weird and sad holiday songs -- the kinds of things issued on semi-obscure singles and in collections like *Blue Yule*, *A Lump of Coal*, *Bummed Out Christmas* and *Have a Nice Christmas: Holiday Hits of the '70s* (just the place to find [Wayne Newton's disco-fied Jingle Bells](#)).

Let's face it. In about a week you're going to be ready to smash any speaker putting out yet another tinny rendition of *Rudolph* or *Silent Night*.

For many singers, even some interesting ones, the very idea of a Christmas album freezes the imagination and clogs the epiglottis, leading to yet another assemblage of predictable songs predictably done.

As an antidote, there has long been a thriving business in novelty songs and parodies, among them [Martin Mull's *Santafly*](#), Stan Freberg's *Green Christmas*, Father Guido Sarducci's *I Won't Be Twisting This Christmas* and the [Bob & Doug McKenzie](#) version of *The Twelve Days of Christmas*. First day's gift: Beer.

That tradition continues. A recent e-mail touted a CD of holiday-themed songs about lawyers (as in *Let 'Em Sue*, a parody of *Let It Snow*.) You can find out more at www.lawtunes.com.

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"Twelve Days of Christmas," Bob and Doug McKenzie

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Some songs have leapt from iconoclasm to become radio standards at holiday time. The Waitresses' *Christmas Wrapping* and the Kinks' *Father Christmas* are both played often enough to take the novelty out of their novelty.

Of alcohol and poverty

But there's still plenty of fun to be found in nontraditional Christmas songs, especially when you start thinking in terms of subgenres.

Like the too-much-alcohol songs. *Fairytale of New York* is just one example. Consider, too, Elvis Costello's *St. Stephen's Day Murders*, where people drink 'till the beer is all spilled and the whiskey has flowed," or Commander Cody's *Daddy's Drinking Up Our Christmas*. The Cucumbers had the basics in *Ho Ho Ho & A Bottle of Rum*, and Clyde Lasley offered a thorough account of how Santa Came Home Drunk.

Then there are songs of economic misery. *Root Boy Slim's Xmas at K-Mart* is one great example. "I must have died and gone to heaven," Root croaks. "Cause hell is Christmas at the 7-11." Jethro Tull's *A Christmas Song* asks "how can you laugh when your own mother's hungry?" The Mighty Mighty Bosstones' *X-Mas Time (It Sure Doesn't Feel Like It)* includes among its complaints that there's "nothing you can spend." The Dance Hall Crashers have some alarming detail about how I Did It for the Toys.

Lost love, or raciness

You can find no-romance songs, epitomized by Prince's *Another Lonely Christmas* -- also notable for one of the great record labels ever, with Prince looking decidedly unlike Santa. This group also includes *Alone on New Year's Eve* (the Manhattans), *Christmas Ain't Christmas Without the One You Love* (O'Jays), and *Far Away Christmas Blues* (Little Esther).

On the more upbeat side, it's remarkable how some of the grimmest songs of the season can be toe-tapping. Like *John Prine's Christmas in Prison*, where at least "the food was real good."

Think also of Christmas songs about sex. Yes, they exist, and not just when you wonder where the mistletoe might lead. *Santa Claus Wants Some Lovin'* is a standard among bluesmen (and Albert King's version seems especially needy). Jimmy Butler's *Trim Your Tree* is indeed, as one album notes, "cheerfully salacious."

I know nothing about singer Josephine Premice except that she sang *Mama, Give Me What You Gave Santa Claus* -- although the song is a lot less racy than the title somewhat creepily suggests. But I have no doubt what *Clarence Carter suggested in Back Door Santa*.

But the eerie stuff doesn't end with original songs and lyrics. The idea of doing a Christmas song the same old way so repels some musicians that they have to bend the classics.

On *Mojo Nixon's Good King Wenceslas*, Mojo and band toss out the lyrics in favor of a chanted la-la-la-la. Guitarist Kenny Burrell retooled *Little Drummer Boy* in a steamy, *Bolero*-like way. A Four Tops version of *Merry Christmas Baby* -- really just singer Levi Stubbs with a big band -- finds the band throwing in a riff from *Fly Me to the Moon*.

And, speaking of (a possible) Christmas in prison, Phil Spector's *A Christmas Gift for You* album not only includes some legitimate Christmas classics but the gonzo likes of *The Bells of St. Mary* -- done by Bob B. Soxx and the Blue Jeans. But you might prefer instead to think of some holiday peace -- with the Ramones' *Merry Christmas (I Don't Want To Fight Tonight)*.

- Irish Rovers, "Miss Fogarty's Christmas Cake"
- Clarence Carter, "Back Door Santa"
- Mark Mothersbaugh, "Jingle Jingle Jingle"
- Martin Mull, "Santaflly"
- Wayne Newton, "Jingle Bell Hustle"
- James Brown, "Hey America"
- Sherwin Linton, "Santa Got a DWI"
- Bob & Doug McKenzie, "12 Days of Christmas"
- Squirrel Nut Zippers, "A Johnny Ace Christmas"
- Albert King, "Santa Claus Wants Some Lovin' "
- Four Tops, "Merry Christmas Baby"
- New Song, "Christmas Shoes"
- Bob B. Soxx & The Blue Jeans, "Bells of St. Mary"

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