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Laughing all the way

Dashing through the music stores, look for gifts to jingle humor bells

DAVID MENCONI, Staff Writer

Today is when panic officially sets in. You meant to do your holiday gift-shopping long ago -- but you've just realized that December is half gone, Christmas is barely more than a week away and you haven't even started yet. Fear not. There's still just enough time, and you don't even have to settle for the obvious hits of the day.

That's where we come in with our annual "alternative" gift guide of strange musical artifacts. Some of the following items are wonderful, some are awful, some are ridiculous or even downright bizarre. But good or bad, they'll all make far more of an impression than the latest chart-topper from Mariah Carey.

List prices are given, but better bargains on most of these items are out there. Just make sure you include a gift receipt.

Elton John private concert (www.neimanmarcus.com, \$1.5 million) -- Someday, when alien expeditions are picking through the remains of our shattered civilization, they'll come across a copy of the Neiman Marcus catalog and realize we had it coming. The Neiman Marcus catalog is always good for preposterous extravagance, and extravagance doesn't get much more preposterous than this: For the price above, Elton John will play a 90-minute show for you and up to 500 guests. At least it's for charity (all the money goes to the Elton John AIDS Foundation), and you get to keep the Elton John Signature Series Red Baby Grand Piano he'll play on.

"The Dick Cavett Show: Rock Icons" (Shout! Factory, \$39.98) -- What with Bono hanging out at the White House, it's not so jarring to see rock stars in square places anymore. But there was a time when rock 'n' roll and mainstream culture just didn't know what to make of each other, and one of the meeting places was Dick Cavett's late-night ABC television show. This three-DVD set starts with an Aug. 19, 1969, show featuring Jefferson Airplane just back from Woodstock, and it's safe to say both parties were completely baffled by each other. "Are you comfortable?" Cavett asked Airplane singer Grace Slick as they sat down to converse. "Not really," she said. Even more strained is a 1970 show with a stoned-to-the-gills Sly Stone alongside Debbie Reynolds,



Tift Merritt

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"Don't Dream It's Over: The '80s Music Party Game" by Martin Joseph Quinn (Power Cat Books, \$12.95)

Perfect for that friend who never misses the '80s tribute band Breakfast Club whenever they play around here. Billed as "the trivia game that'll rock you like a hurricane," this would work nicely in place of "Madlibs" or charades if a party is going badly. It's quite detailed about that silliest of decades, the 1980s, with "over 1,000 wicked cool questions" about trivia such as the origin of Frankie Goes to Hollywood's name (answer: an old magazine headline about Frank Sinatra).

tennis star Pancho Gonzales and Sen. Fred Harris, D-Okla. -- a landmark in excruciatingly awkward small talk.

"All-Time Top 100 TV Themes" (TVT, \$22.98) -- On the down side, this skews a bit heavily toward recent shows, putting the likes of "Sex and the City" and "Everybody Loves Raymond" in the pantheon alongside "I Love Lucy," "Merrie Melodies" and other vintage classics. Also, the sound quality isn't so great -- many of these selections sound as though they were literally recorded off a television set. That said, this is still a spectacular amount of fun. Perfect fodder for answering machines and mix CDs.

John Batdorf & James Lee Stanley, "All Wood and Stones" (Aezra; www.allwoodandstones.com, \$18.98) -- You wouldn't think the Rolling Stones oeuvre had much of a pulse left by now. But dang if this collection of acoustic covers doesn't take that mangy old dog and make it do backflips. "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction," "The Last Time" and "Under My Thumb" are among 11 tracks to get the treatment on this well-done set.

Paul Anka, "Rock Swings" (Verve, \$18.98) -- Burt Bacharach got lots of attention this year for "At This Time" (Sony), a record involving Dr. Dre and social commentary. But that's not nearly as strange a fish out of water as "Rock Swings," a collection of swingin', finger-poppin' big-band versions of rock songs by the likes of Oasis, R.E.M., Soundgarden, Nirvana, Bon Jovi and Van Halen. Anka's version of Soundgarden's "Black Hole Sun" is particularly freakish. A perfect curveball for your next game of "Name That Tune."

Various Artists, "Stubbs the Zombie: The Soundtrack" (Shout! Factory, \$18.98) -- Another "Name That Tune" candidate, this is a soundtrack album for the video game about the zombie traveling salesman, "Rebel Without a Pulse." Death Cab For Cutie, Flaming Lips, Dandy Warhols, Raveonettes and other alternative-rock stars cover "Strangers in the Night," "Mr. Sandman," "If I Only Had a Brain," "Earth Angel" and other period classics. Strange, and it gets stranger with repeated listens.

The Books, "Lost and Safe" (Tomlab, \$16.98) -- Have you ever walked along a fence, picked up a stick and dragged it across the pickets to dig on the rhythm? That's basically what The Books do -- idiosyncratic found-art sound collages overlaid with cello, guitar, mandolin and banjo. Although "Lost and Safe" isn't

Rig Recordings, \$15.72)

Recorded at Grammy nominee Merritt's homecoming show at Raleigh's N.C. Museum of Art last June, this is very much a hometown record, with joy and good vibes abounding. And if you were part of the sold-out crowd at this show, you can even claim you were the person hollering "Say what?!" during the quiet parts of "Tambourine." "Home Is Loud" is a limited edition, easiest to find at local independent record stores.

50 Cent watch/MP3 player (www.icedtime.com, \$295)

You've got 50 Cent's compact discs, DVDs, computer game and book. You saw the movie. Your closet is full of garments and shoes from his G-Unit clothing line. And your refrigerator is stocked with "Formula 50" grape soft drink. But what are you telling time and/or listening to music on? Hey, you're just not down with all things Fiddy until you spring for his custom watch/MP3 player, which includes 256 megabytes of music storage (enough to store about 60 songs).

Appearance by "The Elvis Cup" (www.elviscup.com, approximately \$400 for anywhere in the Triangle)

In 1977, then-13-year-old Wade Jones saw an Elvis Presley concert in Charlotte and grabbed the white styrofoam cup that Elvis drank from onstage. After keeping it sealed in a freezer for many years, Jones auctioned off the water in the cup for \$455 on eBay last year. Then he started taking the cup itself on tour. He'll come display the cup in its acrylic case alongside artifacts of the show it came from (ticket stub, program, photos of Elvis holding the cup) and play the cup's theme song -- "The Elvis Cup" by Renelvis, the Charlotte-based Filipino Elvis impersonator. It would be just right for any Elvis fanatic's party to mark The King's 71st birthday, which happens Jan. 8.

Willie Nelson, "Countryman" (Lost Highway, \$13.98)

The marijuana leaf on the cover should tell you everything you need to know about the country icon's reggae album. And if that's too subtle, the credits apologize to any contributor whose name was omitted: "Either we were too blunted to remember, or it's been lost in the smoke clouds over the years." Of course, cannabis probably had a lot to do with someone deciding this was a good idea. But for those of a certain ilk, "Countryman" would be an ideal gift alongside a DVD of the Cheech & Chong movie "Up in Smoke."

LawTunes, "You Don't Wanna Cross Santa" (www.lawtunes.com, \$3.99)

That's "cross" as in "cross-examine," backed with "Billin' on Christmas Eve." Here we have the latest legal-themed songs from Lawrence Savell, a litigation attorney from New York who dabbles in music on the side. It's also available as part of a three-disc set with Savell's earlier efforts, "Legal Holiday" and "The Lawyer's Holiday Humor Album." "Outside the streets are fillin', the chestnuts grillin', but we're billin' on Christmas eve."

And a merry little subpoena to you, too.

More Lifestyles

quite as out-there as its 2003 predecessor, "The Lemon of Pink," it's still quite strange and not for everyone. But a fascinating trip if you care to take it.

- [Baekgaard dishes on style](#)
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- [Box office can't get monkey off back](#)

"The Sights and Sounds of Esquivel!" (Bar/None, \$16.98) -- This was recorded in 1975, a bit past Esquivel's prime, to promote a Mexican restaurant in Chicago that booked the space-lounge king for a six-month engagement. It's still as strange as everything else in the Esquivel canon, especially the monstrously garish version of "Rhapsody in Blue." Roll over, George Gershwin, and tell Liberace the news.

"Petra Haden Sings: The Who Sell Out" (Bar/None, \$16.98) -- In which the daughter of jazz bassist Charlie Haden interprets every song (including the fake commercials) from The Who's 1967 cult classic, a cappella, duplicating the world's loudest rock band with just her voice. The results land somewhere between quirky stunt, affectionate homage and weirdest term-paper project ever.

Scharpling & Wurster, "Hippy Justice" (www.stereolaffs.com, \$16) -- When he's not playing drums for Superchunk, Jon Wurster's primary occupation is comedy writer. In that capacity, he has made a series of wonderfully goofy phone-prank comedy records with his partner in crime, radio deejay Tom Scharpling. The latest installment has Wurster calling Scharpling on the air posing as a fascist commune leader, former child punk-rocker and car salesman, among other guises. Not quite as essential as 1999's epochal "Rock, Rot & Rule," but a ton of fun nevertheless.

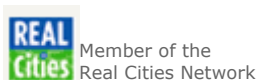
"Nouvelle Vague" (Luaka Bop/V2, \$15.98) -- The French duo of Marc Collins and Oliver Libaus have concocted an album of bossa nova versions of late-'70s/early-'80s new-wave classics. So if you've ever wondered what Modern English's "I Melt With You," Joy Division's "Love Will Tear Us Apart" or other songs by Depeche Mode, The Clash and XTC would sound like in this particular style ... well, wonder no more. As the credits say about each song, "No bossa nova version has ever been recorded." True enough.

Herb Alpert, "Christmas Album" (Shout! Factory, \$13.98) -- Alpert's trumpet has been scientifically proven to turn any given environment into a breezy, sunny 81-degree day. So it's peculiar to hear him play "Winter Wonderland," "Jingle Bells" or "Let It Snow, Let It Snow, Let It Snow." But this reissue of his 1968 Christmas album is quite agreeable. It's back in circulation as part of a reissue campaign of Alpert's albums, which includes a "Lost Treasures" set of rarities with some weirdly inspired song choices (James Taylor's "Fire and Rain" among them).

"The Environmental Sounds of Crawford, Texas" (Koch, \$9.98) -- Yes, this is 10 tracks of ambient noise recorded around President George W. Bush's "other" hometown on a single randomly selected day last year. If there's a point, it's not immediately apparent. Even the people who made this acknowledge it can be thought of as "the 'Pet Rock' of recordings."

PC Munoz, "Twenty Haiku" (www.twentyhaiku.com, \$5) -- Billed as "the perfect gift for the music lover with the limited attention span," this is as easy on your time as it is on your wallet. The whole thing clocks in at less than five minutes.

**Staff writer David Menconi can be reached at 829-4759,
<http://blogs.newsobserver.com/beat> or**



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