

A Holiday Playlist: The Best (and Worst) Christmas Music

The poll results are counted. Charisma *readers chimed in on their favorite and least favorite holiday songs.*

Long before the advent of iTunes and political correctness, Christmas music was about, well ... Christmas. People actually sat around fireplaces or gathered in churches and sang carols that made overt references to the birth of Jesus.

Nowadays, however, some radio stations play holiday music 24 hours a day that rarely mentions the reason for the season. We hear lyrics about snow and winter weather (even though Christmas is hot in most parts of the world), overcoats, shopping, sleighs, Santa Claus, reindeer, toys, holly, elves, bells and chipmunks.

I don't mind secular songs about the season. My favorite Christmas album is Nat King Cole's "The Christmas Song" from 1963. But while it features classics like "Jingle Bells," "Deck the Halls" and the famous title track about roasted chestnuts, it also offers 10 classic carols that are unapologetically Christian.

This year I decided to ask my Facebook and Twitter friends to help me compile a list of the best and worst Christmas songs. I know everyone has his own tastes and favorite styles, so please don't be offended if one of your childhood favorites is on my Naughty List. If you're planning to go caroling this year (I'm going Christmas Eve), then this might remind you of some of the "greatest hits" of Christmas.

Here are our favorites:

1. **"O Holy Night."** This stirring anthem isn't easy to sing

unless you're a professionally trained tenor—and that's why I prefer listening to the Josh Groban version. It gives me goose bumps every time I hear it. Composed in 1847, it glorifies the incarnation of Christ and contains a powerful prophetic denouncement of slavery: "Chains He shall break, for the slave is our brother; and in His name all oppression shall cease." Interestingly, a 1906 version of this carol was the first song ever played on the radio.

2. "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." Originally written in Latin in the 12th century, this majestic carol reminds us how the Jews yearned for the coming of the Messiah: "O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free Thine own from Satan's tyranny; from depths of Hell Thy people save and give them victory o'er the grave." Few hymns are as rich in biblical imagery. Enya's version is haunting.

3. "The First Noel." Christmas carols were originally used as lessons to narrate the story of Christ's birth. This song describes the shepherds, angels, wise men and the Christ Child in masterful poetry—and reminds us that the Savior "hath made heaven and earth of nought; and with His blood mankind hath bought." (The word Noel, or "Nowell" in 18th Century English, means Christmas.) Here is Charlotte Church's take on this classic.

4. "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear." Penned in 1849, this carol had deep meaning in the United States at a time when tensions were mounting between North and South. It emphasizes the message of the angels at Christ's birth: "And man, at war with man, hears not the love-song which they bring; O hush the noise, ye men of strife, and hear the angels sing." Frank Sinatra's version.

5. "O Little Town of Bethlehem." An Episcopal priest from Philadelphia wrote this carol after a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1865. It reminds us of how God used such an insignificant place to stage the miracle of redemption. ("How

silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!") Steven Curtis Chapman and Nat King Cole recorded great renditions of this song.

6. "Joy to the World." Penned by Isaac Watts in 1719, it was not intended to be a Christmas carol. Yet today it is the most widely published Christmas hymn. It is based on Psalm 98 and celebrates Christ's victory through His second coming, with powerful words like this: "He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove the glories of His righteousness." There have been many pop recordings of this carol (Casting Crowns' is excellent, and I love Whitney Houston's gospel rendition), but the Vienna Boys' Choir version is flawless.

7. "Hark the Herald Angels Sing!" Charles Wesley, founder of Methodism, wrote this song in 1739, but it had a somber melody. The livelier version we sing was composed in 1840. This hymn packs a theological punch in every line, with references to the incarnation, the Trinity and regeneration: "Christ by highest heav'n adored; Christ the everlasting Lord! Late in time behold Him come; offspring of a Virgin's womb." Amy Grant has a great version of this carol.

8. "Sweet Little Jesus Boy." Written in the style of old Negro spirituals, this song captures the essence of Christmas from the perspective of distant observers—and reminds us that Christmas is not about white European culture. Mahalia Jackson's soulful rendition is one of the most authentic.

9. "What Child Is This?" William Chatterton Dix wrote this song in 1865 after a bout with depression. It was later set to the famous 16th century English melody, "Greensleeves." Rather than retelling the Christmas story, it calls us to participate in it: "So bring Him incense, gold, and myrrh; Come, peasant, king, to own Him; the King of kings salvation brings; Let loving hearts enthrone Him." Faith's Hill's version has a Celtic flavor.

10. "Angels We Have Heard on High." This hymn was translated into English in 1862 from a French carol, and is best known for its Latin refrain, "Gloria in excelsis Deo" ("Glory to God in the highest"). While there have been hundreds of recordings of it—including Reliant K's punkish 2008 version, I prefer it *a capella*.

And now ... the envelope please. Here are the Top 10 Worst Christmas Songs—selected by *Charisma* readers who responded to my Internet poll.

1. "Santa Baby." With apologies to sultry-voiced Eartha Kitt, who cooed these lyrics in 1953, this song celebrates everything that's wrong with a materialistic holiday. Her Santa Claus wish list includes a yacht, a convertible, a duplex, jewelry, Tiffany decorations and the deed to a platinum mine. No wonder shopping malls play the greedy tune incessantly. It's a gimme! gimme! gimme! retail conspiracy.

2. "Please, Daddy (Don't Get Drunk This Christmas)." This song probably has sent people into professional counseling. Even hard-core fans of cry-in-your-beer country music will admit the 1975 John Denver ditty is downright depressing. It's even worse than the lesser-known pity party favorite, "I'm Drinkin' Christmas Dinner All Alone This Year."

3. "Blue Christmas Without You." No thanks, Elvis. The last thing I want to do during the holidays is wallow in gloom.

4. "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus." One friend of mine from Georgia said this loopy song seriously upset him as a child. Why was Santa hitting on his mother? And why was she tickling him back? That's just weird to a second-grader.

5. "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer." I don't know what is stranger: That this silly tune became a hit during the 1980s, or that the guy who wrote it actually recorded a sequel in 2002 called "Grandpa's Gonna Sue the Pants Offa' Santa." In the original, the poor grandmother forgot to take her

medication, drank too much eggnog and died while her husband watched football. Not exactly how I want to remember Christmas.

6. "Wonderful Christmas Time." "The feeling's on," Paul McCartney sings playfully. But why does he have to sing it over and over and over and over? Playing this tortuous melody to terrorism suspects would be an effective alternative to waterboarding.

7. "All I Want for Christmas Is You." Obviously this Mariah Carey anthem is hugely popular—it is the bestselling holiday ringtone in history. The fact that it trivializes Christmas as a backdrop for somebody's love life makes the song even shallower.

8. "Last Christmas." In these vapid lyrics, a jilted lover says, "Now I know what a fool I've been / But if you kissed me now I know you'd fool me again." Actually, because it has jingling bells, we were all fooled into believing it is a Christmas song. It isn't.

9. "Jingle Bells (Barking Dogs version)." OK, it was cute the first time. But if you force me to listen to it regularly I will call Animal Control.

10. "The Christmas Shoes." I hesitate to include this 1996 Christian song in my list, but too many people in my poll listed it as their least favorite. It begins with a stirring message about a boy who can't afford to buy his dying mother a pair of shoes, but then it morphs into tear-jerking dramatic overkill. When they made it into a novel and a TV movie it felt like an assault on our heartstrings.

Whether or not you agree with these selections (and your comments are always welcome on our Web forum) I want to wish all of you a very, Merry Christmas. Happy caroling!

J. Lee Grady is editor of *Charisma*. You can find him on

Twitter at leegrady.