

The 12 Lists of Christmas

More than 80 wonderful Christmas songs and recordings you've probably never heard.

Compiled by Christopher Kent (as of 2020)

There's no denying that Christmas music can cheer us up, provide solace and give us hope for better times. But sometimes hearing the same songs over and over gets a little tiresome, and the cheery effect starts to wear off. In an attempt to catch our attention with something fresh that provides that same Christmas spirit, dozens of new Christmas singles and albums are released every year. Nevertheless, it's rare that a song or recording jumps out and becomes a classic. The vast majority are just new recordings of old standards that don't stand out—and the real standouts tend to get lost in the crush.

Starting in the early 2000s I spent 10 years scouring through hundreds of Christmas albums searching for wonderful new songs and unique arrangements of the familiar songs that most people have never heard. As a musician, it was clear to me that buried in that avalanche of new offerings every year there had to be a bunch of true gems, so I set out to find them. I was not disappointed, and now, I'm sharing what I found with you!

So, what were my criteria for choosing the recordings on these lists? New songs had to be unique in some way, and the lyrics had to capture some of the positive feeling and sense of magic that Christmas is supposed to bring to us. If the song was intended to be funny, it had to be both original and make me laugh. A new recording of a familiar Christmas song made the list if the arrangement was different from what we usually hear, and the recording and vocal performance really stood out.

A few disclaimers: First of all, everyone has their own taste when it comes to music, including Christmas music. My taste reflects the music I listened to for the first 20 or 30 years of my life: artists like the Beatles, Paul Simon, Billy Joel, Elton John, Stevie Wonder, Joni Mitchell, and others. I've never been drawn to hip-hop, rap, punk or heavy metal, and that's reflected in the music I create. It's also reflected in the songs that I've chosen to include here.

So, anything listed below is exceptional *in my opinion*. If your taste in music is very different from mine—which is probably the case if you don't care for the music I write—then you may not like many of these recordings. On the other hand, if you like the music I create, and you appreciate Christmas music that reflects the positive spirit of the season, then I'm pretty sure you'll enjoy these recordings. (I shy away from very religious Christmas songs, with the exception of the classic carols. Just my personal taste.)

I've provided a brief description of each track in these lists so you can decide whether you care to give it a listen. The recording artist (not the songwriter) is listed in parentheses. Most of these—though not all—are currently available on the internet or on CD. Please note that a high recommendation of one track from an album is not the same as a recommendation of the *entire album*! Even if you love the recording I recommend, don't assume all the tracks on the album it came from will be equally good. (I've been burned!) List 11 (below) names a few albums you may never have heard that I find I can listen to all the way through without being disappointed.

Incidentally, I've noticed that very few people create a Christmas playlist of their own. I suspect that's because we're all used to hearing the same songs and recordings every year. Part of the fun of the songs listed below is that you can pick out new favorites and create a playlist for your own enjoyment. We've done that at my house, and it adds a tremendous amount of cheer and pleasure to the holiday season. So go for it!

A NOTE ABOUT YOUTUBE: Many of these songs can be sampled on YouTube, and if you Google the song title, the YouTube version is probably one of the first things that will pop up. (YouTube won't let you download the songs, though; you'll have to find other ways to get a copy onto your phone or desktop.) Here's the thing: If you sample a song on YouTube, **DON'T WATCH THE VIDEO, JUST LISTEN TO THE MUSIC!** When you watch a music video, your brain doesn't process the music well—it gives priority to the visual images. Presenting a visual along with the music reduces the music to something like a movie soundtrack. If you want to really hear the song, crank up the music and don't watch the video!!

A personal note: Although I've been a lifelong songwriter, I never felt inspired to write any Christmas songs of my own; I thought every good song had already been written. But after doing all of this research, I was impressed by the range of new perspectives and musical ideas people are still coming up with, and that inspired me to start writing my own Christmas originals. You can listen to the first seven (and download them for free) here at christopherkent.com. I've chosen not to include any of my originals in the lists below, but I hope you'll consider adding a few of my songs to your holiday playlist!

1. The Best Original Pop Christmas Songs You Probably Haven't Heard

- *Jingle Bell Jamboree* (Keb Mo') A totally awesome, low-key song about getting together with family at Christmas. (A little sad when family visits are curtailed during the pandemic, but a wonderful song nonetheless.)
- *Santa Claus is Comin' in a Boogie Woogie Choo Choo Train* (The Tractors) This is a Christmas remake of the Tractors' song *Baby Likes to Rock It Like a Boogie Woogie Choo Choo Train*. It's a rollicking rock 'n roll dance number with some very creative Santa lyrics substituted for the original words.
- *Christmas Spirit* (Donna Summer) A gorgeous and heartfelt pop song with a Christian perspective. It's hard to believe this isn't a Christmas standard.
- *Upon a Christmas Eve* (Michael Johnson). This song was written by my friend Hugh Prestwood (he's in the Nashville Songwriters' Hall of Fame). It's a lovely short story about finding innocence again on Christmas Eve.
- *Breath of Heaven (Mary's Song)* (Grover Washington Jr.). One of the most original and beautiful Bethlehem songs I've ever heard. (Another version was recorded by the songwriter, Amy Grant, but the Grover Washington recording is stunning.)
- *Cry of a Tiny Babe* (Bruce Cockburn) Bruce Cockburn is one of the best songwriters out there. This is a slightly irreverent take on the Bethlehem story, from a glorious and highly original perspective. Fresh and entertaining.

- ***Glorious*** (Melissa Etheridge) A really nice rock ballad incorporating references to “Angels We Have Heard on High.”
- ***To Be With You*** (Sarah Groves) A truly moving song about getting to see your family at Christmas. Brings a tear to my eye every time. Warning: This one might really make you cry during COVID quarantine...
- ***Bells are Ringing*** (Mary Chapin Carpenter, 2001 version) A nice Christmas song written by MCC about hope for a better life at Christmas. She recorded it twice; the 2001 version is my favorite.
- ***Shotgun Shells on a Christmas Tree*** (Robin and Linda Williams) This doesn't sound like a winner, but it's wonderful. It retells Linda Williams' childhood memory of growing up poor in the country, and the first time her father decided they should have a Christmas tree. If you don't shed a tear, check to see if you have a pulse!
- ***On a Quiet Christmas Morn*** (Mary Chapin Carpenter) This was written by Robin and Linda Williams (see previous song), but I think MMC's recording really does it justice. It describes a quiet Christmas in a cabin, referencing the similar quiet of the morning of Jesus's birth in Bethlehem.
- ***Darlin' (Christmas is Coming)*** (Over the Rhine) A really sweet original song about anticipating the peace and joy of Christmas. A lovely arrangement and recording by the husband and wife duo Linford Detweiler and Karin Bergquist.
- ***When the Baby Grew Up*** (Kathy Mattea) A joyful, funky song about remembering who the baby will be when he grows up. The musicians are clearly having a ball!
- ***White Horse*** (Over the Rhine) Another sweet, unique song about Christmas that captures the spirit. But it's hard to describe!
- ***A Cradle in Bethlehem*** (Sarah Groves) Another song by the author of *To Be with You*. This one is a sweet, unique retelling of the Bethlehem story.
- ***Must've Been Ole Santa Claus*** (Gary Allan) My all-time favorite Santa song! A lively, original, funny story song you can dance to, with a terrific band.
- ***Tennessee Christmas*** (Amy Grant) A sweet song about how nobody's Christmas is quite like the one you celebrate at home. (You can guess where home is.)
- ***Indiana Christmas*** (Straight No Chaser) This is an acapella group, with another song along the lines of the previous one. Equally sweet—different home location!
- ***Must Be Santa*** (Bob Dylan) Yes Dylan recorded a Christmas album! This is an obscure Santa song performed with high hilarity by a bunch of wild, partying people, headed by Dylan!
- ***Welcome Christmas*** (Cast of the TV show Glee) This is the song sung by the villagers after the Grinch has taken all of their presents and decorations, but they're celebrating anyway.

2. The Best Arrangements/recordings of Well-Known Christmas Songs

- ***O Holy Night*** (Trombone Shorty and other New Orleans Musicians, post-Katrina). Organized and recorded for the TV series *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* Christmas episode in 2006. This gets my vote for the most gorgeous and moving Christmas recording ever made. (You can hear it on YouTube at [youtube.com/watch?v=_rayDO-gS4Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_rayDO-gS4Q) or download it at <https://dillieodigital.wordpress.com/2011/12/16/song-of-the-week-o-holy-night-by-studio-60-new-orleans-band/>)
- ***Hallelujah Chorus*** (excerpt from *Too Hot to Handel*) This was a jazz remake of The Messiah, and just like the original version, the Hallelujah Chorus is the highlight. Think high-energy gospel choir!
- ***For Unto Us a Child is Born*** (The Roches) A terrific three-voice arrangement of another highlight from Handel's Messiah. The three sisters are awesome vocalists.
- ***Carol of the Bells***: a tie between *Manheim Steamroller* and *Trans-Siberian Orchestra*. The latter lists the recording as "Christmas Eve/Sarajevo 12/24" Lots of artists have gone to town on this Christmas carol, but these two versions are really intense!
- ***I Saw Three Ships*** (Bruce Cockburn) A really fun, driving folk-rock version of this carol.
- ***Rise Up Shepherd*** (Vanessa Williams) A knock-your-socks-off gospel-choir-style version of this less-well-known carol.
- ***Do You Hear What I Hear*** (Linda Eder) An awesome, hard-driving version of this song featuring African drums and other instruments with a gospel choir and powerhouse vocal by Ms. Eder. My favorite version of one of my favorite carols.
- ***Joy to the World*** (Whitney Houston) A rousing, hard-to-beat version of what was already an upbeat carol. Try not to dance!
- ***Deck the Halls*** (Dick Hyman) One of the great jazz pianists takes this tune and goes to town. Tremendous fun, and hard to believe anyone can play this well!
- ***Processional on "God Rest Ye Merry"*** (Mormon Tabernacle Choir) A very fun arrangement of the well-known carol, with full orchestra and a really big choir. (Ha!)
- ***Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer (JoAnn Castle)*** An awesome boogie-woogie jazz piano version of the song. Only available on YouTube, from the Lawrence Welk show. Ignore the video—everyone had to smile constantly on the show or be fired. But enjoy the playing!!

3. Wonderful Pop Christmas Recordings You May have Heard

Many folks are familiar with these recordings. Justifiably so!

- ***Christmas Wrapping*** (The Waitresses)

- *Snoopy's Christmas* (The Royal Guardsmen)
- *This Christmas* (Yutaka) This song has become something of a standard, but this was one of the earliest recordings of it. Still my favorite.
- *Christmas Chopsticks* (Andre Kostelanetz & His Orchestra)

4. The Most Thought-Provoking Original Christmas Songs

- *Christmas in the Trenches* (John McCutcheon) This song tells the story of the Christmas truce that took place during World War I when the soldiers started singing on Christmas Eve and stopped fighting. A powerful statement about the hypocrisy and futility of war.
- *The Rebel Jesus* (Jackson Browne) A biting commentary on how Christmas isn't always as spiritual and Christ-like as it should be.
- *Much Worse Things* (Stephen Colbert and Elvis Costello) A witty commentary about how Christmas isn't perfect—but how there are *so many things that are worse!*
- *Some Children See Him* (James Taylor) I never got excited about this song that talks about how each child imagines that Jesus looks just like him or her, until I heard this version. *Now* I get it!

5. The Best Scary Christmas Songs

- *Star of Bethlehem* (Boston Pops Orchestra) Written by John Williams. From the soundtrack of the movie *Home Alone*. Uplifting and yet scary at the same time!
- *Zat You, Santa Claus?* (Louis Armstrong) A witty tale about a stormy Christmas Eve with someone knocking at the door (and peering through the keyhole!). I sure hope it's Santa Claus!

6. The Most Unusual Arrangements of Well-Known Christmas Songs

- *Carol of the Bells* (Bird and Bee) The familiar song, but on acid!
- *Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy* (arranged for bicycle!) (Flip Baber) This definitely wins the award for most unusual arrangement of a Christmas classic ever recorded!
- *Jingle Bells* (Bela Fleck and the Flecktones, with the Alash Ensemble [Tuvan throat singers!]) Wild and crazy! Lots of fun.
- *Let It Snow, Let It Snow* (Gloria Estefan) This sounds like a predictable recording until about halfway through. Then the big band gets seriously crazy!
- *Joy To the World* (Oriental Echo Ensemble) My favorite track from an album of carols arranged for Chinese instruments. (This album is referenced in my original Christmas song *A Christmas to Remember*.)

7. The Best Funny Christmas Songs

- *You Ain't Getting S**t for Christmas* (Red Peters) One of the funniest recordings ever made for any season! Warning: It contains four-letter words!
- *I Yust Go Nuts at Christmas* (Yogi Yorgesson) A classic bit of Swedish/American friendly humor from the 1950s!
- *Diddly Squat* (Heywood Banks) Perennial funnyman HB sings about the kids who misbehaved. They ain't getting *diddly squat*!
- *Monsters' Holiday* (Bobby "Boris" Pickett) A Christmas follow-up to the Halloween classic *Monster Mash*. Same musicians, same monsters, different story!
- *Yulesville* (Ed "Kookie" Byrnes) *The Night Before Christmas* retold by a 1950's "Cool Cat."
- *Cajun Night Before Christmas* (Cajun Man Ron Guidry) A Cajun dialect retelling of the famous poem, set in the Louisiana swamps...
- *Mr. Santa* (Suzy Boguss) A parody of the 1950s song *Mr. Sandman*. Others have recorded this, but SB's version is the most awesome by a mile!
- *Another Christmas Song* (Stephen Colbert) A song about making money by writing a Christmas standard! Hilarious!
- *Frosty the Bluesman* (Heywood Banks) Same guy who wrote *Diddly Squat*. (See above!) A very bluesy take on the Frosty the Snowman story. (*My sister's a snow cone, my brother's a flake...*)

8. The Best Combinations of Two Songs

These are all awesome. 'Nuff said!

- *Mary's Little Boy Child/O Holy Night* (Vanessa Williams)
- *Peace on Earth/Little Drummer Boy* (David Bowie & Bing Crosby)
- *Sleep Well Little Children/Wonderful World* (Kristen Chenoweth)
- *Here Comes Santa Claus/Santa Claus is Coming to Town* (Linda Eder)
- *Happy Holiday/The Holiday Season* (Manhattan Transfer)
- *Glow Worm/It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas* (Rockapella)
- *Little Drummer Boy* (Erich Kunzel and the Cincinnati Pops Orchestra) Ever hear the popular classical piece, Ravel's *Bolero*? The one that starts really quietly and builds steadily to a crashing climax? Turns out it has a lot in common with the Christmas song *Little Drummer Boy*, so a clever arranger presents *Drummer Boy* in the style of *Bolero*. A lovely bit of musical fun!

9. The Best Parodies of The 12 Days of Christmas (by artist)

- Bob & Doug McKenzie (lots of beer jokes)
- Sesame Street (Yes, Cookie Monster gets his Christmas wish!)
- Boymongoose (East Indian Christmas humor)
- Weird Al Yankovic (lots of pithy observations about the holiday)
- Straight No Chaser (very funny acapella mishmash of Christmas songs)
- Twisted Sister (heavy metal gifts!)
- Jeff Foxworthy (redneck gifts!)
- Allan Sherman (maybe the first parody, circa 1964. Still a classic!)

10. The Best Classical-Style Christmas Hymns/Carols You Probably Haven't Heard

- *The Shepherd's Story* (Mormon Tabernacle Choir) One of my first choral favorites as a child. A little slow, but the MT Choir sliding up the scale on NOEL!! over and over gets me every time.
- *Words from an Old Spanish Carol/Carol of the Birds* (Amy Grant & Art Garfunkle) These are two tracks that run together from the album *The Animals' Christmas* written by Jimmy Webb. Glorious, uplifting music that starts slow and builds to a rousing climax, with the two lead vocalists, a full orchestra and a children's choir. Gives me chills every time I hear it!
- *This Christmastide* (Jessye Norman & the American Boychoir) Yes, I sang in the Boychoir, but I'm not on this recording. But what a gorgeous song!
- *Have You Seen a Child* (excerpt from *Amahl and the Night Visitors*) *Amahl* is a 45-minute opera by the American composer Gian Carlo Menotti created for television in the 1950s. A great story about a poor mother and crippled child who receive a visit from three wise men (guess where they're going!). This song is just gorgeous.
- *Still, Still, Still* (Manheim Steamroller) This is a lovely European carol, seldom heard over here. A lovely ballad capturing the peace and joy of the season. This version is the best I've heard.
- *Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!* (Boston Pops) Another John Williams creation, this time from the soundtrack of *Home Alone 2*. A rousing celebration of the joy of Christmas with full choir and orchestra!
- *Carol of the Russian Children* (Singers Unlimited, 1972) Hauntingly beautiful but obscure old carol, sung by a ground-breaking acapella group.
- *Angelus Ad Virginum* (Steve Schuch & the Night Heron Consort) One of the happiest, dancing-est Irish band Christmas instrumentals ever!
- *Il Est Ne (He is Born)* (Michael Gettel) Like a spectacular Christmas tree full of lights—only its music! Absolutely gorgeous.
- *Christmas Bouquet—5 Carols by Alfred Burt* (Boston Pops) This less-well-known composer wrote a new Christmas song every year in the early 1900s, and

many of them are awesome! (The one most people have heard is *Caroling, Caroling*.) Here, the Boston Pops does a medley of four or five of his best.

- **Poor Mary** (Renee Fleming with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir) From one of the Choir's annual Christmas specials. A stunningly beautiful slow song. The real payoff comes at the end. Renee Fleming hits notes that no human being should be able to hit, like it was nothing. Wow.

11. Less-well-known Christmas Albums that Hold Up From Start to Finish

Given that every artist seems to end up recording a Christmas album, it should be no surprise that most albums aren't very exciting as a whole. It's easy to be repetitive and predictable, or to be super weird just to stand out. Even albums with one or two wonderful tracks sometimes are mediocre at best once you get beyond those tracks. Out of our collection of more than 100 Christmas CDs, these are the ones that we enjoy listening to from start to finish.

- **Silver and Gold** (Vanessa Williams) In case anyone has forgotten, this gal has a spectacular voice. The arrangements of these songs are glorious, and her singing blows me away!

- **Joy to the World** (Boston Pops Orchestra). The Boston Pops Orchestra has recorded lots of Christmas albums. This one may be hard to find, but it's definitely the best.

- **James Taylor at Christmas**. I usually don't care much for singer-songwriters doing other people's material, but JT has done a lovely job of capturing the Christmas spirit with jazzy arrangements and warm vocals. No sour notes here!

- **The Christmas Album** (Manhattan Transfer). Another premiere acapella group in the pop/jazz vein, with a big band and orchestra backing them up. Every arrangement is soulful and gorgeous, and some tracks are bursting with energy.

- **A Manhattan Steamroller Christmas**. This was the first in a long series of albums, and as often happens, the first was the best. A mix of Renaissance instruments and hard-driving synths. (You've probably heard many of the tracks from this album.)

- **Joy for Christmas Day** (Kathy Mattea) As with any Christmas album, the arrangements (and the vocals) make or break the album. Every track on this album is first-rate.

- **A GRP Christmas Collection**. Someone at a smooth jazz radio station collected their most popular Christmas tracks for this CD. If you like listening to smooth jazz, this album is unbeatable. (The follow-up collections don't hold up nearly as well.)

- **Christmas** (The Singers Unlimited) Made in 1972, this is a premiere acapella group, doing a mix of contemporary and older Christmas classics. It's definitely not rock 'n roll, but these guys were one of the finest acapella groups ever, influencing many groups that came after.

- **A Celtic Celebration (Volumes 1 & 2)** (The Night Heron Consort) A gorgeous collection of Christmas tunes arranged for Celtic and Irish instruments. Many high-energy tunes suitable for dancing! A pleasure to listen to if you like this kind of music.

12. CK's Christmas Party Mix

These are all uptempo recordings of the song in question. Play this mix at your Christmas party and everyone will be smiling! (If you leave out a few and add others that you like, it's all good!)

- Sleighride (Boston Pops)
- Jingle Bells (Natalie Cole)
- Hark the Herald Angels Sing (Manheim Steamroller)
- I Saw Three Ships (Bruce Cockburn)
- Silver Bells (Kevin Eubanks)
- Joy to the World (Natalie Cole)
- Deck the Halls (Manheim Steamroller)
- Feliz Navidad (Tom Scott)
- Rise Up Shepherds (Vanessa Williams)
- Santa Claus is Coming to Town (Dave Valentin)
- Little Drummer Boy (Daryl Stuermer)
- Snoopy's Christmas (The Royal Guardsmen)
- Deck the Halls (Dick Hyman)
- Good King Wenceslas (Manheim Steamroller)
- Hallelujah (Excerpt from *Too Hot to Handel*)
- Ding Dong Merrily on High (The Night Heron Consort)
- God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen (Manheim Steamroller)
- Go Tell It On the Mountain (Bruce Cockburn)
- Angels We Have Heard on High (Don Grusin)
- Frosty All the Way (Boston Pops)
- Mr. Santa (Suzy Boguss)
- Santa Claus is Coming to Town (Neil Diamond)
- Do You Hear What I Hear (Linda Eder)
- Joy to the World (Tonic Sol Fa)
- Angelus Virginem (Night Heron Consort)
- Jingle Bells (Jimmy Buffet)
- O Come All Ye Faithful (Kathy Mattea)
- Winter Wonderland (Rockapella)
- Joy to the World (Whitney Houston)
- The First Noel (George Howard)
- Jingle Bells (Clancy Brothers)
- Here Comes Santa Claus/Santa is Coming to Town (Linda Eder)
- Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer (Ray Charles)
- Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas! (Boston Pops)
- Good King Wenceslas (The Roches)
- Go Tell It on the Mountain (Vanessa Williams and David Foster)
- Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer (JoAnn Castle)

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