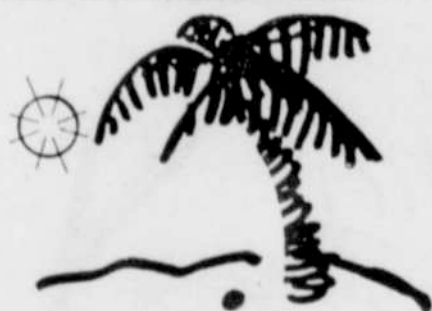


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Stop burning the turkey and listen to this!

From a wide range of holiday albums, Dr. T picks a classic from 1963: Phil Spector's Christmas Album

BY DR. TANTALUS

The advent of the Christmas season invariably invokes memories of sacred music, lightly falling snow and cherubic children gathered around the family tree, eagerly unwrapping their presents. Many of us pick out our favorite version of "The Messiah" and walk through the house humming along to the familiar refrains while awaiting the annual sing-along at Civic Auditorium. Others rediscover the joys of Renaissance choral music. Perhaps it is time to hear the "Nutcracker" (the London

Music

Symphony Orchestra released a marvelous soundtrack last year in conjunction with the movie).

However, for the rest of us, Christmas is a white-knuckle ride on the roller coaster of impending social disaster: dodging Tri-Met buses while trying to buy the last sheet of gift-wrap in downtown Portland, or enduring the screams of thousands of lost children whose parents are contemplating which small appliance Aunt Rose ought to receive this year, or trying to recall your favorite drag queen's bra size which changes from year to year. What about music for moments like those?

Fortunately, all is not lost. Every year the record industry takes its favorite artists and sets them to work cranking out Christmas records; sometimes, of course, the effort is a bust. A Carpenters' Christmas makes the doctor feel like he has been embedded in a loaf of Wonder Bread. And it seems as if every Motown group that ever made it to vinyl has recorded enough Christmas carols to make you think that Bethlehem is a suburb of Detroit. But every so often the result is truly angelic.

The classic record in this field remains Phil Spector's Christmas Album. Recorded in 1963 in authentic monaural sound, the album rarely has been surpassed by a legion of imitators during the past twenty-four years. The original album is now a collector's item with a price that reflects its value, but second and third pressings of the album are not difficult to find, sometimes at a minimal cost. The original album contains a cover photograph of the various artists involved on the record. The second pressing has Phil Spector in a Santa suit with a "Back to Mono" button in his lapel. Subsequent pressings have discarded the button.

And what a find on the inside! Darlene Love belts out "White Christmas" with Spector's "wall of sound" behind her. The Crystals step forward with "Santa Claus Is Comin' To Town" and the Ronettes provide new life to "Frosty the Snowman." If these girls can't get your toes a-tappin' and fingers a-snappin' then it's time to call the Doctor to check your vital signs.

Apparently Phil thought that such an album might not be well received, because he includes one cut which explains why the album has been



E. Ann Hinds

made, while "Silent Night" plays in the background. After this ground-breaking album, producers would no longer feel compelled to offer such explanations.

Certainly no explanations are necessary when listening to Elvis sing "Merry Christmas, Baby." Dating from the early Reconsider Baby album, this Christmas tune shows Elvis at the peak of his artistic prowess. As the band cranks into a rhythm-and-blues riff, Elvis's voice slips and slides up, down and through the verses until you're convinced that Elvis and his baby are going to have a mighty nice Christmas, indeed.

Of more recent vintage is Zee Records production of A Christmas Record, first released in 1981. Of particular note on this album is Nona Hendryx and Material performing "It's A Holiday," August Darnell (aka Kid Creole) singing "Christmas on Riverside Drive," and The Waitresses' boffo rendition of "Christmas Wrapping." However, avoid the slash-your-wrists cut of "Hey Lord" by Suicide unless you're particularly in need of being depressed. If you're fortunate, you'll find a copy of the album in its original white vinyl form.

Those looking for a little less punk and a little more soul might wish to check out 1982's Christmas Soul Special. "Wicked" Wilson Pickett checks in with the meanest version of "Jingle Bells" that you are ever likely to hear and Mary "My Guy" Wells nails down "Jingle Bell Rock" to the floor and then stomps on it a bit. Ben E. King does the best that a man can do with the interminable "Drummer Boy" and Martha Reeves gives us a soulful "Oh, Holy Night." Recorded on the obscure QAG label, this record still should show up in your local stores.

1987 will undoubtedly produce its own onslaught of records, but at the time that this column is winging its way toward print the most notable addition has been A Very Special Christmas, a benefit album for the Special Olympics.

Included on the album is Springsteen's version of "Merry Christmas, Baby," which was available last year only as the B-side to "War." A side-by-side comparison with Elvis' version makes it difficult to believe that they have both recorded the same song since the stylistic differences are so great. Bruce also has donated his version of "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" to the Pointer Sisters for this album as well as saxophonist Clarence Clemons and pianist Roy Bittan.

The list of artists on this album is impressive. Eurythmics, Madonna, Run-D.M.C., U2 and Stevie Nicks are just a few of the musicians represented here. At over 51 minutes, the album does not shortchange its listeners on music, either.

So if you are looking for some non-traditional Christmas cheer in an ever-so-traditional Christmas setting these albums are a place to start. The wedding of traditional carols and popular tunes in a modern format is not always a successful venture, but these artists have proved that it can be done, and done well.

Merry Christmas, everyone!

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just out