

# TWENTY-THIRD AVENUE B·O·O·K·S

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## AURAL GRATIFICATION

# 'Tis the Season

Why does everyone think they can do a holiday album?

by Aaron Bong

TONY BENNETT  
*Snowfall*



PHOTO BY LOS GREENFIELD

Tony Bennett is in his own element here. He chose to go with a more "traditional" sound for his Christmas album. The big band sound works, with trumpets wailing and the bass grooving along.

This is a re-release of an album Bennett did in 1968, except for the last song, "I'll be home for Christmas," which he recorded on *The Jon Stewart Show*. The first, "My Favorite Things," sounds really good a little jazzed up.

Bennett also covers "The Christmas Song," as well as "White Christmas," and "Winter Wonderland." So many times I have heard people butcher classic Christmas songs, trying in vain to make them their own. Bennett has found a way to be true to the original scores and at the same time make some memorable music.

I know that my grandmother would really enjoy this CD, and I think that it's OK, but I'm holding off buying a Christmas album until the Pet Shop Boys produce one with Liza Minnelli, or just come out with one of their own.

LIZ STORY  
*The Gift*

Liz Story has been playing piano all of her life. She studied at Juilliard, then soon after became a pupil of Sanford Gold.

This is the most enjoyable of all of the Christmas albums I heard. Especially for unwinding after you get back from dealing with all of your relatives and in-laws and such.

Lots and lots of piano, and just a little bit of acoustical bass. But the piano is lush and vibrant, standing on its own with only the bass as occasional garnish.

The songs are all churchgoing Christmas favorites. "Angels We Have Heard on High," "O Holy Night," "Greensleeves," and "We Three Kings of Orient Are."

Liz Story plays effortlessly through her own arrangements of each piece.

In my family, we often compete with "mood" music during holiday conversations. It can get difficult, at times, to hear what relatives you have artfully dodged all year are saying. Sometimes it can be a downright blessing hearing the Mormon Tabernacle Choir belt out a particularly loud song, so I don't have to listen to Aunt Judy do her armchair psychologist bit on me.

Don't count on *The Gift* to save you from any obnoxious relatives. Instead, reserve this album for when you and snookums leave the "festivities" and go back home to relax by yourselves.

MARIAH CAREY  
*Merry Christmas*

All right. Picture it. Portland, Ore. Christmas of 1986. The pink-flocked tree (remember those abominations?) you put up is covered from top to bottom with that horrible tinsel crap I hate so much.

Being the consumptive, label-conscious shopping queen that you are, every one of the hundred-or-so packages under the garish, cinematic-in-its-horror tree has a designer label on it.

Slowly puffing on your overpriced Pall Mall, you contentedly waltz over to your brand new CD player to choose some music to play. There it is. Stuck between the Stray Cats and the latest Cars album you might find this little piece of '80s trash.

But no, Mariah had to wait until 1994 to release it.

So, you caught me. I'm not a big Mariah Carey fan. I don't even pretend to enjoy the way she consistently oversings and over-embellishes songs. And I can never forgive her for what she and Luther Vandross did to "Endless Love."



PHOTO BY DANIELA FEDERICI

So, as my friend Nicci would say, "That's a dark place, you wouldn't wanna go there."

VARIOUS ARTISTS  
*Joyful Christmas*

RuPaul once said "very contemporary," and where this album is concerned I must agree. *Joyful Christmas* is rich gospel and rhythm and blues. Very contemporary.

The songs do seem to be slow and dragging in some areas, but that seems to be the R&B feel.

Patti LaBelle sings "Away in a Manger," and she sounds a little tired, not quite up to her usual speed. Lou Rawls glides through "Angels We Have Heard on High," and Oleta Adams beckons us with "O Come All Ye Faithful."

All the songs are well executed and well performed. And the choir involved is fabulous.

CAUTION:

Steer clear of Neil Diamond's little attempt. I won't even bother going into it, because it is nothing more than a major party faux pas. So please pass it up. The "Hallelujah Chorus" should never have a guitar solo in it.

- ▲ Been there, done that
- ▲▲ Buy it used if you really want it
- ▲▲▲ It's in fashion this season
- ▲▲▲▲ Timeless and flawless