

Setting the holiday mood

Discs that will get you in the spirit of the season

One day it's going to happen. You're going to buy Christmas albums. Sure you think you'll always be able to go home for Christmas and listen to whatever schmaltzy artifact your parents might have cranked up on the Master's Voice, but as any good life insurance

Charles Lieurance

salesman will tell you: "Here today, gone tomorrow."

Well, when it comes to be your turn to purchase your own Yuletide vinyl, you have several choices. You could just play the folks' classics but, as you found out in high school when you thought Led Zeppelin's "Communications Breakdown" was more appropriate for Christmas dinners than Anita Bryant singing "What Child is This?" your folks don't have the musical taste of your average Shriner.

You could just trudge out through the black ice to your local record store and pick up the year's run of X-masploitation LPs like "John Schneider Sleigh ride" or Billy Odol reads "The Night Before Christmas." This is basically making the same mistake your parents made. Your children will be trying to sneak the Beastie Boys' "Cookie Puss" onto the turntable most of Christmas Day.

So let's get some taste. Make it apparent that you don't just pick up any plastic shrink-wrapped square with "Christmas" stamped on it.

Here's some alternatives:

1. "A Charlie Brown Christmas", Vince Guaraldi Trio — To my mind the most tasteful and energetic Christmas LP around. Guaraldi, a noted jazz pianist com-

bines traditional Christmas music with perfect mood pieces and brings to both his own special vision of jazz composition. Though the compositions seem simple, as they should, each weaves a complex web of melody and mood. There is a slight edge of melancholy to the work that adds an amazing depth to Charles Schultz's Peanut characters.

This melancholy edge makes the album perfect for holiday evenings, sentimental chit-chat and nostalgia.

2. "Elvis Sings the Wonderful World of Christmas", Elvis Presley — Despite the sort of Vegas schmaltz that immediately comes to mind when one hears the title of this album, it's really a classic. "Elvis Sings . . ." contains some pared-down traditional Christmas songs that showcase his really amazing voice and several deep bluesy rarities.

3. "December", George Winston — Sure, it's New Age Music, Zen Muzak, or whatever you call this kind of yuppie soma, but it's the best of the lot. Winston is a boring rather uninspired pianist who has the melodic sense of Keith Jarrett but none of Jarrett's ear for adventure.

The album is gorgeously produced as is the case with most Windham Hill music and unobtrusive in a

good way. Ideal background music for any holiday gathering or for being lonely and contemplating the meaning of life.

Nice and loads less pretentious than Winston's other efforts.

4. "Light of the Stable", Emmylou Harris — Harris has the most beautiful voice in country western music. Not too much twang or hiccup and an unparalleled ear for dynamics. Her whisper-singing is especially effective.

This collection of incredibly expressive Christmas songs is completely devoid of the usual cliches that litter much seasonal music.

5. Handel's "Messiah" — There are so many great versions of this that it's hard to recommend the right one to buy. Avoid the Mormon Tabernacle choir's version which is all bombast and no subtlety. The Messiah is magnificent madness, so complex and adorned that it comes close to menacing the listener.

The sort of divine inspiration that must have been granted to Handel would strengthen anyone's belief in higher powers. This is definitely not unobtrusive. In fact, if you play it loud (the best volume for the work) it has the same effect as something by Sonic Youth or Black Flag. Don't even try to play it as background music, it's an insult to Handel and to the spirit of music.



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