



YULE BE GLAD

BY FRANK-JOHN HADLEY

Santa's a jolly fellow, but it must be hard for him to be merry when timeworn Christmas music engulfs him like an avalanche. It's a wonder that countless recordings of "Jingle Bells" and other favorites haven't made Mr. Claus sourer than Scrooge. To his benefit – and ours – some new releases serve up fresh-sounding music that staves off groans of "ho-ho-oh-no!"

JOE MCCARTHY'S NEW YORK AFRO BOP ALLIANCE BIG BAND
The Pan American Nutcracker Suite (Angelface)

If you're beginning to tire of Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn's classic 1960 recording of Tchaikovsky's classic fairy tale ballet, keep an ear out for this version by drummer-educator Joe McCarthy with his 18-piece band. The New Yorker approaches familiar material not out of devotion to Ellington or Tchaikovsky but out of service to his own creative vision, one emphasizing the marvel of Brazilian and Venezuelan dance rhythms. Extra slices of chocolate candy-cane cake to McCarthy and saxophonist-conductor Vince Norman for their fine arrangements. joemccarthymusic.com

LOUIS ARMSTRONG
Louis Wishes You A Cool Yule (Verve/UMe)

Given Louis Armstrong's great success with pop and novelty songs, you might think he recorded a lot of Christmas songs. Not so — the 11 tracks on his first Yuletide collection, singles from the 1950s and '60, are about it. Satchmo's inimitable gravelly vocals and to a lesser extent on this collection his Gabriel's horn give him the magnetism to have mastery of, say, "White Christmas" and zany "Zat You, Santa Claus?" The one and only Ella Fitzgerald adds to the toasty vibe of "I've Got My Love To Keep Me Warm" and singer Velma Middleton joins Satchmo for laughs on "Baby, It's Cold Outside." vervecords.com

JANE MONHEIT
The Merriest (Club 44)

An engaging singer whatever the season, Jane Monheit invests the well-known tunes of her second holiday album with an emotional resonance that banishes even their most banal sentiments. The meticulousness of her polite style is evident on "The Christmas Song" and "Christmas Time Is Here" while spunky "Winter Wonderland" and fun "Let It Snow!" have her loosening up. Her treatment of Broadway composer Cy Coleman's "(Christmas) Stay With Me" sticks with you. janemonheitonline.com

DAVE KOZ & FRIENDS
Christmas Ballads-25th Anniversary Collection (Just Koz Entertainment)

Dave Koz, the chart-topping smooth-jazz saxophonist, has led popular Christmas tours every year since 1997 and sporadically released Christmas albums. Unlike seven previous ones, his latest features ballads that he hasn't recorded before. They provide mellow aural bliss to anyone relaxing near a fireplace of crackling logs on a wintry night. davekoz.com

RICHARD WILLIAMS
Hollywood Christmas (self-released)

Utah-based pianist Richard Williams has the sugar-plum fantasy of giving cinematic quality to secular Santa tunes. Apparently on his mind are *Home Alone*, *Elf* and some

unmade movie starring revelers Frank Sinatra and the Rat Pack. richardmusic.com

RAY CHARLES
The Spirit Of Christmas (Tangerine)

On his only Christmas album, first released in 1985 and now reissued in remastered sound, Ray Charles sings chestnuts with an acute sensitivity to the soulful connotations of the special season. Tenderhearted and poignant, Charles cancels out the fatigue of "This Time Of Year" and "What Child Is This?" among others. It's "The Spirit Of Christmas," from the occasionally crude movie *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, that comes closest to Christmas services at a Black gospel church. raycharlesstore.com

VARIOUS ARTISTS
...There's Trouble Brewin' (Bear Family)

The German archival label Bear Family has a series of compilations that feature obscure old jazz, country and R&B tunes connected in theme to a certain holiday or season. This curiously titled seventh installment featuring Christmas music zeroes in on R&B- and country-rooted proto-rock 'n' roll cut between 1951 and '63. Of 16 selections, Chuck Berry's "Run Rudolph Run" is by far the most popular, with riff-master Santa Berry having a great time putting his reindeer through their paces. Available on LP only. bear-family.com **DB**