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Comically A-Caroling We Will Go!



From left, "Frosty the Snowman," "The Grinch," "Mommy Kissing Santa Claus," "The Chipmunk Song," and "Three Stooges."

Following is the third in a four-part series on Christmas carols by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Andrew Roth, Ph.D.

Have you ever felt harried from juggling all the preparations necessary to make the season festive?

Have you ever felt annoyed at all the unrelenting good cheer?

And, perhaps, having marinated too long in the gauzy warmth of the season's sometimes saccharine sounds, have you ever felt the need to stifle your inner Grinch, to step back, not take this holiday thing so seriously and laugh?

Well, you're not alone.

There is an entire catalog of, oh, non-traditional is not the right word, alternative Christmas carols and songs ranging from the whimsical "Frosty the Snowman" to the slyly insinuating "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus" to the irreverent "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer" with multiple stops along the sleigh-slick way.

Like, for instance, Kenan Thompson's 2015 *Saturday Night Live's* "Sump'n Claus" for those whose name might make Santa's naughty list. Or *Community's* 2011 "Baby Boomer Santa," which gives a Christmas spin to the "Okay, Boomer" baloney in which Millennials mock granny and gramps' self-absorbed pretensions.

Surveying any topic but in particular one as diverse as Christmas music naturally leads to list-o-mania *Top Ten This and Top Fifty That* like "The 30 Greatest Christmas Carols of All Time," "Best Christmas Soundtracks: 25 Essential Films for the Holidays," Spotify's "A Sexy, Sexy Christmas: The Naughty List," and "16 Funny Christmas Songs That Will Add Some Cheer to This Dreadful Year," and many more. [1]

So, with the license all these lists provide, here are three mini-lists of the slyly suggestive, the cynically sassy, and the traditional quietly amusing and whimsically pleasing.

As we learned the past two weeks, Christmas carols are ancient, but the tradition with which we are most familiar began in the 16th century with religiously themed songs. In the 19th century, both in Europe but more specifically in the United States, there arose what one might call festive Christmas music – songs slanted to the season but not specifically religiously themed. As the 20th century unfolded, Christmas songs were increasingly festive celebrating the wintry season, family, friends, and lovers. Or, if not lovers, then those with whom one cavorted.

One of the earliest was "Jingle Bells" ("One Horse Open Sleigh"). It does not reference Christmas at all and was composed as a song celebrating sleigh racing, drinking, and young people frolicking just out of their chaperone's reach. Today, it is thought of as a children's song, but not originally.

Still, when compared to Esther Williams and Ricardo Montalban's 1950 duet "Baby, It's Cold Outside," Eartha Kitt's 1953 version of Joan Javits and Phil Springer's "Santa Baby," Lady Gaga's 2008 "Christmas Tree," and Marli Sui's 2017 "It's That Time of Year," "Jingle Bells" seems transparently innocent. Bridging the divide between "Jingle Bells" and the others is 1952's "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus," which, although suggestive of adultery, is really a quaint inside joke reinforcing conventionality.

Currently caught up in a controversy about sexual harassment, if not date rape, with many Adult Contemporary radio stations banning the tune, Frank Loesser's 1944 "Baby, It's Cold Outside" first gained fame in 1949's Esther Williams "aquamusical" *Neptune's Daughter*. It won 1949's Academy Award for Best Original Song. The song is a call and response duet in which one singer responds to a statement or request by another. In "Baby, It's Cold Outside," a male singer tries to convince a female singer she should stay at his place for the night because it's cold outside, but she thinks she should leave. In *Neptune's Daughter*, the original duet was song by Ricardo Montalban and Esther Williams, but it was then immediately flipped when Red Skelton and Betty Garnett did a comic bit in which it was the man who wants to leave and the woman who wants him to stay. [2]

Its second stanza sings (keep in mind the first line is the woman, then the man responds, or vice versa):

from Baby It's Cold Outside

My mother will start to worry
Beautiful what's your hurry?
My father will be pacing the floor
Listen to the fireplace roar
So really I'd better scurry
Beautiful please don't hurry
Well maybe just a half a drink more
I'll put some records on while I pour
The neighbors might think
Baby it's bad out there
Say what's in this drink?
No cabs to be had out there
I wish I knew how
Your eyes are like starlight now
To break this spell
I'll take your hat, your hair looks swell
Why thank you
I ought to say no, no, no sir
Mind if I move in closer? [3]

As *Time* magazine notes, “‘Baby, It’s Cold Outside’ Was Controversial From the Beginning,” noting in its June 27, 1949 issue: “Queasy NBC first banned the lyrics as too racy, then decided they contained nothing provably prurient, and put the tune on the air.” [4] It became a hit and *Time* later named it one of the 100 best songs of all time. [5]

In our time, however, the song’s lyrics have come under attack as condoning sexual harassment and even using alcohol and drugs to seduce an unwilling partner. To which one can have two reactions: Yes and No. Yes, the lyrics are, as the saying goes, what they are, but no, there is no suggestion in the lyrics that the besought (whether female or male) couldn’t just leave. Also, it was another time and another place; 21st century thought-police would never get the joke in Dorothy Parker’s famous quip: “Candy is dandy, but liquor is quicker.”

John Legend updated the lyrics for a 2019 duet with Kelly Clarkson. They sing:

‘What will my friends think,’ Clarkson sings.
‘I think they should rejoice,’ Legend replies.
If I have one more drink? She continues.
It’s your body, and your choice,’ he sings. [6]

Besides the fact the lyrics sound like cardboard feels, it’s not exactly Ray Charles and Betty Carter, or, for that matter, Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme. Granted the original’s lyrics can sound whiny, if not a bit creepy, one needs to remember, as Chris Willman noted in *Variety*, that the song can also be a feminist tract for it’s the besought (female or male) who is in control. Willman also points out that the song can be “heard” as a comic, mildly satiric riff on the entire seduction genre. [7]

“Baby, It’s Cold Outside” has been covered by just about every major singer, male and female, of the past 75 years, including Louis Armstrong, Sammy Davis, Jr., Dean Martin, Ray Charles and Betty Carter, Bette Midler and James Caan, Rod Stewart and Dolly Parton, Lady Gaga, Garth Brooks and Trisha Yearwood, and Michael Buble and Idina Menzel. Still, proving that nothing sells like controversy, in a recent list of 67 notable performances of the song since 1950, 17 have been

since 2016 (or 25 percent in the past five years). It's a hit again!

The Michael Buble/Idina Menzel version of "Baby, It's Cold Outside" featuring some cute kids can be found [here](#).

If the thought-police have a problem with "Baby, It's Cold Outside," then it's more than a puzzle what they might think of Eartha Kitt's 1953 "Santa Baby," Lady Gaga's 2008 "Christmas Tree," and Marli Sui's 2017 "It's That Time of Year." Joan Javits and Phil Springer's "Santa Baby" found controversy right from the beginning with many opining that its lyrics were too suggestive for a holiday song. Its lyrics sing:

from [Santa Baby](#)

Ba-boom
Ba-boom
Ba-boom
Ba-boom

Santa baby, just slip a Sable under the tree for me
Been an awful good girl
Santa baby, so hurry down the chimney tonight

Santa baby, a '54 convertible too, light blue
I'll wait up for you, dear
Santa baby, so hurry down the chimney tonight

Think of all the fun I've missed
Think of all the fellas that I haven't kissed
Next year, I could be just as good
If you check off my Christmas list

Santa baby, I want a yacht, and really, that's not a lot
Been an angel all year
Santa baby, so hurry down the chimney tonight [8]

Eartha Kitt's original and sultry version can be found [here](#).

We met Marli Sui singing "It's That Time of Year" from 2017's film ***Anna and the Apocalypse*** about a Zombie-Christmas two weeks ago in Part One of this Christmas carol series. Sui's lyrics make "Baby, It's Cold Outside" seem quaint:

from [It's That Time of Year](#)

"Snow is falling on the frosty ground
Christmas cheer is spreading all around
It's that time of year
But I'm feeling so blue
There's a lack of presents in my stocking
And my chimney needs a good unblocking" [9]

As does Lady Gaga's "Christmas Tree," which was released then withdrawn and then released again in 2008:

from [Christmas Tree](#)

The only place you wanna be

Is underneath my Christmas tree
The only place you wanna be
Is underneath my Christmas tree

Light me up put me on top, let's falalalalalalala
Light me up put me on top, let's falalalalalalala

Ho, under the mistletoe
Yes, everybody knows
We will take off our clothes
Yes, if you want us to we will

You, oh, oh, a Christmas
My Christmas tree is delicious
Oh, oh, a Christmas
My Christmas tree is delicious ... [10]

You can find Marli Sui singing "It's That Time of Year" [here](#) and Lady Gaga's "Christmas Tree" [here](#).

On a far tamer note, much of this holiday double-entendre banter began with "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus" in which a young boy sneaking down the stairs on Christmas Eve finds mommy smooching with Santa under the mistletoe. He's confused, doesn't know whether to tell daddy or not, so he tells his Teddy Bear.

The song was actually written by an Englishman but found its greatest success when young American singer Jimmy Boyd's 1952 rendition climbed the holiday pop charts. As Albert and Shirley Menendez point out in their ***Christmas Songs Made in America***, the song's "charm lay in the presentation of the child's point of view." [11] Before 2021's bluenoses get too excited about a Christmas song discussing adultery, it was a case of mistaken identity for, of course, the Santa mommy kissed was daddy! The song sings:

from I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus

Christmas toys all over the place,
Little Johnny wears a funny smile upon his face;
For Johnny has a secret,
And this secret he must share,
He wants to tell somebody,
So he tells his Teddy Bear:

I saw Mommy kissing Santa Claus
Underneath the mistletoe last night ... [12]

Jimmy Boyd's original 1952 version of "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus" can be found [here](#), but for a real kick Dolly Parton's version can be found [here](#).

Among the cynically sassy Christmas songs, which is a much longer list than one might imagine, or, for that matter, even want, two or three bubble to the top. The Three Stooges' "We're Coming to Your House" was an early entrant, Elmo and Patsy's "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer" speaks to the dangers of sleighs pulled by reindeer, and ***Community's*** "Baby Boomer Christmas" signals to those of us of a certain age that our time is passing.

Speaking of a certain age, almost everyone knows ***The Three Stooges***. But in case you missed the last half of the 20th century, they were a vaudeville comedy

team that had two careers. One, their first, was a lengthy run in films and stage from as early as 1922 to the 1970s; the second, seems eternal as they gained renewed fame on TV in the 1950s, 60s and 70s as first broadcast TV then cable TV endlessly reran the 190 or so short films they made for Columbia Pictures in the 1930s and 1940s. Now, Larry, Curly, and Moe, and Moe and Curley's forlorn brother, Shemp, have found a kind of immortality on the internet and **YouTube**, down which rabbit hole you can go and see them all over and over and over again.

Over the course of that long run they made numerous Christmas recordings, including "All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth," "Wreck the Halls with Boughs of Holly," "Mairzy Doats," and "I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas." In "We're Coming to Your House" they sing they're coming to your house, but mommy and daddy won't like it because they're going to wreck it! It speaks to all the holiday guests you'd rather not have entertained. As I said, you can find all of their wacky stuff on **YouTube**, including "We're Coming to Your House," which can be found [here](#).

Remember, if the doorbell rings, "don't let 'em in!"

First performed by the husband/wife team of Elmo Shropshire and Patsy Trigg in 1979, "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer" inspired a film and an episode of TV's ***Grey's Anatomy***. A novelty song written by Randy Brooks, according to Brooks, Elmo and Patsy heard him perform the song, asked for a copy and then ran with it as a key part of their act. It's droll, well, maybe not droll, its snarky lyrics sing of grandma who had too much spiked eggnog at a Christmas Eve party and stumbled outside into a snowstorm. The next morning her trampled body is found in the snow with reindeer tracks the key evidence. She had been run over by Santa and his sleigh! [13] As they say at ***Christmas Songs***, "The moral of the story? Never give grandma too much eggnog!" [14] The irreverent tune sings:

from Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer

Grandma got run over by a reindeer.
Walking home from our house Christmas eve.
You can say there's no such thing as Santa,
But as for me and grandpa we believe.
She'd been drinking too much eggnog,
And we begged her not to go.
But she forgot her medication, and she
Staggered out the door into the snow.
When we found her Christmas morning,
At the scene of the attack,

She had hoof-prints on her forehead,
And incriminating Claus marks on her back. [15]

The old TV sitcom ***Community***, which ran for six seasons between 2009 and 2014, aired "Baby Boomer Santa" as one of several spoofs on holiday music in a 2011 episode. Although waning now, for most of the decade of the 20-teens Millennial complaints about their Boomer parents and grandparents rose to internet meme status.

As a Boomer, I have some permission to speak on the topic of "Baby Boomers" who, I agree, have a lot to answer for. Did the *Boomers* break America, and are they the root of all the post-1960s chaos bedeviling American, if not global, society? Maybe. Their four American presidents aren't exactly draped in glory,

and the sartorial mess they made of the 1960s has become the default style of just about everywhere, which I have taken to calling the *slobbification* of America. And that's just the trivial items. So, yes, they have some baggage to explain. We've explored this topic in several earlier **Book Notes**, in particular one on Bruce Cannon Gibney's ***A Generation of Sociopaths: How the Baby Boomers Betrayed America***, which can be found [here](#).

Well, that's a bit of a heavy topic for the holiday season, still **Community's** "Baby Boomer Santa," written by Donald Glover (who, as a musician, goes by the stage name Childish Gambino) and Danny Pudi, hits a lot of right notes riffing on Boomer fascination with The Andrews Sisters (cf. Bette Midler), the '50s anti-Commie craze, the Beatles and the rest of the menagerie. In the song and skit, they are attempting to convince Chevy Chase, now playing Grandpa, to get with it and join them by pandering to his Boomer biases. In the accompanying video, Chase looks anything but amused.

Charles Barkley famously said of aging athletes that "father time is undefeated." It's a truism aging Boomers must confront as their cultural moment passes and their Gen X children and Millennial grandchildren mull Grandpa and Grandma's legacy.

Still, in true Boomer style, at the end Chase steals the scene much to the horror of the retreating Millennials! When will the Boomers ever get off stage? With two dottering septuagenarians dominating current American politics, it's a fair question.

The song sings:

from Baby Boomer Santa

Santa Claus was born in 1945
He had a boogie-woogie Coca-Cola army jive

And when the Commies gave the polio to Doris Day
Santa helped the Beatles chase McCarthy away
That Baby Boomer Santa
He's never gonna die

Santa fought at Woodstock and Vietnam
And smoked a ton of acid and burnt his bra

And then in 1970, he did more drugs
And his hair stayed long and he ... grew a mustache ... [16]

In their book, ***Christmas Songs Made In America***, the Menendez's call the best of these holiday comic songs whimsical. [17] Whimsical means pleasing or entertaining in a lightheartedly old-fashioned or imaginary way.

Let's conclude this tour through comical carols with quick looks at three whimsical classics: "The Chipmunks' Song," "All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth," and that childhood favorite "Frosty the Snowman." First an even quicker look at one of the season's genuinely unpleasant phenomena – Dr. Seuss's riff on Dickens' ***A Christmas Carol*** in which a green creature of undetermined species outdoes Scrooge by attempting to steal Christmas! I have never been a fan of either Dr. Seuss or the Grinch, but if he helps children learn to want to read, then maybe he gets a pass. Still, where's the Christmas spirit in:

from Mr. Grinch Lyrics

You're a monster, Mr. Grinch,
Your heart's an empty hole,
Your brain is full of spiders, you have garlic in your soul, Mr. Grinch,
I wouldn't touch you with a thirty-nine-and-a-half foot pole!

You're a foul one, Mr. Grinch,
You have termites in your smile,
You have all the tender sweetness of a seasick crocodile, Mr. Grinch,
Given a choice between the two of you I'd take the seasick crocodile! [18]

Give me the lovable but chilly Snowman's embrace any time, but first what about those Chipmunks?

Usually, gimmicky hit songs come from the score of a film or Broadway play riding the original production's popularity. Ross Bagdasarian's 1958 hit single, "The Chipmunk Song," originally known as "Christmas Don't Be Late," reversed the process. As Stephen Cox relays in a short article in the *Hollywood Reporter*, working under the name "David Seville," Bagdasarian, an actor and songwriter on Hollywood's fringes, experimented with a reel-to-reel tape recorder to create multiple tracks of high-pitched voices. Actually, as Cox explains, the technique is simple but laborious requiring multiple layerings of multiple tracks. Essentially, you record a track at half-speed and then play it back at normal speed. Using the technique, Bagdasarian/Seville had a 1950s gimmick hit "The Witch Doctor," which I am sad to say I am old enough to vaguely remember. Using the technique again, Bagdasarian created "The Chipmunk Song." His singing rodents were an immediate hit reaching No. 1 on Billboard's Hot 100, earning three Grammys in 1959 and selling more than 25 million copies by 1965. [19]

Spawning movies, TV series, books, comic books, and now video games, what is it that Alvin, Simon, and Theodore sing about? Well, catching every child's antsy angst awaiting the big day, they sing:

from The Chipmunk Song (Christmas Don't Be Late)

... Christmas, Christmas time is near
Time for toys and time for cheer
We've been good but we can't last
Hurry Christmas, hurry fast
Want a plane that loops the loop
Me I want a hula hoop
We can hardly stand the wait
Please Christmas, don't be late ... [20]

Alvin and the guys singing "The Chipmunk Song" can be found [here](#).

It must be a generational thing, but I never could quite get my father's hilarity at seeing Spike Jones on the latter's old TV series. Jones was a country-western singer who happened upon a shtick of intentionally playing music poorly much to the apparent amusement of millions of people. He made a career out of "All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth." The song was actually written in the 1940s by music teacher and text book editor Don Gardner, who, as Valerie Strauss relates in *The Washington Post*, was quoted in his 2014 obituary in *The Boston Globe* as saying that while he was selecting songs for an elementary school Christmas program "I didn't yet have anything selected for the second-

graders ... (who were all telling the teacher) ‘All I want for Christmas ...’ I noted that 16 of the 22 in the class were missing their front teeth.” [21]

Strauss continues the tale by quoting Gardner’s *Los Angeles Times* obituary in which he said, “I was amazed the way the silly little song was picked up by the whole country.” A teacher heard him perform it at a music conference. She connected him with the Witmark music company. The song was published in 1948. On December 6, 1948, Spike Jones and His City Slickers released a recording in which Jones used a falsetto voice to mimic a child unable to pronounce words because his two front teeth were missing. In 1949, the tune went to No. 1 on the Pop Charts. [22]

The songs very familiar lyrics sing:

from All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth

Everybody stops and stares at me
These two teeth are gone as you can see
I don't know just who to blame for this catastrophe
But my one wish on Christmas Eve is as plain as can be
All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth
My two front teeth
See my two front teeth
Gee, if I could only have my two front teeth
Then I could wish you, “Merry Christmas” ... [23]

The song has been recorded in some version by just about everyone, but you can find Spike Jones’ 1948 version [here](#) and those lovable Chipmunks’ version [here](#).

But the best of all the whimsical Christmas tunes remain “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” and “Frosty the Snowman.” We told the story of Rudolph’s creation as an advertising ploy by Montgomery Ward that bloomed into a cultural phenomenon in a **Book Notes** last year that can be found [here](#).

After Gene Autry found great commercial success with the musical version of “Rudolph,” he sought another holiday season hit. Written in 1950, the year after Autry’s success with “Rudolph,” “Frosty the Snowman” was written by Jack Rollins and Steve Nelson. Autry and his Cass County Boys recorded the song for that year’s holiday season. Originally making no mention of Christmas, the song tells the story of a snowman who is magically brought to life by a silk hat placed on his head by the children playing with him. They dance through town until the sun begins to melt him, but Frosty promises the children he will be back again someday. Some years later, various performers changed “someday” to “Christmas Day.” [24]

Frosty sings:

from Frosty the Snowman

Frosty the Snowman
Was a jolly happy soul
With a corn cob pipe and a button nose
And two eyes made out of coal
Frosty the Snowman
Is a fairytale they say
He was made of snow, but the children know

How he came to life one day ...

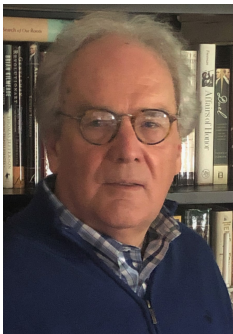
Frosty the Snowman (snowman)
Knew the sun was hot that day (hot that day)
So he said, "Let's run, and we'll have some fun
Now before I melt away"
Frosty the Snowman
Had to hurry on his way
But he waved good-bye, saying, "Don't you cry
I'll be back again someday!" [25]

Let's end this tour of the holiday season's non-traditional songs and carols with Frosty's reassuring hint promising us all he'll be back again someday. Surely, Frosty wouldn't let us down, would he?

The definitive version of "Frosty the Snowman" remains Gene Autry's and can be found [here](#).

Next week in Part Four – the holiday season's biggest hits past and present with Mariah Carey, Wham, and others.

For a more complete Christmas caroling experience to actually hear these songs, you will want to tune into my *The American Tapestry Project's* "A-Caroling We Will Go: The Origins of Classic American Christmas Carols" on WQLN/NPR. As always, it is available on WQLN's website, which can be accessed [here](#) and other popular podcast sites.



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End Notes

1. Cf. There are almost as many lists as there are Christmas songs. The genre can be divided into numerous categories giving free rein to our inveterate need to rank everything. The cited can be found at *The 30 greatest Christmas carols of all time* at **Classic FM** available [here](#) accessed November 26, 2021; *Best Christmas Soundtracks: 25 Essential Films For the Holidays* at **discovermusic.com** available [here](#) accessed November 26, 2021; *A Sexy Sexy Christmas: The Naughty List* at **Spotify** available [here](#) accessed November 26, 2021; *16 Funny Christmas Songs That Will Add Some Cheer to This Dreadful Year* at **Harper's Bazaar** available [here](#) accessed November 26, 2021.
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