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ESSENTIAL CHRISTMAS ROCK'N'ROLL SONGS

Forget Silent Night and Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer, the finest Christmas songs should have rock'n'roll in their heart. Here's our guide to the best alternative festive hits to get you bopping this December...

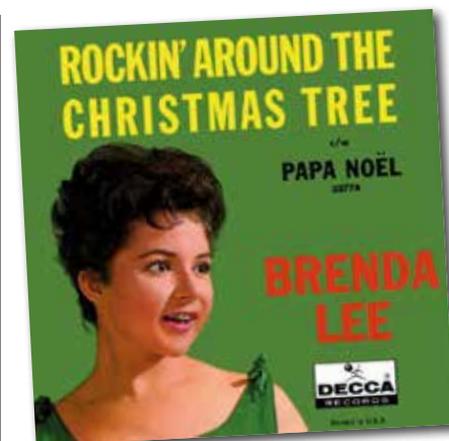
WORDS BY STEVE O'BRIEN

Christmas compilation albums can be depressingly predictable. *White Christmas*, *Mary's Boy Child*, *Frosty The Snowman*, *Here Comes Santa Claus*... Yawn. But there are some Yuletide songs out there that eschew those sentimental clichés and go-to production tropes (want your song to sound festive? Hey, just add sleigh bells), festive tunes that have the spirit of rock'n'roll coursing through their veins. Here, then, is a no-crooners-allowed guide to our 20 favourite alternative Christmas tracks...



1 JINGLE BELL ROCK (1957) Bobby Helms

One of the most ubiquitous Christmas tunes ever, partly for its inclusion on the soundtracks to *Jingle All The Way* and *Home Alone 2*, *Jingle Bell Rock* remains the signature number from country/rockabilly star Bobby Helms. With its references to hops and *Rock Around The Clock* ("Giddy-up jingle horse, pick up your feet/ Jingle around the clock"), it's a rare Christmas song that was laser-targeted at teens. Helped in its initial success by repeated airings on *American Bandstand*, it's been covered countless times, most notably by Hall & Oates.



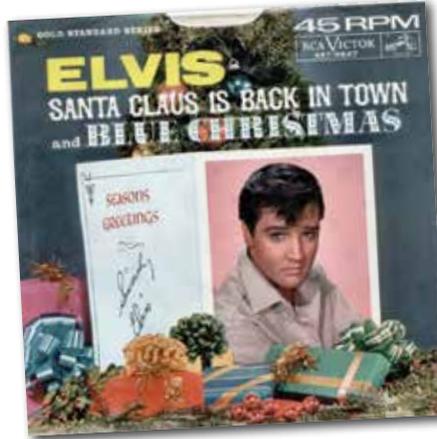
5 ROCKIN' AROUND THE CHRISTMAS TREE (1958) Brenda Lee

Brenda Lee was just 13 when she waxed this festive classic from the pen of Johnny Marks. Featuring Hank Garland and Harold Bradley on guitar, Floyd Cramer on piano, Boots Randolph on sax, Bob Moore on bass, and Buddy Harman on drums, the track was reportedly written by Marks while sitting on a beach, and it was he who asked for the young Lee to mic the song. "It must have been a God-given thing, because I had not had a lot of success," the singer recalled. "For some reason, he had heard me and wanted me to do it. It's been a blessing because it's a phenomenal song."



2 RUN RUDOLPH RUN (1958) Chuck Berry

Released in November '58 at the peak of Chuck Berry's powers, this 12-bar rockin' classic was written by Johnny Marks (who had form with festive singles having penned *Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer* and *Rockin' Around The Christmas Tree*) and gave its singer a No.69 US hit (a re-release in 2021 saw it peak at No.10). A year later, Berry dropped *Little Queenie*, a song that was *Run Rudolph Run* in all but name. It's been covered by such artists as Lynyrd Skynyrd, the Brian Setzer Orchestra, Billy Idol and The Grateful Dead.



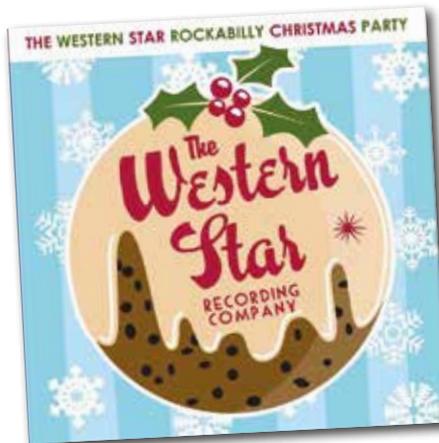
3 SANTA CLAUS IS BACK IN TOWN (1957) Elvis Presley

There's much to love on the 1957 release *Elvis' Christmas Album* (still the best-selling festive LP of all time, fact fans), but there ain't much rocking going on. *Santa Claus Is Back In Town*, however, kicks it like the King's best. Sitting conspicuously next to carols such as *O Little Town Of Bethlehem* and *Silent Night*, as well as festive standards such as *White Christmas* and *I'll Be Home For Christmas*, *Santa Claus Is Back In Town* is a swaggering Leiber & Stoller rocker, which netted Elvis a No.7 hit in the UK.



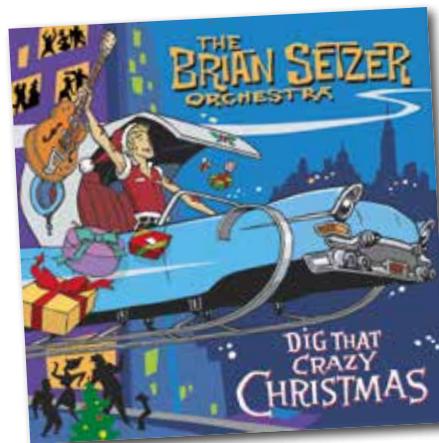
4 SLEIGH RIDE (1965) The Ventures

There have been umpteen versions of this 1948 composition by Leroy Anderson. First recorded in 1949 by Arthur Fiedler And The Boston Pops Orchestra, its most famous cover is The Ronettes' for 1963's *A Christmas Gift For You From Phil Spector* LP. We're plumping for The Ventures' surf-guitar version from two years later. Though it's more likely to conjure images of Orange County than Lapland, it's still one of the most playlisted takes of *Sleigh Ride* and has inspired covers by Los Straitjackets and Jon And The Nightriders.



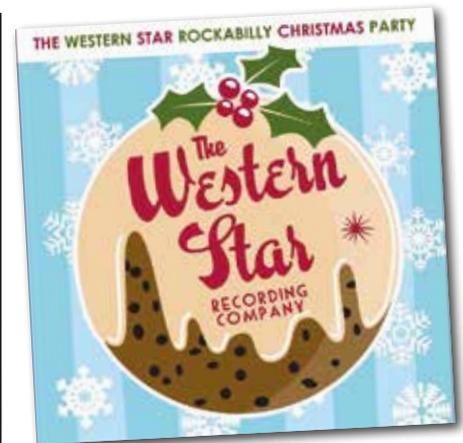
6 THE CHRISTMAS TWIST (2016) Jack Rabbit Slim

The *Western Star Rockabilly Christmas Party* LP is a must-spin for any half decent rock'n'roll-themed Christmas shindig. Featuring a gaggle of contemporary bands belting out such rockin' festive bangers as *Cruel Yule*, *Cadillac Under My Christmas Tree*, *Santa Claus You Dirty Rat* and *Keep The Receipt (This Christmas)*, it's the ultimate anti-schmaltz festive compilation. One of the standout tracks is Jack Rabbit Slim's *The Christmas Twist*, which is also the one most likely to get everyone out of their chairs and up onto the dancefloor.



7 DIG THAT CRAZY SANTA CLAUS (2005) The Brian Setzer Orchestra

The Brian Setzer Orchestra have recorded no fewer than three Christmas long-players so far – 2002's *Boogie Woogie Christmas*, *Dig That Crazy Christmas* (2005) and 2015's *Rockin' Rudolph*. The first track on Setzer's second Christmas selection, *Dig That Crazy Santa Claus*, is a hard-swinging cover of an obscure 1954 Christmas platter from Oscar McLollie And His Honey Jumpers. "Dig that crazy Santa Claus with his red suit on," sings Setzer, his larynx turned up to 11, "Dig that walk, that crazy talk, man, oh man, he's really gone."



8 BLOTTO IN THE GROTTO (2016) Little Timmy Tinsel And The Fairy Lights

Another festive gem taken from *Western Star's Rockabilly Christmas Party* compilation, this Chas & Dave-style pub singalong came from the mysterious Little Timmy Tinsel And The Fairy Lights, a band whose only other credits are the same album's *Santa's Lost On The Underground* and *The Office Christmas Party* from *Western Star's* 2019 follow-up, *The Ultimate Rockin' Christmas Collection*. As British as a battered sausage, its lyrics about a perma-pissed Santa Claus ("Oh what's he doin' now/ Makin' a row/ He'll wake up with an 'eadache the size of a cow!") are a riot.



9 ROCK & ROLL SANTA (1961)
Little Joey Farr

Little Joey Farr certainly doesn't have the longest CV on Discogs. Just four songs in fact, and two of those are novelty Christmas singles. The first, *Big White Cadillac* ("I want a big white Cadillac for Christmas/ Send from Joey to my mom/ I know how happy she would be/ Just to drive it all around"), is a bit cute, but *Rock & Roll Santa* rocks hard and deserves a place on any Christmas party's playlist. Little is known about Joey Farr, but, in a way, who cares when he's left behind a track as blistering as this?



10 GONNA HAVE A MERRY CHRISTMAS (1950)
The Nic Nacs

Eartha Kitt didn't invent the sexy Christmas song. Three years before the future *Catwoman* cooed her way through the timeless *Santa Baby*, Micky Champion delivered a similarly sultry vocal performances on this unjustly forgotten R&B ballad from 1950. The Nic Nacs weren't around for very long. Well, one day, actually. The band were really The Robins in all but name, remonikering themselves for their one and only single with RPM (they were contracted to rival label Recorded In Hollywood).



11 CHRISTMAS IN JAIL (1956)
The Youngsters

It's hard to imagine Bing Crosby or Nat King Cole crooning a Christmas song about life in the clink, but that didn't deter long-forgotten doo-woppers The Youngsters from spinning this refreshingly gritty seasonal number. Its danceable melody contrasts with some pretty bleak lyrics ("I wore my shoes out walking the floor/ Got rocks in my head, I wish I was dead/ Ain't gonna drink and drive no more"), and it's no wonder that this festive B-side is better remembered than the song it supported (*Dreamy Eyes*, in case you're wondering).



15 CHRISTMAS IN LAS VEGAS (2002)
Los Straitjackets

The Ventures' *Christmas Album* from 1965 isn't the only guitar-powered festive instrumental LP. In 2002, mask-wearing retroists Los Straitjackets released *'Tis The Season For Los Straitjackets*, a punchy collection of wordless seasonal favourites. Among the standards, there are two originals, including this buoyant, salsa-like curio. OK, it may not conjure up images of snow-capped mountains or kids flocking round a towering Christmas tree, but it's as jubilant as anything else off this must-have festive album.



16 IT'S CHRISTMAS TIME (1958)
Marvin & Johnny

Marvin Phillips and Emory "Johnny" Perry remain two of the most underloved singers of the 1950s. Best known for their 1954 hit *Tick Tock*, their sumptuously blended voices made them one of the very best vocal harmony duos of their era - it's just a shame that history has, for the most part, forgotten them. The slinky, gospel-flavoured *It's Christmas Time* (sometimes known simply as *It's Christmas*) is one that showcases their golden larynxes perfectly and deserves a parking space on any festive playlist.



17 BACK DOOR SANTA (1968)
Clarence Carter

Taken from the compilation album *Soul Christmas*, this is a joyously raunchy R&B number that's a good deal more lusty than your average festive tune. With its playfully suggestive lyrics ("They call me Back Door Santa/ I make my runs about the break of day (oh, ho, ho)/ I make all the little girls happy/ While the boys are out to play"), it's no wonder that it hasn't found its place on your standard Christmas compilation album. Rap group Run-DMC famously sampled the song on their 1987 hit *Christmas In Hollis*.



12 SLEIGH BELL ROCK (1960) Three Aces And A Joker

Formed in Salt Lake City in 1959, the fabulously-named Three Aces And A Joker recorded a grand total of two songs – both released on a single 7" through the General Recording Company in November 1960 – in their short career. Despite the initial pressing of *Sleigh Bell Rock* and *Booze Party* being limited to a mere 600 copies, both tracks have gone on to feature on numerous compilations since. Listening to this galloping festive number six decades later only makes you feel sad that the band split up almost as quickly as they formed.



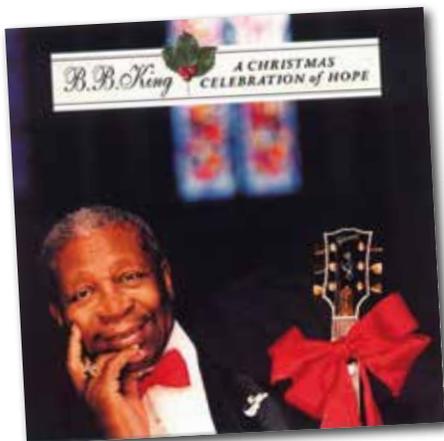
13 JINGLE JANGLE (1955) The Penguins

Best known, of course, for the ageless *Earth Angel (Will You Be Mine)*, released as their debut single in October 1954, Californian doo-wop outfit The Penguins followed up their most famous hit with this evergreen number the next year. Like *Earth Angel*, this one was a B-side, too, its flip being the less well remembered slow-tempo *A Christmas Prayer*. This track is unquestionably the doozy, though. It's an essential sax-driven rocker that proves beyond all doubt that there was always more to The Penguins than just one, albeit brilliant, song.



14 MERRY CHRISTMAS BABY (1958) Chuck Berry

You can, of course, never have too much Chuck Berry on any rock'n'roll list, and we simply couldn't shun this 1958 track from the father of r'n'r. More laconic and bluesy than the frisky *Run Rudolph Run*, it had already been recorded in 1947 by Johnny Moore's Three Blazers (its writer, Lou Baxter, had offered his song to the group to raise the money to pay for his treatment for throat cancer), but Berry's version is sleazier. A previously unreleased alternate take eventually saw the light of day on Chuck's 1964 album *St. Louis To Liverpool*.



18 CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION (2001) B.B. King

Originally waxed back in 1960, *Christmas Celebration* was re-recorded by the legendary blues guitar master for his 2001 long-player *A Christmas Celebration Of Hope*. Nesting alongside a host of BB-ified covers such as Clarence Carter's *Back Door Santa*, Charles Brown's *Please Come Home For Christmas*, *Christmas Comes But Once A Year* and *Auld Lang Syne* is this juggernaut, a brilliant track that somehow accomplishes the feat of being as quintessentially B.B. King as it's possible to get while at the same time sounding winningly festive.



19 WHO SAY THERE AIN'T NO SANTA CLAUS (1960) Ron Holden

It's not what you might consider the usual narrative for a seasonal favourite – guy gets a heap of insurance cash after he murders his wife ("I had a wife who gave me trouble, and when she died, they paid me double!") before he's arrested and sent to the electric chair. *Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer* this ain't. With its tongue firmly in its cheek, this R&B stomper is more blackly funny than depressing (even though the story is bleaker than Ken Loach on *Blue Monday*, the tune itself is fairly jolly), but you're not going to hear this one blasting out of a department store grotto anytime soon.



20 SANTA AND THE SATELLITE (1957) Buchanan And Goodman

One of the most unusual records in this list, *Santa And The Satellite* consists of half spoken-word, half snippets of popular rock'n'roll singles (*Jailhouse Rock*, *Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On*, *Wake Up Little Susie* and more). Very much in the spirit of Dickie Goodman's previous novelty hit, *The Flying Saucer*, this mad-as-a-bag-of-bees mashup tells the story of how Santa is kidnapped by Martians, only to escape disguised as Elvis Presley. Later in 1957, the duo released another Christmas-themed disc in the shape of *Santa & The Touchables*, but this one is the lulu.