



Silent Night



by: Michael Kolasa

originally published December 6th, 2020

In my quiet life, I try to “revaluate my values” (to borrow a phrase) and forego the dogma of tradition, to act with the spirit of love and kindness, to be the neighbour. As I get older, life becomes stranger, the world shrouded and dim, and the prospect of a long life becomes the twin shadows of hope and despair. Here is an early dinner with your favourite person, a winter walk in the woods, a red wheelbarrow, a perfect summer bean arch; there is the staring abyss, the widening gyre, the eternal bigot, the billionaire arsonist.

That’s why I seek soothing things that ground and centre me. Sufjan Stevens’s rendition of “Silent Night” does that for me: the twin guitars, acoustic and electric, fluid with a country twang; the excited voices calling at the end; the brevity and wonder, the warmth and lush soundscape, leading into “O Come O Come Emmanuel.” To paraphrase Nietzsche, Sufjan foregoes singing to give voice to the spirit of the song: a safe, gorgeous, harmonious winter night.

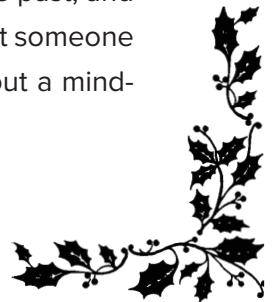
What childhood memories, if any, do you have attached to this song? I remember when I was very little, younger than eight, my parents bought me a Disney-themed Christmas album. I recall a rendition of “Silent Night,” though I have since



checked and learned it does not exist. Nevertheless, I can almost remember it — it is sweet and soothing like Sufjan's, but with Mickey Mouse singing lead. This phantom recollection gives way to a memory of me and my two cousins sitting in my bedroom, looking out my window: we are watching for Santa Claus. I think we see him, but it might be an airplane. Santa's distant looming shadow brings us into the living room, where our parents probably drink wine and talk about adult things, the clock ticking towards presents, some ancient videogame blaring from the television. Later in his career, Sufjan will sing, "the past is still the past, the bridge to nowhere," but I don't think he considered magical sleigh rides.

Christmas was never a sorrowful time for me. I've heard of the Christmas blues, but even at my most feverishly anxious and lonely, I loved Christmas, the warm comfort of it, the gifts, family, dinner, sleep. On Christmas Day, 2018, my childhood best friend Michael Gardynik passed away. I found out a couple of days later and went to his viewing, then funeral.

His loss sparked in me a new reverence for nostalgia, of looking to the past and reaching for what was there. It taught me "you can never go back home," which I guess makes sense to me now. There is no time machine or Nostalgia drug (à la Watchmen) through which we can see and feel the past, and sometimes it drives me bugshit. Have you ever lost someone and dreamed of them, only to wake up? Talk about a mindfuck.



We only have our imperfect memories, guided by shifting recollection and the stories we tell ourselves and each other, and so we inevitably change the past as we go forward. I remember a Christmas long ago when my parents gave me a Nintendo 64 (Jungle Green with Donkey Kong 64). Michael's family visited in the morning, gave me Pokémon Snap, received their presents in kind, probably stayed for coffee and cake (who can remember?), and went home. We can never do that again, and it fucking sucks.

I know Christmas can most accurately be represented by spreadsheets of sales figures, but within that callous capitalism lies a beating, sometimes growing heart, like a bizarre Grinch, who, in spite of its cold salesmanship, represents a better part of us, in a Christmas sort of way (if you squint enough). We get the toys, we give the toys, we mope and laugh and grow a little, we get dragged to midnight mass, we share our coffee and cake. If we're lucky, we take that with us and live it again, always for the first time.

I still love that mystical feeling, my watchful eyes scanning for Santa through our window. When my love and I lay down on a silent night, holy night in late December, our souls dancing in the lamplit streets of the infinite, twirling with candy canes and snowflakes and seasonal beer, we will drift into sleep and then into dreams, and maybe I will see my friend again, and make up for lost time.

~





O Come O Come Emmanuel



by: Kathleen Bellavia

originally published: December 6th, 2019

I have never been a fan of the Christmas music typically played on the radio, even Christian radio. For most of my life, I was too embarrassed to admit it. The only time I would hear Christmas music that moved me was in church when someone would play “O Come O Come Emmanuel,” usually on a piano. I felt like that song captured the mix of emotions probably felt by those present at that first Christmas. There was elation at the birth of Jesus, but also uncertainty, doubt, and a world of brokenness. I had spent every December of my adult life wishing for holiday music that was more meaningful and captured both the sadness and joy that had been the experience of my life.

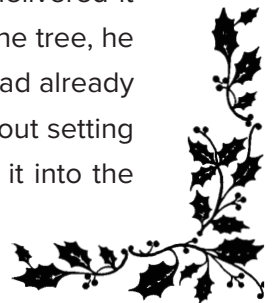
I have been a fan of Sufjan’s music since 2005 when I first discovered Seven Swans. In December of 2007, I was going through one of the hardest times of my life, and I set out on iTunes to look for some Christmas music that wouldn’t make me feel so isolated. Everyone around me was excited for Christmas, I was not, and radio Christmas music was a constant reminder of that. I thought maybe Christmas wasn’t for everyone, that it wasn’t for me. Because I was already familiar with Sufjan’s music, I bought Songs for Christmas as soon as I saw it and was pretty confident that Sufjan would



deliver exactly what I was looking for. Songs for Christmas far exceeded my expectations and has been the soundtrack to my Decembers ever since. I purchased Silver and Gold as soon as it became available and have been equally thrilled with that collection of songs.

The first time I heard “O Come O Come Emmanuel,” one of the first songs on Songs For Christmas, I knew I had found something very special. I had never heard such a beautiful arrangement of the song, and the choice to use the banjo on such a melancholy song is wonderful. The lyrics of this song contain phrases of suffering such as “captive Israel,” “mourns in lonely exile,” “gloomy clouds of night,” and “death’s dark shadow,” but at the same time repeat the words “rejoice, rejoice, rejoice.” It’s a mix of sorrow and celebration, and isn’t that just like life and just like the human experience? And for some of us, this is also our Christmas experience.

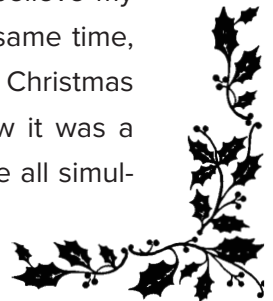
Most of my Christmases have been a mix and joy and sadness, and that Christmas of 2007 is a perfect example. I was a single mom of two boys, going through a terrible divorce and not receiving much in the way of financial support, so I was working three jobs and still struggling to make ends meet. I had never set up a Christmas tree by myself, so I went to the tree lot, picked out a tree, and paid them extra to deliver it and set it up for me. The man who delivered it was not the man I paid, so when he arrived with the tree, he expected payment to set it up. I explained that I had already paid, but he didn’t believe me and left angry without setting up the tree. So we did the best we could to get it into the



tree stand. It was noticeably crooked, and the night after we got it all decorated, it came crashing down. The baby Jesus broke off of the “Kneeling Santa” ornament, and I still have a clear memory of watching it slide across the wood floor far away from the tree and down the hall. I remember saying something along the lines of, “Even the Baby Jesus doesn’t want to stay around for this Christmas I’m trying to pull off.” But then came a Christmas miracle! I now refer to it as ‘The Miracle of the Christmas Dog Pee.’

We had two dogs, a good one named Beauty and a bad one named The Beast (it was actually Buddy, but he was a beast.) Beauty had a stocking hanging from the fireplace that said “Nice,” and The Beast had a stocking that said, (you guessed it) “Naughty.” The Beast was such a bad dog, and though I loved him dearly, dealing with his bad behavior added to my already stressful life. Also stressful was that Beauty was sick and taking steroids, which made her pee often and in weird places. She kept peeing on the rug right in front of the Christmas tree. Not on the wood floor where it would be easy to clean up.

Just as I thought I could not clean up another puddle again without losing my sanity, I noticed her pee was in the perfect shape of a candy cane. I called the boys in and we had a good laugh. The next time she peed I couldn’t believe my eyes and I called the boys. We all yelled at the same time, “A stocking!” It really was the perfect shape of a Christmas stocking. When it happened a third time, I knew it was a Christmas miracle. I called the boys again and we all simul-

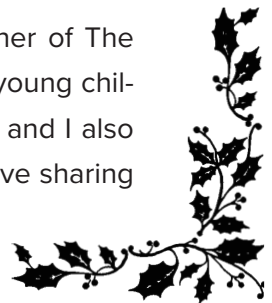


taneously shouted, “An angel!” It was like she was peeing inside of those Christmas cookie cutter shapes. But I don’t think Beauty had any of those because she didn’t bake. The miracle was not the dog pee, but that we could still laugh in such dark times. We have other joyful memories of Christmases during those tough years, and Sufjan’s Christmas music was the soundtrack to them all. God always provided, not only gifts, a tree, and good food, but more importantly, laughter and love.

Sufjan’s version of “O Come O Come Emmanuel” is just one example of a song that exemplifies this mixture of joy and pain together. His original songs in these collections also do this so well, but I don’t feel I could begin to put into words how brilliant those songs are. I do know that he is vulnerable and brave with his own life and music, so it naturally makes us not feel so isolated. In life, we all have times where we are fearful and physically exhausted as I was and not unlike the teenaged mother of Jesus. But God gives us special gifts and little miracles to remind us to have hope. Sufjan and his music are among these special gifts God has given us who are fans. Joy and hope in the midst of our brokenness is the gift of Christmas, and it is for everyone.

~

My name is Kathleen Bellavia, and I am the owner of The Music Makers—a traveling music studio teaching young children in Charlotte, North Carolina. My son, Justin, and I also teach ukulele classes and clubs for everyone. I love sharing





We're Going To The Country!



by: Taylor Grimes

originally published Decemeber 1st, 2018

As much as I adore the crunchy leaves of fall and the warm weather of summer, this is easily my favorite time of the year. Not only does winter represent a reprieve from work and the knowledge of imminent snowfall, but it's symbolic of a million little traditions that accompany the season.

Sure, there are “big” events like opening presents on Christmas, but it's also special because it's the only time of year when everything changes. The street lamps get wrapped in Christmas lights, the packaging on products gain red and green embellishments, everyone seems to adopt a different demeanor. Everything from car advertisements to storefront windows become snow-coated jingle-bell-adored mutations of their prior selves. The world seems to become a less harsh place. As much as I love these tactile Cinnamon-scented adoptions, music is the one seasonal change I look forward to the most.

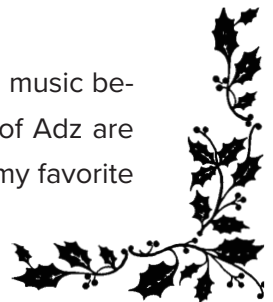
I'm the guy that breaks out the holiday music the second the clock strikes midnight on October 31st. I've got dozens of holiday-themed playlists, hundreds of Christmas albums, and (much to the chagrin of those around me) I'm not afraid to enjoy them for two months straight.



I'm also a deeply nostalgic person. During the summer I listen to last year's radio hits. In the autumn I revisit albums from fall terms now long gone. During the holidays, I break out multiple playlists of nostalgia-fueled tunes. From metal to Christmas classics, this season seems to cater to my personal brand of hyper-obsessive revisitation if only because the world itself is doing the same thing. Thanksgiving doesn't have carols. Easter doesn't have an anthem. Nobody has an Independence day album. Society has self-inflicted holiday nostalgia, and we're all along for the ride whether we like it or not.

The same way that a certain smell can evoke some long-buried memory, Christmas music is inextricably tied to events, feelings, and people of Christmases past. That time in elementary school when all I wanted was a copy of the board game Battleship. That time when I was stringing up Christmas lights with my dad and two brothers singing along to The Barenaked Ladies' dumb jokey version of "Jingle Bells." Making cookies with my mom after a day full of video games, podcasts, and warm sweaters. These heartwarming memories get fainter and fainter each day, but the right song can send the feeling rushing back in the most goosebump-inducing way possible. Music is the closest we'll ever get to bottling up nostalgia, and there's music made specifically for this month, so why not embrace it?

I've written about my deep connection to Sufjan's music before. While albums like *Carrie & Lowell* and *Age of Adz* are objectively-great artistic achievements, I reserve my favorite

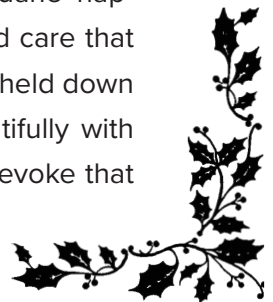


albums of his for these final two months of the year. Both Michigan and Illinois are records that I'll only spin from October 31st onward. Plus the man has over 100 Christmas songs to his name, so my November and December are basically inundated with Sufjan Stevens.

While I adore almost every song on both of his massive holiday-themed releases, one of the more obscure deep cuts that lies close to my heart is "We're Going To The Country."

The song itself is a warm, familial folk track and about as barebones as Sufjan's Christmas work ever gets. Clocking in at two minutes seventeen seconds, the song contains less than 100 words and is both pointed and direct while also taking as much time as it needs to deliver its message. Centering around a plucky banjo and gentle acoustic guitar, "We're Going To The Country" is a mid-tempo country-tinged jaunt with lyrics of fitted sheets and mistletoes. This track is also notable for being one of the few songs across Sufjan's 100 Christmas songs to not feature the man himself on vocals. Helmed by Matt Morgan, "We're Going to The Country" weaves a vague story of traveling to the country as a family and picking out a Christmas tree.

It's a simple song revolving around a simple event, but despite the surface-level retelling of such a mundane happening, the track manages to depict the love and care that goes into these types of traditions. The chorus is held down by carefully-wielded sleigh bells that meld beautifully with the established banjo/guitar melody to perfectly evoke that



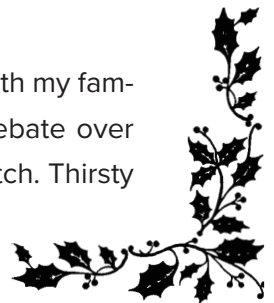
sense of wintery wonder that comes with this yearly expedition.

When I mentioned my multiple holiday-themed playlists earlier, the reason there are so many of them is because they are specific. The holidays are about tradition, and I've got my own self-enforced traditions that are just for me and no one else. A single song that I'll listen to while my family and I are on the way to a yearly dinner at one of our favorite restaurants. An album that I'll listen to while playing through a specific level of a video game. A compilation of songs that I listen to during the first snowfall of the year. They get pretty specific.

One of these hyper-specific holiday collections is a playlist of about a dozen songs that I listen to while my family is on our way to pick up our Christmas tree. One of the reasons Portland Oregon is such a wonderful place to live is its adjacency to everything. 90 minutes to the ocean. Two hours to the mountain. And (in my case) about 10-minutes away from full-on farmland.

While I'll admit it seems terribly-uninspired and on-the-nose to listen to a song about going to the country while going to the country, I feel like that sort of cheese is exactly what the holiday is about.

The song evokes warm early-morning car rides with my family packed into the van, ready to passionately debate over which tree is the best. Ready to get covered in pitch. Thirsty



for the complimentary hot cocoa on the ride home. Preparing for the coming afternoon of decorating, revising all of our favorite Christmas tree ornaments and reminding each other of the story behind each decoration.

“We’re Going To The Country” is a perfect encapsulation of Christmas. An unsuspecting and simple thing that grows into a tradition you care about more than words can explain. A universal experience that’s been changed, morphed, and customized with thousands of miniature traditions all built on top of one another. A unique expression of love that only comes once a year. An ever-changing feeling that possesses the power to bring your family closer together. The song has become one of the many, many things that warm my heart and fill me with joy around the Christmas season. A tradition all its own, and a reason to look forward to the winter, and it’s only two minutes long.

~

Taylor Grimes is a Portland-based writer, pop-culture geek, and co-creator of this very website. When he’s not baptizing himself in Christmas-based nostalgia you can usually find him writing about new music on his blog over at Swim Into The Sound. You can also catch him on Twitter @GeorgeTaylorG where is the purveyor of all hot takes, bad memes, and esoteric photoshops.





Lo! How A Rose E'er Blooming



by: Nicholas Webber

originally published Decemeber 12th, 2019

There are a handful of songs that I hold very dear for their uncanny ability to quiet my thoughts and revive me in the moments I feel faint. Sufjan Stevens's rendition of "Lo! How a Rose E'er Blooming" is one of those songs. As soon as I hear the guitar and banjo plucking that pastoral tune, I am immediately in a better place.

Sacred Christmas music elicits a whole host of memories and emotions for me. Although I was raised in church, my relationship to the religious side of Christmas is a bit unorthodox. I grew up in a fundamentalist evangelical church in Montana, and while I look back on this time fondly, my denomination didn't celebrate any Christian holidays.

As far as I could tell, we didn't celebrate these holy days because the Bible didn't explicitly command them; they had pagan origins. We didn't have a special Easter celebration. Any newcomers visiting our church for the traditional Christmas service would've been disappointed to find a desolate, snow-capped steeple with the lights off and nobody home (unless the 25th happened to fall on a Sunday, when the preacher would be obligated to say, "Now SOME people



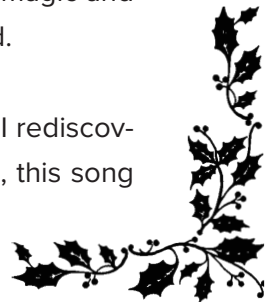
choose to celebrate this day as Christ's birthday, and that's not a bad thing. But we should celebrate Christ EVERY day.")

Ever the iconoclast, I remember lecturing my bewildered fourth-grade peers with great zeal, telling them that Jesus was most likely not born on the 25th of December and that celebrating his birthday on a certain day is unhistorical and arbitrary. Side note: I have always been really fun at parties.

Of course, my family and I still celebrated Christmas in our own way. Jesus was always a part of it. And it was always special and beautiful and holy. Familial warmth, Christmas goodies, carols, prayer, old decorations, and Santa Claus all swirled together to create a nutmeggy Yuletide concoction of epic proportions. I adored it. It was my favorite time of the year.

As I grew older, so grew my proclivity to overthink things. These days, it's tough for me to make sense of this Christ-haunted holiday. I attend an Anglican church, and every time Advent comes around, I struggle to categorize Christmas and its seemingly disparate elements, its bizarre blend of the holy and the profane. Is it more characterized by rampant consumerism or generosity? Is it about the Christ child? Is it a veritable smorgasbord of trite sentimentality? What are we to make of this holiday season? The magic and wonder that I felt so strongly as a child has waned.

When I listen to "Lo! How a Rose E'er Blooming," I rediscover that wonder. When God seems silent and cold, this song



The “Rose e’er blooming” refers to Mary, the mother of Jesus, the chosen bearer of the Mystery. I love that the long-awaited fulfillment of these prophecies is described in such modest language: “It came, a flower bright / Amid the cold of winter.” The miracle of the Incarnation is encapsulated in the poignant, fragile beauty of a budding flower.

And then comes the twist ending to the story of redemption: “To show God’s love aright / She bore to us a Savior / When half spent was the night.” When the second syllable of “Savior” is sung, a borrowed chord is employed, which swaps the expected minor chord with a major chord and gives the cadence a surprising, optimistic lift, a lovely instance of text-painting that mirrors the unexpected, undeserved gift of divine intervention.

My favorite part of Sufjan’s version is the many instances of caesura, the prolonged pauses which give the song its lilting, pensive quality. In these pauses, I feel space to breathe. This song gives me permission to slow down and rest in the tension of my ever-shifting faith and the utter patchwork wackiness of the Christmas season. When I listen to this song, I no longer feel a need to reconcile all of the competing narratives in my head. I can simply listen to the words that were penned centuries before stocking stuffers and weird stop motion TV specials and just be still.



And when I listen to this song, it's all sacred. Everything is sacred; the tree, the laughter, the blinking lights, the liturgy, all of it. I am a child. And if even for just a moment, I can say that I believe.

He came like a little flower in the middle of a cold, cold winter.

Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah.

~

Nicholas Webber (@nickrwebber) lives in the Denver metro. He's trying his darndest to reclaim any childlike wonder he has lost over the past several years. He enjoys being creative and writing songs. He likes those scented wax melters and his long socks with whales on them.





It's Christmas! Let's Be Glad!



by: Phoebe

originally published December, 23rd 2019

For weeks now, writing this piece has loomed in my mind and on my to-do list; I didn't where how to start. But now, nine days after I promised to have this written in a week, I sit in my Airbnb in the heart of Milan, fueled by a few hours of stunted sleep and airplane food, and am finally ready to write this. First, some backstory: I discovered Sufjan (like many other teens, I imagine) through Call Me by Your Name. It was perhaps a few weeks after the Oscars, and I was watching the trailer for the movie when I was captivated by the ethereal music in the background. A quick Google search led me to the song title ("Mystery of Love," of course) and the singer (whose name I thought was pronounced "Suff-jan"), and thus an obsession was born.

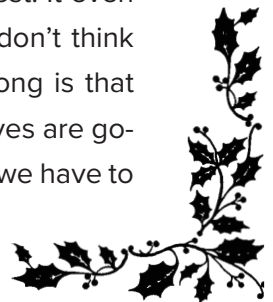
It started slowly at first, discovering more of his songs here and there, then it quickly snowballed: I made a Tumblr just to get notifications for when he posted there, he became my most-listened-to artist on Spotify last year, and I bought a green "Say Yes to Michigan!" shirt, among other things. I was completely enraptured by him: his concept albums featuring songs with long, eccentric titles and grandiose orchestral arrangements and mythological references abound. I mainly listened to Carrie and Lowell and Illinois, then delved into



Michigan, All Delighted People, The Age of Adz, The Avalanche, and Planetarium with unrivaled zeal. With that being said, it wasn't until this past summer that I dared venture into his impressive Christmas catalog, save for "That Was the Worst Christmas Ever!," "Sister Winter," and "Did I Make You Cry On Christmas Day? (Well, You Deserved It!)."

Let me paint you a picture: I was on a family road trip, it was July, and we were barreling down the road to see the Four Corners, then later the Grand Canyon. It was perhaps the least Christmas-y setting you could conjure. I was seated in the middle of the back row of the rental car, flanked by my twin sister and younger brother, and I had exhausted all my auditory go-to's. So, I decided, what better time than then to finally delve into Sufjan's Christmas music? I put in my earbuds, turned up the volume, and off I went. Which brings me to the song I've chosen to write about: "It's Christmas! Let's Be Glad!" This song was one of many that stood out to me that sweltering summer day. To be honest, it wasn't my first pick to write about (I'm more emotionally affected by the previously mentioned songs, especially "Sister Winter"), but my other top choices were taken, and this seemed a worthy substitute.

A concise one minute and fifty-five seconds long, "It's Christmas! Let's Be Glad!" is at once catchy and uplifting with a more somber undertone, done with true Sufjan zest. It even rhymes. I'm not going to analyze the lyrics, as I don't think it lends itself to that, but what I get out of the song is that Sufjan is telling us that no matter how badly our lives are going, stop and take a moment to appreciate all that we have to



be grateful for, saccharine as that may sound. Everyone has something for which to be grateful (the world is abundant!). And so my parting message: if you've had a difficult year, or if your Christmas isn't panning out like the Hallmark movies say it will, find something to be glad for and (to quote the maestro himself) keep it moving!

~

Phoebe is a high school student living in Upstate New York. Her main loves include Sufjan Stevens (duh), Vampire Weekend, and Ben and Jerry's ice cream. She is a strong proponent of the Oxford comma. She currently has no projects or accounts to plug, but plans on starting a blog in the near future.





Holy, Holy, Etc.



by: Keith Schnabel

originally published December 6th, 2018

My mother's many gifts couldn't fit on Santa's sleigh. Among them are songwriting and an ability to effortlessly win the adoration of small children, both of which she employed in writing and directing original Christmas pageants at our small Evangelical church. She has passed onto me her passion for songwriting, as well as a delicious holiday monkey bread recipe we make every Christmas eve. It was while making that annual monkey bread together this year that we found ourselves in disagreement over a new tradition: my Christmas playlist.

Created three years ago during our last Christmas together, my playlist covers the entire sad/happy spectrum of Christmas songs, from reverent liturgical hymns to obscure English carols to modern classics by Bing Crosby, Mariah Carey, and members of the Rat Pack. It is, in my humble opinion, perfect. I have played it religiously every December since in memory of our last Christmas together.

However, this is the first December I have spent with my parents since founding this new tradition, and my mother is not a fan. When an admittedly melancholic choir performance of a Latin hymn was immediately chased with a Sufjan song,



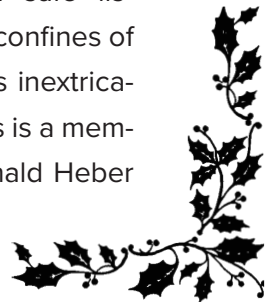
my mother took a break from her monkey bread making to finally voice her displeasure with Mr. Stevens' songwriting:

"Well, your mother is depressed, now."

Perhaps my sad/happy balance was off-kilter. I would argue this is not Sufjan's fault: *Songs For Christmas* features a number of joyous, one-minute instrumental covers of Christmas tunes as well as Sufjan's achingly beautiful arrangement of "Holy, Holy, Holy," its penultimate track. But "Holy Holy Etc." is neither of these things. This 41-second track (really, 32 seconds followed by a long silence) is little more than a harmony guitar part interrupted by off-putting laughter. So what is it doing here?

Honestly, I have no idea. The hymn the track is riffing on is not even a Christmas song, strictly speaking. Anglican bishop Reginald Heber wrote "Holy, Holy, Holy" in the early 19th century as a hymn for Trinity Sunday, a spring holiday, to the tune of an earlier song which was also about the doctrine of the Trinity. So what we have inherited is, apparently, an aborted arrangement of "Holy, Holy, Holy," a track which is itself lifted from an earlier song, neither of which is about Christmas.

Stevens is famously Christian. It's what made him "safe" listening when I was a teenager struggling with the confines of Evangelicalism. But Stevens' faith, like Heber's, is inextricable from playfulness and creativity. In fact, Stevens is a member of the same Anglican Communion that Reginald Heber



was a bishop in. During his lifetime, the Anglican Church was about as receptive of Heber's songwriting as my mother is of Sufjan's; Heber's hymns were not permitted to be sung in church for being too informal and playful. Today, though, "Holy, Holy, Holy" is a beloved Anglican hymn that has been covered by countless artists as a Christmas song because, really, how many other old hymns do people still know nowadays?

In a 2012 interview with *Uncut*, Sufjan laid down his philosophy of Christmas songwriting:

"The elusive Christmas hit usually has an indelible melody, clever wordplay, and juxtaposition of conflicting consciousness: joy and heartache, or sacred and profane. Christmas is a Catch-22. We celebrate "God made man" with luxurious feasts and revelry in the dead of winter when nature is least inviting. The best Christmas songs (even the secular ones) tap into this bi-polar emotional field."

Like many who leave their childhood faiths behind, I find Christmas to be at once nostalgic and profoundly painful in ways I cannot describe. It's like your ex is having a birthday party and they've invited your entire family. You go, you even have a bit of fun, but there is an unspoken weirdness to the whole evening. Sufjan speaks that weirdness and, when words fail, arranges it to be played by a couple of guitars and an ethereal laugh.



But every Advent needs its Christmas, every yin its Auld Lang Syne. Cheery, tinsley, secular holiday tunes are every bit as valid as the dour ones. “Silver Bells,” “Santa Baby,” and “Let It Snow” are as Christmassy as monkey bread and as Jewish as Baby Jesus: the holiday pull-apart known to us today as golden dumpling coffee cake or monkey bread traces its roots to a Hungarian Jewish pastry called Aranygaluska, and the aforementioned songs were written by Jewish songwriters. They have snuck into the Christmas canon by the same route as “Holy, Holy, Holy” — they bring us joy.

After a bit of grumbling, I added some Nat King Cole to the playlist to rebalance its vibe, and Mother and Child finished making the monkey bread together in heavenly peace. It turned out, in our humble opinions, perfect.

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Keith Schnabel is a producer of activist films. Their documentary on the legacy of mental asylums can be previewed at mentalitymovie.com.





Amazing Grace



by: Eddie Brown

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When I was kindly approached to contribute to A Very Sufjan Christmas, the song that immediately came to mind was, in fact, not a Christmas song. The seventh and ultimate track on Sufjan's Noel: Songs For Christmas - Vol. 1 (2001), "Amazing Grace" has that ever-so-rare quality: every single time that I hear it, I immediately stop what I'm doing, raise the volume, and listen. Is there a name for that sensation? There probably is in German... Shuttupannleestentoit? However you label the unique phenomenon, any artist would consider themselves lucky to curate this feeling with a song just once; it speaks to his singular talent that Sufjan has performed dozens of songs that evoke the same response. Like many of the songs on his Christmas album, Sufjan did not actually compose this song, which raises the question: where did this universally recognizable tune come from? Actually, this simple song has deep roots, with origins older than the USA itself.

Originally penned as a hymn by John Newton in 1779, the song tells the story of the priests' early days as a slave trader. Yes, this spiritual tear-jerker that's been used as a rallying call for crying puppies and bearded old guys pleading for pen-nies was first written by an 18th-century slave trader - one who was described by his captain as the most profane sailor



with whom he'd ever set sail. After Newton had a near-death experience in a terrible storm that smashed up his ship off the coast of Ireland, he promptly excused himself from sea-faring and found God, joining the Church of England. As a reformed man and a priest in England, it was this nearly fatal storm that inspired Newton to write his hymn, praising the divine grace through which he believed himself saved - both literally and spiritually. It would become the spiritual song we know today when it was set to the tune of "New Britain" by William Walker in 1835. Now, it is performed an estimated 10 million times annually and is one of the most recognizable songs in the English language.

So, what is it about Sufjan's performance of this song that makes it 1 in 10 million? And why, for Santa's sake, is this 250-year-old hymn on an X-mas album?

To Sufjan, the creation of music is the purest form of gift giving - a concept that he ties as closely to God as it is commonly tied to the holidays. In a blog post discussing Lewis Hyde's *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, Sufjan weighs the difference between selling and giving, as it pertains to his faith and his art. Diving into his religious beliefs, Sufjan considers the ceremony of the Eucharist - in which Jesus gives his very flesh and blood to his followers - to be a Grace "spiritual made corporeal."



Similarly, he contemplates the gift of romance and eroticism, writing: “To make art is to make love.” WLike God, we give our bodies to our partners, and it is also in this manner that we give our art to the world. To Sufjan, creating art is like creating life: a gift given for the very preservation of humanity.

All these gifts - religious, romantic, or artistic - must be something freely given, because to demand reciprocity would be to demean generosity. In his blog, Sufjan concludes, in words too sweet to paraphrase: “perfect art, as a perfect gift (without ulterior motive, without gain, without compensation) courageously gives itself over to the world asking nothing in return. Do I engage with my work as a father cultivates his child, with loving-kindness, with fierce enrichment, with awe and wonder, with unconditional love, with absolute sacrifice? I make this my impossible objective.”

No, “Amazing Grace” is not a song about Christmas. But it is a song about divine charity, about giving sight to the blind, relief to those afraid, and a return to home for those who are lost. These concepts purely embody the holiday spirit of generosity and, to Sufjan, the very nature of music itself. And, like all of his music, this song is a “perfect gift,” and the rare accomplishment of his impossible objective: a beautiful, unconditional gift from him and his friends to the listener. And for that, we are grateful.

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Eddie Brown has never written for any publication, and assumes that after reading his piece that you can now understand why. He loves Christmas almost as much as he loves blathering on about music. He is also very grateful to the organizers of this project for the opportunity to write about one of his favorite pieces of music as performed by one of his favorite artists. Happy Holidays!

