



O Come, O Come Emmanuel



by: Jocelyn Au-Yeung

originally published December 17th, 2020

There was a time in my life where Christmas was like magic. I remember being 11 and running around my church, still enraptured by the sensations of the season. It wasn't Christmas just yet — it was the beginning of December, and every year, the church staff would haul out a towering tree and swaddle it in dimmed lights and shining decorations, waiting for the tree lighting ceremony. There would be cookies and candy canes for all the children, snow outside, and no school to look forward to. They even had a photo booth in a side room with ridiculous hats and props so all the moms could have family holiday pictures to show off.

At home, we had stopped putting up the tree. My mom was raising three kids herself, and setting up, getting needles everywhere, dropping ornaments, then tearing down at the end of the season was a bit too much. So every year, I'd look forward to the one at church. I still loved Christmas wholeheartedly then, with childlike abandon. It hadn't lost its shine on me yet, and I loved every part of it (except for the holiday pictures). Christmas was a time of celebration and joy, and I was looking forward to it with every fibre of my tiny heart.



A Very Sufjan Christmas

I remember sitting in the front row on the left side of the church sanctuary, where the tree stood. My closest church friend sat next to me, and we were listening to Bruno Mars' "Count On Me" on repeat on my iPod Shuffle. Then, the ceremony began and we rose to sing hymns.

*O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appears
Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice!
Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice!*

Even as a little kid, I was always struck by "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." While songs like "Joy To the World" and "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" are loud and blatantly joyous, "O Come" was, in a word, haunting. It's quiet, subdued, even somber. Yes, there are other quieter, softer Christmas hymns, but they are peaceful, soothing even.

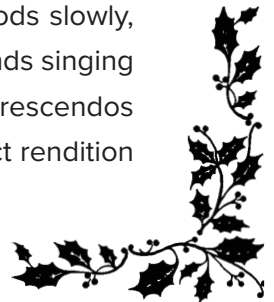
But in "O Come," there is pain deep in the soul of it. It is the crying out of a people in captivity, who suffer at their own hands and the hands of others, seemingly abandoned by their God. It is not as raucously hopeful as some Christmas songs tend to be. It reaches out cautiously, not wishing to hope for too much, not daring to rejoice without its hurt. I didn't appreciate it all those years ago, at least not in the way I do now.



When I look back at my younger self at Christmas, I can't help but mourn for her, especially now. Along the way, that brazen love for Christmas faded when all the good things with Christmas became complicated. My relationships with my family changed as we got old and moved for school, our interests changing. Gifts lost their magic when I became a teenager that people didn't know what to get. This year, we're separated from family and friends, losing the experiences that actually made holidays fun. My church, the one I grew up in for all these years, has problems that I've woken up to, and I'm starting to transition out of it. Things are not shiny and bright and perfect. There is pain in each of the things that disappoint us.

*O come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death's dark shadows put to flight
Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice!
Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice!*

I discovered Sufjan a couple of years ago, and I fell in love with the way he perfectly captures all the weird, multi-layered facets of Christmas in his own way. He does it here on "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" too. The song trods slowly, the banjos strumming a steady beat, the woodwinds singing its eerie melody. Sufjan's voice sings clear and crescendos with crashing drums at its end. I think it's a perfect rendition



of the hymn in a lot of ways. It doesn't lose what makes "O Come" so special.

In the song's pain and haunting melancholy, it dares to hope in deliverance. Deliverance from pain, suffering, grief. And in that deliverance the song hopes for, it rejoices. In the agonizing disappointments and sorrows of life, it chooses to cast them out and clings to faith in something greater than itself. In a lot of ways, it's a prayer that feels like shouting into the void, at least for me. But sometimes, that is all we have.

I might not have the same belief in Christmas magic, or even in life, that I did so long ago. Disappointments find a way to beat most of it out of you, however depressing that might be. But I can still sing this song, cautiously reaching out, hoping for deliverance, believing that there is something greater on the horizon to cling to. And until then, I rejoice — in the good and the bad, in what I've been given, and in the things that matter, even when they hurt.

~

Jocelyn is a student studying media production at Ryerson University in Canada. She once almost talked to Andy Shauf at a show and then chickened out. You can find her on Instagram (@ay.jocelyn) and on Twitter (@Lupins_).





Come on! Let's Boogie to the Elf Dance!



by: Matt Monroe

originally published December 7th, 2018

I'll keep it real with y'all, despite considering myself an avid Sufjan fan, I've yet to fully-dive into his Christmas output due to how daunting it is. There are 100 tracks from the core albums alone (not counting any singles or EPs I might be forgetting), and my choice here was a completely random one as Taylor asked me to join this project. I figured "why not?" and decided to choose the track name that made me laugh the most and hope the best from there.

Well, I do have a bone to pick with Mr. Sufjan Stevens here. Despite the fact that the song is called "Come on! Let's Boogie to the Elf Dance!", there are no mentions of elves in the song. There's lots of mentions of Santa and Jesus, but not one elf is mentioned throughout the song. With the track name, I'm thinking, oh hey, this could be like a story song about the elves having a little party for all the hard work they've done for their boss, but alas, it's just another song about being excited for Christmas and loving Jesus.

On a more serious note though, are Santa's elves his slaves? As far as we know, none of the elves are paid and their compensation is whatever lodging Santa gives them on the North



Pole. Alternatively, is the North Pole a communist commune where there is no currency and the elves work not for money, but for personal satisfaction and for the love of children across the world? Or is it an ethnostate with Santa and Mrs. Claus being the only exception?

Ok but for real though, this is a fine, serviceable Sufjan Christmas song. The instrumental arrangement here sounds lovely and could have easily fit on Illinois with some more polish. The way the song and the instrumentation builds and builds on top of itself towards the end before the tension releases, only to build itself back up again as the chorus and verse 3 duel it out before the outro and chorus do the same, before releasing again one last time. Overall, “Come on! Let’s Boogey to the Elf Dance!” is another lovely addition to the Sufjan Christmas canon, but I would like an answer to the questions I’ve raised throughout this write-up, sound off in the comments about what you think.

~

I’m a moderator and AMA coordinator over on /r/indieheads and host the Indieheads Podcast. Also, I run @NathanForYouOoC to add onto my increasing levels of clout which you are obviously impressed by. Proud Gamer American.





We Three Kings



by: Alex Hotovy

originally published December 15th, 2020

Man, this Sufjan fella really likes Christmas, doesn't he? 100 songs in 10 years, leaving no stone unturned—from a traditional reading of “Amazing Grace” on the very first disk of Songs for Christmas to the epic 12-minute opus “Christmas Unicorn” at the end of Silver and Gold, a song which blooms into an exuberant exultation, complete with bells, whistles, and an interpolation of Joy Division’s classic “Love Will Tear Us Apart.”

The aforementioned “Christmas Unicorn” is dense to the point an entire freaking dissertation has been written about it! While not necessarily dissertation worthy, other tunes like “Christmas in the Room” and “Sister Winter” feel like essential Sufjan originals, on par with his studio album work. Even with his Christmas covers, Sufjan often likes to have fun with them (or to reference a term I read a lot on the internet c. December 2017, subvert expectations), especially on the latter Silver and Gold discs.

“We Three Kings” is not one of those covers. Instead, it’s a fairly straightforward rendition released on the third disk on the Songs for Christmas compilation, recorded in December 2003. In the Sufjan Stevens Cinematic Universe Timeline,



this comes four months after the release of *Michigan*, three months before *Seven Swans*, and 19 months before *Illinois*. Of all the songs on Disk 3, “We Three Kings” is the closest musical match to *Seven Swans* and *Illinois*—it has the bucolic banjo strums of “All the Trees” or “In the Devils Territory.” At the same time, the ambient ending would not sound out of place as a 45-word-titled interlude on *Illinois*.

Of all popular Christmas carols, “We Three Kings” has always been an outlier, with its 6/8 rhythm and lilting melody, which gives it an exotic flair. Wikipedia says that the carol’s melody “highly resembles a song from the Middle Ages and Middle Eastern music, both of which it has been frequently compared to.” Do with that what you will.

In Christian tradition, “We Three Kings” describes the story of Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar’s journey; the Biblical Magi who brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the birth of Jesus. The original lyrics contain five verses and a chorus—Sufjan sings only verses 1 and 5 and the chorus, forgoing verses 2, 3, and 4, which are written each from the perspective of one of the Magi.

This lyrical decision to omit those verses makes the song’s content more ubiquitous. Sufjan’s stylistic choices underscore that feeling of ubiquity; rather than make it about one specific journey, his version uses the framework of the Magi’s journey to deliver a more universal message.

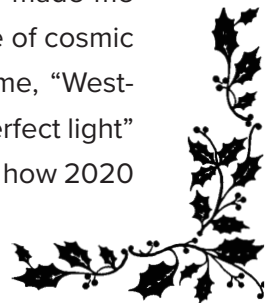


While listening to his version of “We Three Kings,” I thought long and hard about what I’d talk about. While I often listened to it in preparation and never viewed it as anything less than pleasant, I never really could get an angle on it. Like many things in life, my breakthrough was entirely accidental. While at a red light just minutes away from the laundromat, I added “We Three Kings” to my Spotify queue, but I arrived before it played.

Because it was November, it was already dark when I left the coin laundry. After laundry, groceries, and a long day at work, I had that feeling of just being really damn tired. Halfway along my drive, it was “We Three Kings” turn on the queue, and unexpectedly, the song hit me differently for the first time.

As we all know, the secret ingredient to any great Sufjan song is yearning (as an aside, my all-time favorite Christmas song is “Christmas (Baby Please Come Home)” by Darlene Love, the ultimate in Christmas yearners. I notice a trend).

Under the streetlights of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, it felt to me like Sufjan, with his ever-earnest vocals, buoyed by organ, banjo, and tambourine, delivered each lyric perfectly, the exact way I needed to hear them. Lines like “Star of wonder / Star of night / Star with royal beauty bright” made me look up at the night sky and filled me with a sense of cosmic wonder and existential yearning. At the same time, “Westward leading / still proceeding / Guide us to thy perfect light” hit close to home in regards to my life journey and how 2020



has felt for me. The real *pièce de résistance* are Sufjan's pair of wordless "ooh's" on the track, which carry a well of emotion better than the vast majority of lyrics could.

Here, Sufjan's minimal, pastoral instrumentation makes his version feel down-to-earth as opposed to some massive wall-of-sound pop production, and it's all the better for it. The slow, plodding tempo enhances the song's march-like feeling—the ever-forward path of progress on our own journeys. Each instrument plays its part—the banjo is rustic and personal, the organ adds harmonic texture while the tambourine keeps a simple, plodding rhythm. After 136 seconds, the song breaks down into ambient, random keyboard notes—a moment captured and lost. With these stylistic trappings, "Westward leading / still proceeding / Guide us to thy perfect light" becomes less of a travel narrative for three dudes and more of a life mantra.

Sufjan's understated version shines even further compared to "We Three Kings" performances by other artists; even one of my favorite groups of all time—the Beach Boys—don't quite hit the mark. In their case, the harmonies are pretty but have a jazz sensibility, which, complete with a big band arrangement, loses the flavor of what makes "We Three Kings" unique in the Christmas canon. Other versions suffer from souped-up production, unnecessarily acrobatic vocal performances, or head-scratching stylistic choices.



A Very Sufjan Christmas

Sufjan's version shines in its simplicity, capturing the essence of the song and imbuing it with his trademark spiritual folksiness, as well as a universal spiritual power. With everything life can throw at a person, this song is a comforting reminder that it's okay that we haven't made it to the "perfect light." Sometimes, simply "still proceeding" ain't too bad. Thanks for this one, Sufjan.

~

Alex lives and works in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. While he doesn't have any current projects to plug, you can follow him on Twitter at @ahotovy.





O Holy Night



by: Molly Sheffer

originally published December 14th, 2018

“O Holy Night” has always registered as one of the sadder, more solitary Christmas songs to me. If you have an album of the classics, it’s almost definitely not one of the bangers. I always wanted to skip it as a kid to move on to something more upbeat, or better yet, tied into one of my favorite Christmas specials. “O Holy Night” has the misfortune of being one of the Christmas songs with a definite religious theme, and no cartoon classic tie-in. Even “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” definitely one of the more overtly religious classics, gets the Charlie Brown treatment that leaves you wanting to shout along triumphantly against the frigid December night. “Hark” is armor against the cold and dark, even if you stopped going to church or stopped believing in god a long time ago... and the Charlie Brown aspect doesn’t hurt either.

“O Holy Night” is usually quiet and contemplative, at least the versions I heard of it in my childhood were. It feels like it takes an eternity to end, which I didn’t really appreciate at the time. With all the noise and activity, who wants to take a moment to step back and feel sad? Certainly not me.



I was raised Catholic in a family that attended mass regularly, but I maintained a healthy skepticism of the dogma for the most part. My mom, a dedicated do-gooder with a healthy anarchist streak, would go on to teach CCD and scandalize her students by telling them that the bible stories were just that – stories. They were there to guide the reader on how to be a good person in a complex world, not to instill a fear of an inscrutable divine power.

On the opposite side of that was my childhood best friend, who had converted with her mother to a hard-line fundamentalist Protestant sect, and had told me one day in the fifth grade girls bathroom that she heard God speak directly to her and it was a Big Deal. I remember being the 11 year old version of bemused because I could not even comprehend having the kind of faith that would allow me to entertain the prospect of God speaking directly to me. What would that even look like? How would I know it was God and not just me making it up? I came to the conclusion that if there was a group of people that God had chosen to be his agents, I was not going to be one of them. If that was what faith looked like, I did not have it and never would. I didn't really consider myself damned or cursed or anything that dramatic, just kind of neutral. We weren't really a keep the Christ in Christmas kind of family anyway, so it wasn't as if I would miss out on much by ducking out on God. Christmas would still be Christmas, just with fewer reasons to listen to the more serious Christmas songs, "O Holy Night" among them.

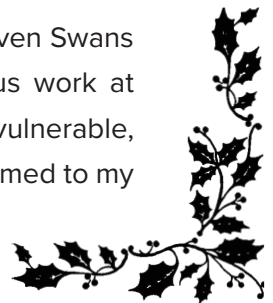


As I got older, the anxiety and depression that I had been treated in my childhood grew exponentially into forms I was unable to contend with for a very long time. One of the casualties of that was any enjoyment of the holidays. My mom had been good at managing Christmas so that her extremely anxious daughter could take part and enjoy the festivities, but even that got lost in the fog. I considered myself so unnecessary a person that the notion of enjoying it seemed wrong. Throughout high school, I had proven to myself that I was so completely unworthy of happiness or a future that I didn't deserve to enjoy a holiday based on faith, or family, or love.

Here's where Sufjan comes in. Finally.

What I did come to enjoy in those years, in spite of it all, was music. I had been a fledgling riot grrrl fan for a long time, but a webcomic I read religiously and my local college radio station threw me into the early aughts indie scene with a vengeance. I obsessed over the Arcade Fire Modest Mouse, Tegan and Sara, Broken Social Scene, pretty much any band out of Canada, and of course, Sufjan Stevens. I listened to *Illinois* when I first got to college, and found friends there that also clung to the bands that somehow helped get me through the last days of high school.

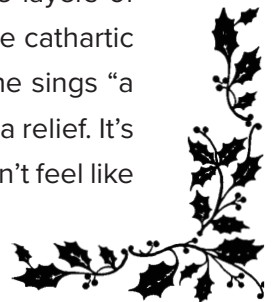
From there, I consumed his other records, but *Seven Swans* gave me pause. It was his most overtly religious work at that point, and to me, it still is one of his most vulnerable, which quite frankly scared the shit out of me. I claimed to my



friends that it was a creepy album and it became something of a running joke to us, shouting “seven swans” at each other in menacing voices. But the album lodged itself in my head, and I read everything I could find about Sufjan’s relationship with his faith. Here was this person who, in his music, laid bare his doubts and fears, but still believed in something. In his music, faith was not necessarily anathema to being kind of fucked up.

I didn’t come to Songs for Christmas until after Christmas 2014. I had spent Christmas 2013 in my grandmother’s house, watching her die from a long illness, and it was the very image of what “O Holy Night” had evoked to me all throughout my childhood. It was the cold, dark night before the joyous morning, except to me, the morning had never come. I sat in the dark, having only listened to “That Was the Worst Christmas Ever!” and feeling that I would never find my way out. And then, in 2014, a new friend who also loves Sufjan and I went back and forth listening to Songs for Christmas, and we came to “O Holy Night.”

Sufjan’s arrangement of “O Holy Night” was completely unexpected to me. It takes the slow sad meditation on the last night before any of us can find salvation, and turns it into a pure expression of potential energy. The familiar Sufjan banjo line propels the choral singalong, adding more layers of strings, glockenspiel, and horns until we get to the cathartic timpani build up that takes us to the end. When he sings “a thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,” it’s almost a relief. It’s as if he’s saying, “I know it’s been hard and you don’t feel like



you're good enough, but come be a part of what's happening next." Few Christmas songs to me encapsulate that feeling of being utterly hopeless and in the dark, but still finding the determination to move forward and create something better. The faith in "O Holy Night" isn't a faith of certainty or for a certain elect. It is for everyone who has ever felt alone and terrified and unworthy, with Sufjan himself leading the march through the last hours before morning. He is vulnerable and imperfect, but he's here and that's enough. It's enough for all of us.

~

Molly Sheffer lives in the NYC area where one can have a lot of sincere thoughts about music, god, literature, and video games, but also be made of crystalized rage from October to April. This is one of her first public writing projects in a long time, and she plans on populating littlebutbad.wordpress.com with more short essays shortly. Her next planned project is the Laura Dern Game Jam Zine.





That Was the Worst Christmas Ever!



by: Sara Loebig

originally published December 14th, 2018

Christmas is unfair. Not the religious holiday- which is matter-of-fact, at least, depending on your creed it is. The idea of Christmas, the one we all created within the past few hundred years for ourselves, has enveloped itself to the point where we've set the bar so high that almost no one can reach it.

You see, having a perfect Christmas requires also having a perfect family, and that's not something I believe exists. Maybe it's my lack of faith, but I don't believe a perfect human being is possible- but that's okay. We have to navigate each other's flaws on a daily basis, and that's part of the experience of being human. That human experience is tested the most during a Christmas holiday gathering.

The scene in Christmas Vacation when the magnificent Turkey arrives at the table, only to completely deflate when cut, is the experience we've all set ourselves up for. Whether we like it or not, we've all seen the ads and got a picture inside of our heads of what our holidays will be like. It won't be like that. It can't be like that.



We can't blame ourselves or each other for not being perfect. We can learn from our mistakes, and we can stop lying to ourselves and learn to accept each other- if the situation should warrant it. Some families are touched by tragedy that others will never begin to understand. For some, the holidays bring about more stress and sadness than any other day of the year.

And that's what Christmas is really about, Charlie Brown. It's about enjoying what we have and supporting those who don't. It's about putting a toy in a donation box and letting it arrive at its destination without getting credit. It's about wishing a friend well on Christmas Day that isn't seeing their family this year, their choice or not. It's about indulging your father's desire to watch Christmas Vacation every year, so much so that you've referenced it in an otherwise serious piece.

It's about accepting the truth about yourself and the others around you. Can you say what you want to be?

~

Sara Loebig is the founder of Voice Piece, a feminist music blog. She lives in Brooklyn, New York with three cats that do not belong to her.





Ding! Dong!



by: Anthony Cervo

originally published December 21st, 2021

This write-up is meant to be read along with the song.

For the ideal experience, play “Ding! Dong!” as you read.

I wrangled the family to go pick out our tree last night. It was a silent ride except for Mariah on the radio. We brought an untouched Thermos of hot chocolate and admired the Christmas lights tickling the windshield. Like every year, we go to the typical white-tented apparition at the local fairgrounds. We took my wife’s mouse-like hatchback for some reason, sure to soon resemble the Grinch’s toppling sleigh. Our son wore his skeleton pajamas while galloping down the recently forested aisles, shout-singing “Jingle Bell Rock.” The trees stood at attention like unwhittled toy soldiers. He pointed to the ten-footer. “Sorry, my boy.” He looked to his mother. She had wandered to the corner of forsaken branches that didn’t survive the ceremonial pre-purchase tree-dragging. Once you pick your tree, it’s schlepped to the front, shedding sprigs like piney entrails. They use them to make wreaths, but I’ve never seen them. She always loved the smell of pine. It reminded her of him.

Giddy-up jingle horse, pick up your feet. Jingle around the clock!



The owner, like a Santa-sized Jabba the Hutt, glides up to us on a golf cart with his oxygen tank in tow. Feigning propriety, he finds his breath and gnarled, “You finding everything alright?” Turning her vacant gaze from the drooping star atop the model tree, she looks through me, “I want to go home.”

~

Anthony Cervo is a husband/dad/musician/artist from Winter Park, FL. He sings lead and plays guitar/banjo in his band, Mt. Eleanor. The best advice he can bestow upon you this Christmas season was best said by our wise sage David Bowie: “turn and face the strange.” Accompaniment written, produced, recorded, and mixed by Anthony Cervo. Narrated by friend/artist/actor Stephan Monteserin.

Personal Instagram: @anthonycervo

Band Instagram: @mteleanor

Email: ant.cervo@gmail.com





All the King's Horns



by: Colin Haggerty

originally published December 18th, 2019

Psalms 72:11 May all Kings fall down before him

I gravitated towards this song because it shines a sort of creepy light on Christmas, so I wanted to make a cover of it to kind of roll with that idea. I began carrying the lyrics around at the front of my head for the entirety of November.

Nothing is wrong, it's what she did.

All the king's horns raise the dead.

As these lines stirred around my head, I started to think about what I could remember from my upbringing about the birth of Jesus and how it compares to this story. The whole thing feels scary yet hopeful. A birth of an unexplained pregnancy, Kings following a star to find the chosen one, and a war between those who believed and those who didn't. The dark nature of this song begins to feel more and more celebratory as it goes by- and that is a perfect metaphor for Christmas.

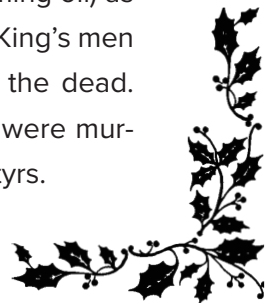
He came to raise up the dead



Throughout my overthinking of this song, I decided to look into comments and theories on Sufjan's would-be hymn. There weren't many, but one led down a long path; someone suggested that this song was a reference to the Massacre of the Innocents.

In the Gospel of Matthew (and literally nowhere else in the Bible), King Herod the Great ordered for every child under the age of two to be murdered in Bethlehem and the surrounding areas. Joseph intended on divorcing Mary quietly, as she had been impregnated by the Holy Spirit... not exactly an Emmy-award-winning sell. Nevertheless, an angel appeared to him in a dream and warned him to take Mary away from Bethlehem for the birth. The angel also told Joseph to name the baby Jesus, as he would save people from their sins.

King Herod called upon three wise men to follow a newly-risen star, brighter than the rest. The chosen one would be there, and they should bring him back. In a dream, much like Joseph's, the Wisemen were told to not return to him. They would follow the star and find the baby, giving him three gifts: gold as a symbol of kingship on earth, frankincense (an incense) as a symbol of deity, and myrrh (an embalming oil) as a symbol of death. All the King's horses and all the King's men would be saddled and worn. Jesus would raise the dead. The Catholic Church considers the children who were murdered in Jesus' stead to be the first Christian Martyrs.



A Very Sufjan Christmas

Most philosophers consider this whole story to be folklore.

I agree.

I like it, though.

~

Colin Haggerty

Ship & Sail

Bandcamp shipandsail.bandcamp.com

Ship and Sail on Spotify, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram





The Friendly Beasts



by: Hunter Prueger

originally published December 9th, 2018

I grew up very close to most of my extended family, and music was an omnipresent factor of our upbringing. There was a point when four of my cousins and I were all in the same high school marching band. One of them was the drum major and the rest of us each played a different instrument. I have no idea why we never formed a band.

I also come from a family with many, many traditions. My cousins and I made some of them up, and those ones usually made no sense. As kids on Thanksgiving we would pretend to be turkeys and parade around our grandparents' house chanting, "Protest! Protest! Just because that we are edible doesn't mean that you can eat us!" right before eating a Thanksgiving turkey. But unlike the Turkey Protest, some of these traditions are holiday staples that predate us. "The Friendly Beasts" is one of those traditions.

On Christmas Eve, my extended family sits in a circle in my grandparents' living room and sings "The Friendly Beasts" with paper bag puppets of each of the animals in the song. My grandmother or my sister will play the piano, and your animal puppet determines the verse you sing. Everyone sings the first and last verses. Everyone, except my dad.



I like to give credit to my family and my musical upbringing as a big reason why I have chosen to pursue music as an academic and career path, but almost none of that credit is allowed to go to my dad. He is the least musical person I have ever met in my life. When we sing “The Friendly Beasts” my dad usually goes for the donkey (I assume because, you know, ass) and sometimes, instead of singing, he rolls his eyes, takes a deep breath, and belts a loud “HEEHAW,” or maybe some other sound that may or may not sound like a donkey-pterodactyl hybrid animal. This family sing-along often deteriorates into uncontrollable laughter at one point or another.

It might sound like my dad hates the tradition, but that’s not true. He loves it. He might not admit it, but I know he does. He was estranged to his family for my entire childhood. It wasn’t until my senior year of high school that he finally met up with his dad for the first time in 25 years, but he died a few months after that. My dad cherishes these traditions because it’s one thing that keeps our family together.

I used to think that “The Friendly Beasts” was a well known Christmas tune, but about two years ago, while my friends and I were recording our own Christmas album, one of them asked, “What’s your favorite Christmas song?” Of course, I said “The Friendly Beasts,” but nobody in the room had ever heard of it. It seemed weird to me, but even now I’m finding out that some people think it’s a Sufjan original.



It was soon after that I realize that my connection with this song goes beyond, “It’s my favorite Christmas song.” This song is very special to me. It encompasses everything that I love about my family, our ridiculous traditions, and everything I’ve loved so much about growing up so close to my cousins.

There is no rendition of this song that captures all of this better than the Sufjan Stevens recording on Songs For Christmas. The warm and inviting orchestration, the trading off of lead vocals by verse, the sheer number of vocal parts and harmonizations, and the “Let’s gather ‘round and sing a song!” spirit of the recording all evoke the memories I have of sitting in a circle in my grandparents’ living room with our paper bag puppets and my dad’s animalistic outbursts.

This year is the first time that I will not be home for Christmas. My sister had a child, so I’m going to Utah to celebrate Christmas with them. I’ll be missing out on one of my favorite traditions, but at least I have Sufjan Stevens’ recording of “The Friendly Beasts” to remind me of home.

~



Hunter Prueger is a composer and musician based in Austin, Texas where he is pursuing a master's degree in music composition from the Butler School of Music at the University of Texas at Austin. Despite primarily being a classical musician, he would describe himself as an avid music fan of almost all kinds throughout the entire history of music.

His music has been described as “exceptionally clever and original”, and you can listen to some of it here:
<http://hunterprueger.bandcamp.com>

And you can listen to the aforementioned Christmas album here: <https://farwell2ndsouth.bandcamp.com/>
(warning: it's not good, but we had fun making it)

