



# Christ the Lord is Born



by: Don Shennum

originally published December 11th, 2021

Sufjan Steven's "Christ the Lord is Born" is a sparse 50-second piano instrumental. My early impression is it was a minimalist version of a more traditional Christmas hymn. I had heard similar jazzed/popped up Christmas songs with the same title. In my head canon, I had Sufjan start out with a highly syncopated and stylized version similar to this, something that would fit right in on Illinois. A couple years back, I finally paid attention to the song credits. Turns out, there is no official Christmas hymn with that title. Sufjan's version is a faithful cover of eastern European composer Leos Janacek's 1909 Christmas composition.

In my opinion, it is the most literal musical interpretation of any of his Christmas covers. There is no embellishment, nothing added or subtracted from the original composition. It is only Sufjan, at his piano, deftly moving his fingers across the three chords required to play this song. It is simple, beautiful, and touching. As the leadoff song to his 2007 I Am Santa's Helper release, it is the deep breath he takes before launching into the next track, the multi-textured and exuberant "Christmas Woman."



And that deep breath is what keeps me coming back to Sufjan's version. I've watched multiple YouTube videos of other covers of the song. All of them clock in around 50 seconds, and are straightforward and solid renditions of the song. But there is something different about Sufjan's version. There are subtle ways he plays with tempo and volume. Pay close attention between 10 and 20 seconds into the song, and you'll hear it. When I listen to this song, I have a specific picture in my head. I see Sufjan sitting alone at his piano, taking deep breaths with his eyes closed, and tenderly playing the notes as he continues to breathe in, and breathe out. Breathe in, and breathe out.

I have this song as the first song in my Christmas playlists. It is my reminder to take that deep breath every day.

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Don Shennum is a geek dad in the SF Bay Area. He considers it a parenting victory that his teenage daughter's 3rd most-listened-to artist in 2021 is Sufjan (behind Olivia Rodrigo and Phoebe Bridgers). You can see what he's reading, listening to, or cooking at <https://www.donshennum.com>.





# Christmas Woman



by: Matthew Milla

originally published Decemeber 19th, 2019

Behold “Christmas Woman”—topping the list of Sufjan’s most Illinois-y sounding Christmas songs like a sparkling ornament. And its shared vibe with that landmark album is a great thing. Because the grim yet achingly transcendent landscape of Illinois deserves Christmas, too. But despite aural similarities, “Christmas Woman” arrived two full years after Illinois—to a world where the woodwinds and metaphors are a tad more psychedelic, as if someone dosed the Yule log. Two years are all that separated A Hard Day’s Night and Revolver, after all, and it’s kind of fun to speculate what transformations those two spins around the snow globe held for our Advent hero.

Sufjan of the mid-2000s had a lot to grapple with come Christmastime: newfound outsider-art infamy, consumerism, Christian hypocrisy, and all the other delicate tropes that had by then already fallen under his mastery. With his actual beliefs obscured in abstruse poetics (thank God), I can never claim to know exactly what his Biblical allegories are spelling out, but they’re captivating nonetheless.



Snakeskins and panthers and babies floating on frozen rivers. Is this Moses in the reeds? Is “the tipping of the handlers as the pagans must” evoking a connection between holiday excess and New Testament moneylenders in the temple? I don’t know! But maybe it doesn’t matter.

It’s not unusual to hear Sufjan entreat Christians to chill out, or do better, or, simply, “put away your fuss.” And that self-awareness is charming as hell. He says that for a century, they have been “scrambling to assemble what a man believes.” I gotta believe it’s been even longer than that. But perhaps Christmas is the best time for such an activity. To self-assess. To give some form of belief another half-chance. To plumb forgotten depths of one’s self for dusty magic, feeling for that final M&M at the bottom of the stocking—even for atheists who enjoy Sufjan simply for his overabundant, Christmas-morning-esque bounty of aesthetic and melodic gifts to all.

Because even though Jesus might be the reason for the season, Sufjan Stevens—and galloping marvels of kaleidoscopic festiveness like “Christmas Woman”—is the gift that keeps on giving.

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## A Very Sufjan Christmas

Matthew Milia is the lead singer, guitarist, and songwriter for Frontier Ruckus, with whom he's released 5 LPs and toured the US/Europe pretty nonstop for a decade. Some people have his lyrics tattooed on body parts. His latest release was a power-pop solo album called *Alone at St. Hugo*. Find him on Twitter at @matthewmilia.





# Break Forth O Beauteous Heavenly Light



by: Anne Williams

originally published Decemeber 15th, 2019

It's Christmas Day, 2003. I rise with the rest of the congregation, eager to lend my voice to one of the two times our songs at Mass are infused with what could be considered happiness, or fun, and belt the opening lines to "Angels We Have Heard On High." I wear a darling ivory dress, complemented by silk stockings and patent-leather shoes, a mother's dream. I revel in it. This Mass, I want to stand out - I am a precocious third grader who believes she truly understands the joy and gravity of what Christs's birth means, and I need everyone to know how seriously I'm taking this. I have three great loves: singing, God, and Harry Potter (but I don't say that at church.) My adoration is earnest, my faith unshaking, and my voice squeaky, but bold. I make it count because I know all other hymns will be somber until Easter.

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My current experience of faith is a far cry from my elementary school days of certainty. The older I get, the more fearful I become of the power of the Catholic Church and its insidious



teachings. The many ways its abusive love has set the stage for the hardships I've encountered since childhood has become steadily clearer over time.

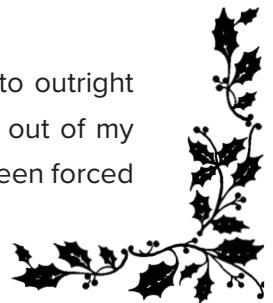
Catholicism taught me about just one woman to emulate, whose defining characteristic and virtue is her virginity. It was not a woman's role to be a direct line to God; only men could channel that divinity. A woman's role was to support them.

Catholicism made my bisexuality an impossibility and nightmare, an abomination I was desperate to avoid until I couldn't ignore it any longer. Catholicism allegedly "hated the sin, but loved the sinner," and boiled my capacity for love down to a sex act. It named me a deviant.

Catholicism told me repeatedly that I, along with every other human, am inherently bad, and wrong, and will be for the rest of my life. That while I was made in God's image, I have wretchedness within me. That despite my wretchedness, this just and male God manages to love me, and for that, He is good. That we can never praise Him enough for His goodness and mercy.

Shame was the bedrock on which my faith was founded. I believed that if I felt penitent enough for my badness, I could someday earn God's love.

In high school, my transition from questioning into outright rejection was swift and devastating. I felt locked out of my own community and was horrified by what I had been forced



to internalize. I felt disgust at each Mass, and I stopped taking communion. I skipped most lines of the Apostle's Creed. But I still sang.

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To everyone's surprise, I attended a Catholic college in the northeast and was taught a different and radical perspective on faith. Through professors wiser than I'll ever be, I learned that G-d cannot, in fact, be a white man, and that love and forgiveness are more holy than any ritual. Reluctantly, I began to discover G-d again, this time as a stand-in for Love. I started noticing G-d in my relationships, my peers' devotion to justice, and the colors of the sky at sunset. At the same time, I also discovered Sufjan's Christmas music.

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The holiday season, despite my skepticism toward the Church's teachings, has always invoked warmth and connection for me. This has often served to ground me in life's more unpredictable times, as Christmas is a sensory experience in addition to a spiritual one. Christmas is the smell of chocolate and pine, the tinkle of bells, the softness of flannel pajamas. In my time at college, it was feeling snow crushed under my boots, flipping through pages in a quiet library, and a scarf pressed against my face. Sometimes, it was also the ringing of the hymns sung by a student choir.



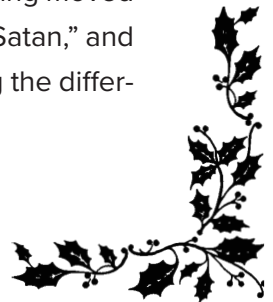


Sufjan had already established himself as my favorite musician by this time, and in no small part because of his raw examination of faith and exploration of sexuality. His music held both anger at God and reverence for the scriptures, and I felt understood within that tension. I was delighted to find these themes explicitly present in his Christmas music, spanning genres and eras. However, I initially skipped over the many hymns sung throughout his second collection of songs, *Silver and Gold*.

I could not understand why Sufjan would choose to focus on the dry and lifeless hymns that represented this bleak and oppressive religion. I remember sneering at the different hymns and rolling my eyes at what I thought was a transparent attempt to be quirky (I mean, did we really need three different versions of “Ah Holy Jesus?”)

However, the more I fell in love with the eclectic songs on the record, the more strange I felt ignoring this part of the album. I decided one day to put my headphones in and just get it over with. I chose the first of these tracks - “Break Forth O Beauteous Heavenly Light,” a carol I had never heard before.

The song ended a little over a minute after it began, and I found myself going back and listening again. I kept hitting repeat, trying to make out the formal lyrics, becoming moved at the rising crescendo of the lyric “The power of Satan,” and the drawn-out lilt of “breaking.” I attempted to sing the different harmonies and work out the song’s message.

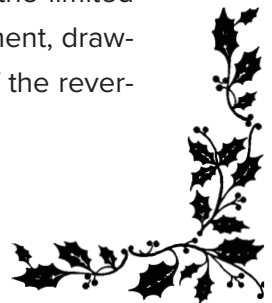


I had a similar experience with the other hymnal songs found on the second disc of *Silver & Gold*, even including the three different versions of “Ah Holy Jesus.” I couldn’t believe I was actually looking forward to the choral arrangements of songs I had never been able to relate to.

I remember first being struck by the quality of the recording itself; “Break Forth O Beauteous Heavenly Light” is a rather unpolished rendition of a definitively formal Catholic hymn. Sufjan and co.’s voices are warbly and slightly pitchy. The arrangement is haphazardly thrown together with a simple piano accompaniment, and seemingly performed without rehearsal. I had never before heard a recorded chorus or choir sound anything less than pristine, and I was captivated by how accessible this version was. It sounded like something I could hear in the pews at Mass.

While unfamiliar with this particular carol, its hopeful message framed by a melancholy melody was distinctly familiar to me as a former devotee of Catholic music. While in a major key, the music and lyrics still feel dissonant. At its core, it’s about the power of a new day, the promise of Christ’s birth, and the literal dawning of a new era.

In “Break Forth O Beauteous Heavenly Light,” the singers slowly and deliberately make their way through the limited lyrics. They distinctly pause between each sentiment, drawing breath before leaning into the next section of the reverential carol.



Regardless of intention, their singing serves as a personal reminder to have patience with the process of finding faith and finding G-d. I shouldn't rush between moments and expect quick resolution to the crises that will inevitably come up. There's a certain holiness found in these hushed breaths; they lend a sense of intimacy to what could be, and mostly is, a grand and distant canticle.

I listen to "Break Forth O Beauteous Heavenly Light," and hear a small group of imperfect singers, led by a queer-adjacent man fraught with doubts, sing about the sanctity of light and hope. I have realized that I am allowed to access the beauty and grace that can still be found within the austere and oppressive traditions of the Catholic Church. I am entitled to question and mourn the joy I wasn't allowed to express within the faith as a penitent child, and feel the elation that a savior has been born. "Break Forth O Beauteous Heavenly Light" represents the power of "confidence and joy" that can be found in song, no matter its origin. And I'm going to keep singing.

~

Written by Anne Williams (she/her)





# Happy Family Christmas



by: Kevin Johnson

originally published Decemeber 19th, 2019

When I was young, my Dad and my brothers and I would play a Christmas themed version of Monopoly. We played it year-round, but particularly during the holidays. In the game, there was a set of properties that were named Joy, Peace, and Goodwill. I distinctly remember my Dad buying the Peace property on several occasions, refusing to trade it, and saying, “this is the most valuable property of all.” This is a cheesy way to pass on a life lesson to your kids, but I think it’s also a very bizarre scenario that gets to the heart of humanity’s most complicated holiday.

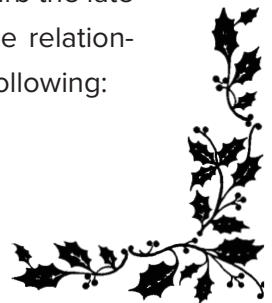
Just think about the very prospect of a Christmas themed Monopoly game. It’s completely absurd! Christmas is supposed to be a holiday that celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ, the savior of humanity who advocated against greed and amassing personal wealth. Yet here we are, playing a Christmas themed game in which the goal is to get rich by bankrupting your friends and family. To get a good picture of just how cynical this is, try to imagine a skilled Monopoly player driving my Dad into bankruptcy and forcing him to sell his Peace property, then imagine my Dad, completely out of money, landing on the Peace property and not being able to afford it. And yet, this is a fairly accurate portrait of



what Christmas has become, hasn't it? Christmas has been co-opted by large corporations and has become more of a consumerist hell rather than the reflective spiritual holiday it was supposed to be. Christmas has become completely divorced from the values that initially inspired the holiday and has become married to the loathsome capitalist values of the modern-day.

It's not particularly insightful to point out that Christmas is currently in a bad way. But our critique of modern Christmas ought to go deeper than the right-wing battle cry of "keeping Christ in Christmas." What we should instead recognize, is that the ruling class has discovered that a holiday about giving gifts is an opportunity to make a shit ton of money and they've exploited this fact to the point where everything that the holiday was intended to represent, now seems like a cliché or a cynical cash grab. The advent of Christmas Capitalism has left many feeling alienated from a set of ideas and beliefs that should be central to our common humanity. Ideas like peace on earth and goodwill towards men, should be truisms, and yet, it leaves a bad taste in my mouth if I say these phrases aloud. Songs about spending time with family and being kind to a neighbor shouldn't agitate the ears so much, as these are things that all people long for.

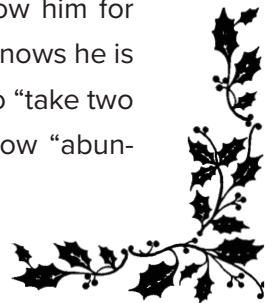
The current predicament of Christmas would disturb the late David Foster Wallace, who often wrote about the relationship between art and our feelings. He wrote the following:



*"An ad that pretends to be art is -- at absolute best -- like some body who smiles warmly at you only because he wants something from you. This is dishonest, but what's sinister is the cumulative effect that such dishonesty has on us: since it offers a perfect facsimile or simulacrum of goodwill without goodwill's real spirit, it messes with our heads and eventually starts upping our defenses even in cases of genuine smiles and real art and true goodwill. It makes us feel confused and lonely and impotent and angry and scared. It causes despair."*

One can't help but feel like David Foster Wallace was talking explicitly about Christmas. When Christmas carols that express good human sentiments, are played ad nauseam in every Walmart across America, the effect is that we no longer regard those sentiments as being serious. We begin to confuse a genuine desire for peace on earth and goodwill towards men with the cynical manipulation of these sentiments for profit, and the result is that we stop longing for such things or worse, we are repulsed by them. This sounds eerily similar to the picture I painted earlier of my bankrupted Dad having to sell his Peace property.

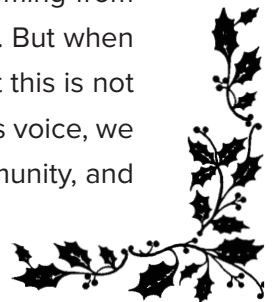
So, what wisdom can Sufjan Stevens offer us? Can he help us defeat Christmas Capitalism? While many know him for his sad songs, anyone who follows Sufjan's blog knows he is a profound optimist. Constantly reminding us all to "take two Aleve® and keep it moving!" and marveling at how "abun-



dant” the world is. So perhaps, in his optimism, he can turn this cynical holiday on its head in some way and reclaim all those good sentiments, like Peace, Joy, and Goodwill, that die a little bit every time they’re sung disingenuously in a song. I believe this is what he’s trying to do with his 100+ Christmas songs. Sufjan seems to think that Christmas can be rescued from its current form, and clearly, he thinks that Christmas is worth saving.

Across his 100+ Christmas songs, Sufjan represents a fulfillment of David Foster Wallace’s warning about “ads pretending to be art.” His Christmas songs are equal parts original songs and covers of the old classics. But when Sufjan sings these songs, they hardly sound like the glorified commercials that typically play on TV and in shopping malls around the holidays. The difference is there isn’t one iota of disingenuity in Sufjan’s voice, even when he’s singing songs that have been sung a million times.

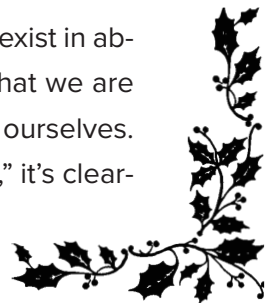
This is most clear on “Happy Family Christmas.” “Happy Family Christmas,” despite it being an original, is the song where Sufjan comes closest to cliché. With a runtime of just 82 seconds, the song’s lyrics could fit on a mass-marketed Christmas card. They’re so short, it’s worth copying them in full right here: “Just this once for Christmas/ I want us all to be/ Like one great big happy/ Family/ Family.” Coming from anyone else, this might be an ad disguised as art. But when we hear Sufjan sing this himself, it’s apparent that this is not mass-marketed corporate pop, this is Sufjan. In his voice, we can hear a genuine yearning for peace and community, and



a genuine hope that such a thing is a possibility. Sufjan's not making a cash grab like every pop star that covers "Silent Night," he's simply expressing a genuine feeling, and he seems blissfully indifferent or unaware of the fact that such a feeling is being sold for a tremendous profit by people that would make Ebenezer Scrooge look charitable.

But the nugget of wisdom, found in "Happy Family Christmas" that can help us defeat Christmas Capitalism, is not found in the lyrics, nor is it necessarily found in Sufjan's genuine expression of what would otherwise be a cheap tagline. Instead, it's found in the instrumentation. The first half of the song is light and pretty, primarily featuring piano and acoustic guitar. Once Sufjan gets through the lyrics, the song erupts into a noisy guitar solo. And on top of that noisy guitar work, we can just barely hear Sufjan singing "Bam, bam, bam..." over and over almost as if it's an a cappella guitar solo. The song is no masterpiece, it's clumsy and even a little childish. But "Happy Family Christmas" doesn't succeed despite these flaws, it succeeds because of them. "Happy Family Christmas" is not awe-inspiring, but it is fun, and it's fun because Sufjan unapologetically embraces his quirks. "Happy Family Christmas" is undignified, unfiltered joy funneled into a song, and this is why it defeats the cynicism that plagues modern Christmas.

The song demonstrates that authenticity can only exist in absence of dignity. In other words, authenticity is what we are when we aren't trying to make a commodity of ourselves. When we hear the song "Happy Family Christmas," it's clear-

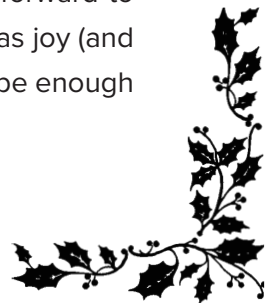




ly genuine because no sane person would create a song so clumsy and childish unless it was from the heart. There's no market for such a thing. This is the cure for Christmas Capitalism, it's to stop selling ourselves and to start living authentically.

The cure to Christmas Capitalism is to become completely authentic. Embrace our flaws and our humanity so that we are no longer a commodity to be bought and sold, but instead, we are just people. Childish, messy, chaotic, and foolish in the way that only human beings are able to be. Instead of selling ourselves in a real-life version of Christmas Monopoly, we learn to dance and sing and laugh with one another. We learn to value community over cheap toys and gifts. By becoming our authentic selves, we no longer need to buy incessantly. We no longer need cheap toys or a surplus of clothes that we will never wear and things we will never use, because these things no longer define us.

Believe it or not, Christmas used to be this way. Way back in the 5th century, when Christmas was still called The Feast of the Nativity, Christians would go to church in the morning and afterward, spend the day getting drunk. They'd sing and dance and make fools of themselves (they often fought and caused trouble too, but hey, that's what humans do!). In those days, there wasn't a Hess truck to look forward to each year. But there was community, and there was joy (and copious amounts of alcohol), and that seemed to be enough for most people.



This may sound like a cliché, but that's okay. It's okay to embrace clichés. In fact, if we don't embrace clichés like community and joy and peace, then we lose those values to the profiteers that corrupted Christmas in this way. If we choose to play Christmas Monopoly, we will probably have to sell peace to some monopolist, or worse, we will become the kind of cynical monopolist that profits off of peace. So instead of playing, we should listen to Sufjan Stevens and sing and dance with one another as though we are one great, big family.

~

Kevin Johnson is a physics teacher from the great state of New Jersey. In what little free time this leaves him, he practices Brazilian Jiu Jitsu and occasionally writes about politics, history, religion, music, or whatever else feels interesting at the moment. He writes a blog about religion [here](#) and writes about music [here](#).





# Jingle Bells



by: Brandon Walsh

originally published December 12th, 2021

To better understand the repeated left-turned-genre-hop-scotch Sufjan Stevens has maintained throughout his 20-year music career, simply compare the pleasant version of “Jingle Bells” found on *Songs for Christmas Vol. 5: Peace to the idiosyncratic “Jingle Bells” on Silver and Gold Vol. 7: I AM SANTA’S HELPER!*

The former is a brisk, 30-second instrumental interlude, evoking joyous memories of singing around grandma’s upright piano. The latter eschews itself of the holly jolly persuasion, opening instead with a grungy acoustic rendition, his vocals doubled in a lazily mangled minor key. Following this riff played to laughing children, Sufjan’s moan takes us to the chorus, now in the familiar major key, played with mostly coordinated instruments and voices (with someone straight going in on that recorder). It resembles “In The Words of the Governor” much more than “Joy To The World.” It’s all pretty chaotic.

*I AM SANTA’S HELPER* is a silly freak out of a Christmas album and tends to be among Sufjan’s least-enjoyed (judging by streaming play counts, The Verge’s rankings, or the popular Spotify playlist “Sufjan Christmas without the weird



stuff”). Many Sufjan fans simply choose to altogether ignore the projects with lesser folk leanings (*The Decalogue*, *Apo-ria*, and *Convocations* as recent examples).

But hark! The weird stuff is misunderstood!

Finding the consistent threads across his catalog, while delighting in its diverse eccentricities, is why I personally feel Sufjan is able to sidestep a draconian music industry largely directed by marketable expectation. This system rewards popular performers in their 50s to still write lyrics about how it feels to be a teenager (woah there, blink-182, big red flag). It’s central to understanding “Jingle Bells” from *Vol. 5* to *Vol. 7* — they’re not made by the same man, not really.

Over his 5 hours of Christmas songs recorded across a decade, Sufjan found joy diving into the emotional powder keg of Christmas, in all its jubilant, divine, childlike, anticipating, traumatic, rote, foreboding, messy, audacious, uncanny glory.

For whatever reason, in his second go at the belligerently in-offensive “Jingle Bells,” Sufjan composes the track as if conducting a middle school recital, whose evidently tipsy parents all jumped onstage to join along in the fun. Christmas is depicted here as a jumbled-together, familial mess. So, you know, it’s a fairly accurate depiction.



The joy of listening to *Vol. 7*'s "Jingle Bells" is hearing Sufjan have fun recording with friends and trying something new. It's aware of its inconsequence, as should we.

Seeing Sufjan's sillier side reminds me of something he said during an interview on Alison Stewart's podcast just last month: "I think we all contain multitudes, and we should all engage with those multitudes. That's just part of being a human." Even the Earth will perish, and the universe will give way.

Engage with your multitudes.

There's no wrong way to Christmas.

~

Brandon Walsh is a filmmaker based out of Indianapolis, Indiana. A few heights of his Sufjan fandom include making a music video for "The Only Thing" using his grandmother's 8mm home movies, seeing Sufjan screen "The BQE" live, paying way too much for a vinyl copy of *Silver & Gold*, and posting the occasional meme on the [/r/Sufjan](#) Reddit page.





# Mystery of the Christmas Mist



by: Emma McElherne

originally published December 23rd, 2020

Sufjan Stevens' instrumental interludes throughout *Silver & Gold* speak volumes to the spiritual themes of the album. In "Mysteries of the Christmas Mist," the mere 2 minutes and 10 seconds of chaotic and ominous sound waves offer a brief respite from the more classic and nostalgic Christmas songs on the album and provides an opportunity for revelry. The piece contrasts from the preceding lush update to "Jingle Bells" and serves as a palate cleanser, setting up the listener for the succeeding, solemn, church choir voices singing "Lift Up Your Heads Ye Mighty Gates."

The song begins with one of Sufjan's signature piano patterns: rising arpeggios that start in the lower register and span octaves, rolling each note in the triad of a chord up the piano as if brushing away its previous inhabitant. Each piano chord begins a new wave, a dominant creation with subtle percussion joining at its crest, then fading out. The tone remains mostly dark and dangerous, teasing at resolution here and there. Sparkling high, staccato notes offer a sonic snow-fall: random notes falling everywhere, harp-like arpeggios complementing at times, often teetering back and forth between two notes-- like one might associate with rain falling, but with the delicate higher register of the piano, it could only



mean gentle snow. After nearly 90 seconds of dissonance, the power of one broken major chord brings a beautiful resolution, which fades throughout a twinkling, playful, indeterminate end.

If Silver & Gold is the treasured Christmas party at my parent's house, "Mysteries of the Christmas Mist" is a brief interruption from the party, stepping outside on the back porch to grab a beer for an uncle. Standing in my Mom's gardening shoes, one size too small but the first thing in the closet, the snow on the porch nips at my heels hanging over the backs. The music and laughter inside mute when I close the door. I wouldn't close the door at my apartment for such a short trip, but house rules don't seem to age. It's a simple sign of respect for the beloved brick and mortar that my childhood witnessed. The freezing air shocks my system, a sharp divergence from the rosemary and garlic brewing inside. I inhale the clean, glacial air that the winter pulls down from the Arctic, and tonight it carries fresh, white flurries and the scent of chimney smoke and Christmas dinners throughout the neighborhood. A simple string of white Christmas lights wraps the apple tree in the backyard, an ode to my mother's minimalist design and its unobtrusive nature. The waves of cold air have already begun to build on my skin, yet I dig in the iceless cooler to grab a beer for myself, even if I don't yet need it. Voiceless and brief, a moment of reflection, my shivering resolves as I return to the warmth, more grateful with each Christmas.



## A Very Sufjan Christmas

Playing Sufjan's Christmas music at a party always garners a "what the hell kind of Christmas music is this?" from a poor soul who has yet to discover the magic of Silver & Gold or Songs for Christmas. But much like the spirit of the season, maybe the magic is reserved only for those who believe.

~

Emma Mac is a Radio DJ and Writer for 93.1 WXRT-FM in Chicago and 93xrt.com. Her favorite concert of all time was 2012's "The Surfjohn Stevens Christmas Sing-A-Long Seasonal Affective Disorder Yuletide Disaster Pageant On Ice" at Metro in Chicago. All she wants for Christmas is an ice-cold vaccine.

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# Lift Up Your Heads Ye Mighty Gates



by: Michelle Codrington

originally published November 30th, 2021

My university had an old section in its library – the original library, made of stone, with a high ceiling supported by pillars, and wooden shelves filled with yellowing, musty-smelling books that threatened to fall apart when opened. I used to go there in my undergraduate days – not to study for exams or write essays, but to think. There was a solemnity and a peace to be found within those walls; a stillness and a reverence for the things of the past.

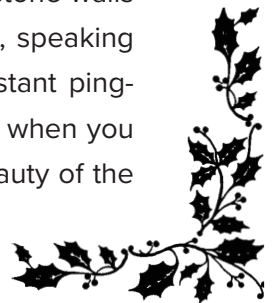
It's a feeling that ensues from "Lift Up Your Heads Ye Mighty Gates" as well. Based on the 1642 hymn written in German by Georg Weissel and translated by Catherine Winkworth, simple mono-instrumental music combines with choral singing in the first verse, followed by an a capella second verse. No doubt, this song reminds some readers of the traditional church services they might have attended on Christmas Eve during childhood. I didn't attend such services as a child. For me, the song feels like sitting in the old library at university when I was fresh out of high school. It's what I imagine it would be like to sit in a historic cathedral in Europe, alone at night, contemplating my existence and life in general, and the mysteries of how the world came to be. I am sure it is



night when the song plays. There's a stillness and a peace that only comes at night when the hustle and bustle of the day has passed; the kind of stillness and peace one finds in a library or an old church.

There's a joy to be found in this song as well, hidden not in the sombre music, but the uplifting and awe-filled lyrics. The strong city gates – inanimate objects – are commanded to join in the joy as the saviour Christ triumphantly enters. The land and the city are blessed; hearts and homes are happy. Christ the King is here, and he brings peace and respite from the pain and suffering of this world. He is triumphant because he has defeated death by his resurrection. He is king even of the inanimate objects in the world; hence even they can respond to him by lifting their metaphorical heads. This poetic line, which forms the title of the song, is borrowed from Psalm 24 - a psalm that proclaims that the Lord God is king over all of his creation, and it belongs to him.

“Lift Up Your Heads Ye Mighty Gates” is a song for the still nights, for the times when one contemplates life and its meaning and wonders whether joy will prevail over the hardships and mundaneness of life. It's a song reminiscent of old libraries and historic church buildings, with their stone walls and old books whispering secrets from the past, speaking from a time when people lived without the constant ping-pong of smartphones. It's also a song for the times when you find yourself confronted with the majesty and beauty of the



natural world, and you are left wondering at the power of a creator who could have made all of it, and to contemplate yet again whether the Christian message might hold some truth for you.

~

Michelle Codrington is a secondary school teacher turned full-time mother who made the decision to explore the claims of the Christian faith while in the old library at her university during her undergraduate degree.





# We Wish You A Merry Christmas



by: Fances Sutton

originally published December 4th, 2019

In his 2012 review of Sufjan Stevens' Silver & Gold boxset, Pitchfork writer Ryan Dombal describes the project as "an excavation into Sufjan's conflicted Christmas heart." Dombal contends this excavation, which grapples with the spiritual, sentimental, and beautiful aspects of Christmastime as well as its consumeristic, painful, and ugly elements is exactly what we need. He remarks, "Of course, Sufjan's uniquely bizarre feelings toward all things merry is a boon for the rest of us, who naturally have the same kind of anxieties and phobias about the holidays, but lack the vast musical talent and/or OCD graphic design skills to make it really count."

It was only as I sat down to write this essay, having spent countless hours preparing/procrastinating by listening to and reading about Sufjan's Christmas music, did I recognize what a "boon" these albums (and their accompanying "frills and flourishes") truly are. Because it's not just Sufjan's musical talent or artistic skills that make these albums so impressive and moving: it's that thinking, writing, and talking about Christmas is hard. I would argue that this is true even if you grew up with and continue to maintain a Norman Rockwell, picture-perfect, idyllic Christmas. Rummaging through Christmas memories and trying to find and write a cohesive

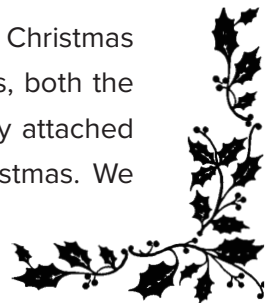


narrative is difficult. It IS an excavation. An archeological one, where you spend hours/months/years examining the same area, discovering fragmented pieces of the past, and putting together the story of those fragments in the present, inevitably told through the lens of your own bias. This isn't just the task set before me as I write this essay, this is the task we all contend with every year at Christmastime.

Each year as we prepare for the holidays, we excavate our memories and make choices about how we want to keep Christmas (\*Extremely Fred Scrooge voice\* "But, uncle, you don't KEEP it!"). For some, it's abstaining altogether, for others it's sticking strictly to tradition, and then there are those in the middle who are starting new traditions and amending old ones. All of these are different ways we try to cultivate a "merry" Christmas.

Despite our best efforts, sometimes Christmas is not mer-ry. Sometimes it's just a miserable year, and even the pageantry of Christmas can't bring us out of our misery. In fact, sometimes that pageantry makes us even more miserable because it feels like everyone else can somehow tap into this sense of joy and peace and good-will-towards-men that we cannot. And why can't we? What are we doing wrong that everyone else is doing right? Everything? Oh. Okay.

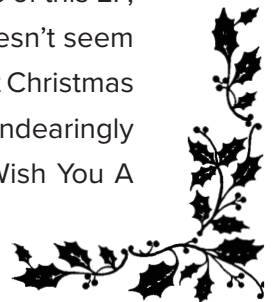
But other times, miserable year or not, celebrating Christmas can buoy us. We find comfort in its consistencies, both the sacred and profane, even if we're not particularly attached to the religious or commercial elements of Christmas. We



appreciate the cold and the warmth, the strings of lights contrasting the lengthy nights, the giving and receiving, and the festive airs we put on to separate this season from other times.

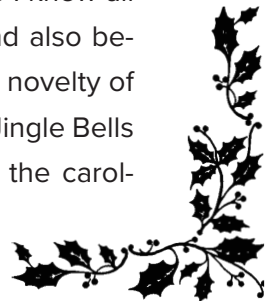
Most years, Christmas probably involves a mix of miserable and merry elements, while some Christmases throughout our lives will fall on the extremes of the spectrum, which brings us to the man at the center of this essay: Sufjan Stevens. Sufjan's Christmas albums embrace this spectrum, while still overarchingly celebrating Christmas in all its messy glory. On these albums, Stevens examines all the different ways we experience Christmas: he pokes fun at the ridiculous Christmas characters, he sings earnestly about both pain and love, and he covers familiar Christmas songs in his own unique way. If there's a Christmas feeling, there's a Sufjan Stevens' Christmas song for it.

"We Wish You a Merry Christmas" is not one of Sufjan Stevens' original Christmas songs. It's a traditional English Christmas carol that harkens back to a time when Christmas carolers received treats in exchange for their door-to-door singing. The song appears on Stevens' EP, *I Am Santa's Helper*, the seventh volume of his Christmas EPs and second in the *Silver & Gold* box set. In reviews of this boxset, reviewers have commented on the odd and fragmented musical styles of this EP, noting that it includes "goofball jamming" and doesn't seem as put together as Sufjan's previous or subsequent Christmas EPs. Despite those critiques, there's something endearingly familiar about Sufjan Stevens' rendition of "We Wish You A



Merry Christmas.” The track is a group number, most likely performed by Sufjan Stevens and members of Danielson who are given vocal credits on the album, but it also sounds like it could be an even larger group of Stevens’ friends and family. “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” probably falls under what the reviewers called, “goofball jamming.” Musically, the song is warped and cacophonous, while still maintaining the cheery familiarity of the original tune. It’s weird and imperfect, and I love it. There’s no polished vocal arrangement, just a group of friends joyfully and rambunctiously singing an old but well-loved Christmas carol.

This version of “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” reminds me of Christmas Eve at my Auntie Ria’s house. Every year we gather there on Christmas Eve to celebrate Wigilia, a traditional Polish Christmas Eve dinner. Like with all traditions, there are elements of this evening that are fixed and others that have shifted as time has gone on. Recipes have been tweaked, family members have passed on, kids have grown up, things have changed. But over the years, the basic format has stayed the same: the Wigilia meal, the sharing of the Oplatek (a wafer that is broken into pieces for each family member as the other family members bestow specific wishes for the person in the new year), and the singing of Christmas carols over dessert. When I was younger, singing the Christmas carols was really fun. Primarily because I knew all the songs from singing in the Christmas choir and also because when you’re younger, you truly believe the novelty of inserting “Batman smells, Robin laid an egg” into Jingle Bells will never wear off. However, in my adult years, the carol-



ing part of the night has sorta lost its luster; all the kids are grown, so no one needs to fake enthusiasm, especially for singing, for the benefit of the kids. Not to mention, the last few Christmas's have been kind of rough for my family and as such, there hasn't exactly been the outpouring of glee that typically accompanies Christmas caroling. Still, each year we've managed to eke out at least a couple songs, one of them being "We Wish You a Merry Christmas." Our version is almost exactly like the Sufjan version: loud, happy voices mangled together, belonging to people who only know about one verse worth of the song. The Sufjan Stevens cover of "We Wish You a Merry Christmas," may not be very beautiful, but it's still joyful and to me, that gives it a certain truth.

Ultimately, Sufjan's Christmas albums remind me that you can acknowledge that Christmas is a complicated, difficult, blustery, overwhelming time of year and... love it anyway. As we excavate our conflicted Christmas hearts, we can still find comfort and joy in Christmas through family, or religion, or simply, our traditions, old and new. There's a Sufjan Christmas song for every Christmas feeling, and "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" is one of my favorites: sitting in the warm, crowded dining room of my aunt's house, full on pierogis, shout-singing about figgy pudding with my family.

~





Frances Sutton is an anthropologist and graduate student currently splitting her time between Dearborn, MI and Columbus, OH as she works on her dissertation. Outside of academia, she publishes a music zine about playlists that you can read [here](#). Her favorite Christmas traditions, besides Wigilia and Sufjan Stevens albums, are new Christmas pajamas (thanks mom!) and the annual Christmas/Holiday album her friends put together (just like Sufjan!), which you can listen to [here](#) and [here](#).





# Ah Holy Jesus



by: Jemima Moore

originally published December 22nd, 2019

Herzliebster Jesu. Ah, Holy Jesus. Brought to you by Johann Heermann. A Christian hymn which showcases deep anguish and sorrow, yet a cadence of joy. Or is it simply realization? He's done it all for us.

I wish to think Sufjan Stevens has more than just three versions of this song tucked away in his dark Michigan basement, sharing a shelf with his collections of crucifixes and rainbow flags. Alas, we are left with three available to our ears. These three songs have had and will continue to have a rooted connection with me, and I assume many others. Although I have no fascinating backstory tied to this series, I feel my relationship with them is something I will strongly value throughout my life.

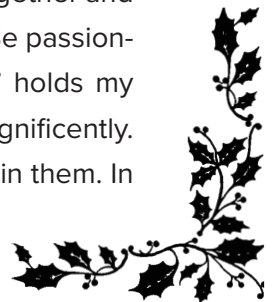
Christmas is joyful. You know it — red and green and lights and children and bells and snow. Perhaps the latter is not entirely relevant here in Queensland, Australia, but I can dream. So why oh, why did Sufjan include this song about Jesus Christ's horrific death on the cross in his Christmas album? If anything, Christmas is about the birth of Jesus — His death is for Easter.



But tell me this – why was He born if not to die. His death (and resurrection) is for all seasons. And I believe Sufjan made the conscious decision to include such a piece three times to drive that specific message home.

It is the dull piano beginning that gets me. I can hear it in my mind even when the song is so far away from me. Proceeded by the happiest tune of all (“We Wish You A Merry Christmas”), “Ah Holy Jesus” turns down the seasonal festivities and turns up the reality. This starkness of these two pieces, tracks eight and nine on I Am Santa’s Helper, works to bring people back. It makes me want to cry. I think. It’s horribly beautiful. My heart pounds with sadness and passion every time those dark, piano keys are pressed, even when listening through the medium of technology. The choir. Sufjan’s vocals are so prevalent yet do not take away from the velvet chorale. Each verse, Sufjan gets sucked in by more voices. Added voices. The choir isn’t perfect, but there is visible passion within their vibrations. The voices move through the air in haunting harmonies, and I just wish I was in that space.

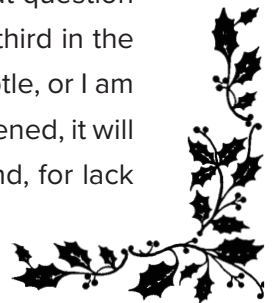
The second version, “Ah, Holy Jesus (with reed organ),” comes a few tracks later. It’s faster, quicker, and more desperate. It’s almost as if Sufjan huddled the choir together and said, “we are going to take this to the next level. Be passionate and be real.” If the original “Ah, Holy Jesus” holds my heart close, then “(with reed organ)” crushes it magnificently. I do not only wish I was in this space; I wish I was in them. In



the singers' hearts, just to sit and look around. I give a nod of acknowledgment to whoever created music. How is it so effective for those who present it as well as those who listen?

We finish our journey of "ah" then "AH" with a lyricless rendition a few tracks after that. A cappella is such a dear thing to me. I am coming up on my fourth year in my current a cappella choir, which amounts to seven years total of a cappella singing and thirteen years of choir singing. It's obviously quite a large part of my life, and I wish to integrate Sufjan's songs into our repertoire wherever possible. So, upon viewing the track "Ah, Holy Jesus (a cappella)" I immediately fell in love. As if this series could get any better. Subtle "ooo"s fill my ears and I am grateful for Sufjan and Jesus. Returning from the desperation of '(with reed organ)', listeners are now welcome to participate in a somber yet joyful mood. Quite oxymoronic, not unlike Sufjan Stevens.

Perhaps these clashing, harmonious feelings are to do with the slight cadence or Picardy third at the very end. It's hard to tell, however, if this is a true Picardy third, as it seems the third is missing from the chord. The third is important because it determines the tonality, that being major or minor. In the other two versions of "Ah, Holy Jesus," it's clearly telegraphed that they end with minor chords, tying the song back to its minor tonality. However, I can't help but question this a cappella version, as there seems to be no third in the last chord. If there is, it is either extraordinarily subtle, or I am losing my hearing or my sanity. If the third is sharpened, it will result in a Picardy third, meaning the song will end, for lack



of a better word, happy. Given the final lyrics of the song “For my salvation” one wonder if perhaps this was a choice. If no third is present, the tune ends with a 5th chord (just the first and fifth are played), which leaves the series open-ended. But enough of this analyzing. I think I just need to set myself down onto the floor and cry for a moment or two.

~

Jemima Moore is a freshly-no-longer-a-teen student from Brisbane, Australia who fears the future and is passionate about all dogs. She’s not good at many things but likes to stick her fingers in many cold, art pies. Find such art pies on her website, <https://jemimamoore.wixsite.com/mysite>





# Behold the Birth of Man, the Face of Glory



by: Kristina Billette

originally published December 24th, 2021

Despite being a longtime Sufjan fan, I didn't have much personal history with "Behold the Birth of Man, The Face of Glory" before this project. As we all know, Sufjan has an exceptionally large discography; so it's fairly easy for songs to slip under your radar. Especially considering that he has over four hours of Christmas songs alone. In preparation for this write-up, I decided to put this song on repeat, lay on my bed, close my eyes, and listen without any interruptions.

The way that Sufjan is able to convey so much emotion in one piece is remarkable. This song truly transports me to a different world. Even though it is barely over a minute in length, Sufjan manages to create a hauntingly beautiful atmosphere with just his piano playing. He clearly put an extraordinary amount of passion and care into this. The fact that the only instrument on this track is the piano creates a solitary experience for the listener and highlights his exceptional abilities as a pianist.

Sufjan creates memories that play like a movie in my head when I listen to "Behold the Birth of Man, The Face of Glory." In the chaos of Christmas, this song represents those



rare few moments when you can truly be alone with your thoughts. It is stepping out for a cigarette on a cold winter night and staring up at the stars, contemplating your existence in the universe while you can hear the muffled sounds of laughter from a party inside. It is waking up in the middle of the night and walking downstairs to see the Christmas tree still lit up, and your partner is snoring softly on the couch. It is about finding time to center yourself during a hectic month of holiday parties and family gatherings.

In these moments of solitude, I think it's important to reflect on the past year and look back on it with kind eyes. You made decisions this year that directly correlate to where you are right now. Despite how you might feel about this past year, you still managed to make it to another holiday season, and I think that's worth celebrating. I began this year in a very different position than the one I'm in now, and that will probably be the case next year as well.

Listening to "Behold the Birth of Man, The Face of Glory" invokes a lot of emotion in me, and I urge you to try and listen to it with a very open mind. Within this minute-long song, there is a multitude of perspectives and feelings that Sufjan is able to touch upon.

I hope that everybody reading this has a happy holiday season and that you can find time to step away from our chaotic world and have a few solitary moments to reflect.

~



Kristina is a barista working in the heart of downtown Las Vegas. She enjoys creating embroidery, writing, and playing RPGs in her spare time. You can find her embroidery on instagram and on twitter, @dreadfulthread.







# Ding-a-ling-a-ring-a-ling



by: Olivia VanVoorhis

originally published December 3rd, 2021

Growing up, my family had a disproportionate amount of nativity scenes, and, as we would always take Christmas decorating very seriously, each year we'd get them out and scatter them around our house. Every little nook and cranny had a nativity scene nestled inside. I think my mom used to collect them for a while, but after acquiring a few too many, she switched to a less intricate collection of nutcrackers and snow globes. Still, it's always a decorating highlight to put up a couple nativity scenes, at least for me. The figures have to be positioned just so as to demonstrate the appropriate amount of inanimate awe, the distribution between people and animals just enough to make the little scene believable, a perfect integration between man and beast. A couple of nativity scenes my mom has held on to even now, having discovered (apparently) that perfect feng-shui to make the divine Lord smile down upon the plastic likeness of his birth. My mom and I are the only two in my family who hold a sort of reverence for nativity scene decorating and, although my brothers experimented with the sets when they were younger, the work remains largely to the two of us now. Even before, my brothers' arrangements were a little too parallel and perpendicular, so I would fix them to follow my design anyway.



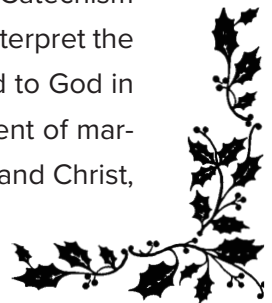
When we were kids, though, the nativity scenes, more than being a source of Biblical likeness, were toys to play with. My brothers and I would make lines of the little mismatched figures, all taken from their different sets, and march them around the house, a somber parade of bearded men with boxes, kneeling women, and sleepy farm animals. Somewhere along the way, one of the more breakable sets — a little, delicate ceramic collection — got injured. The animals' ears sustained the worst of the damage, and now most of them are missing one or both of their tiny appendages. The cow, tragically, lost both ears, keeping only her nubby horns attached to a now all-too-circular face. Nevertheless, we never had the heart to get rid of her or her damaged brethren. So, year after year, she takes her place dutifully by the altar, ears missing but nonetheless basking in the glory of tiny, ceramic baby Jesus.

And thus, a legend was born. From that point onwards, my younger brother, still being in those formative years in which a special emphasis is placed on the animal kingdom, unable to identify that our sad figurine was merely a cow that lacked ears, termed a new name for this pious little creature. And so she became the Christmas Hippo, a now-essential part of our nativity scene. Every year when we decorate, my mom tells the story of the Christmas Hippo, and every year, she laughs until she cries at the Christmas Hippo, plaintively placed with her barnyard companions. The holidays are not complete without her now that we have her, and, despite the sharp, rough divots where her ears used to be, she has transformed into a beautiful relic of Christmas joy.



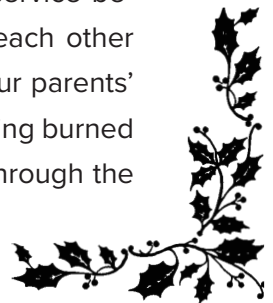
“Ding-a-ling-a-ring-a-ling” is actually one of my favorite Sufjan Christmas songs, in that it’s one of my least favorites. It’s one of the most cacophonous and most auditorily unpleasant Christmas songs he has to offer. Naturally, I find it an absolute joy to listen to and, perhaps moreso, to share with others, as the season ordains. Throughout the holidays, “Ding-a-ling-a-ring-a-ling” is my go-to Christmas song to play when my friends and family request a little holiday cheer, mostly because I know they’ll hate it. And they do. It’s a catastrophic song to listen to, so sharing it with others brings an unparalleled joy, especially when I hear that tell-tale moan of, “What is this?” We all have our little quirks to get through the holidays, I suppose.

For all its mess, “Ding-a-ling-a-ring-a-ling” maintains a sense of genuine theology, a truly impressive feat. I’ve even suggested to my dad that he incorporate it into his church’s Christmas service, but somehow, despite its spotless doctrine, my dad still declines the song’s beckoning invitation. This song, like many a Christmas classic, still proclaims the miracle of Jesus’ birth, his liminal status as both fully man and fully God (if we read between the lines a little), and his role as the king of both heaven and earth. Furthermore, Sufjan, in the simplest terms possible, also asserts that, because of this, Christ is deserving of man’s praise, echoing (intentionally, I’m sure) the tenets of Westminster Shorter Catechism question one. Depending on how we choose to interpret the lyrics, the song even describes how man is joined to God in a heavenly union reflective of the earthly sacrament of marriage. We — the church, mankind — are the bride and Christ,



the long-awaited groom, coming to save us from this world of sin we live in. Admittedly, though, this interpretation is a lot to draw from the line, “As we wear the diamond ring / Wear the diamond ring-a-ling-a-ling-a-ling.” Still, the song has more theological correctness than many other classic Christmas songs (I’m looking at you here, “Little Drummer Boy”).

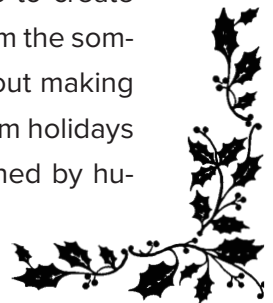
And yet, despite its fervent religiosity, “Ding-a-ling-a-ring-a-ling” stands in stark contrast, I think, to the somber, stuffy candle-lit Christmas Eve services of my childhood. Personally (and I say this at risk of eternal damnation), Christmas Eve services were always my least favorite part of the holiday season. I grew up in a very religious Christian family and so, year after year, my parents would force my brothers and I into scruffy, black velvet Christmas formal wear, and we would attend our church’s candlelight service on Christmas Eve. Of course, this was the last thing we wanted to do, especially when Elf was playing on ABC Family while we were out. Attending church every week was boring enough as is, and attending it the day before Christmas was exponentially worse. Every year, people would read the same passages, the violins would play the same things, and the pastor would preach the same passage. And my brothers and I would sit with absolutely unhinged anticipation, dreaming of what we would find under the tree the next morning. The candles, though, were undoubtedly the best part of the service because then we could at least pretend to catch each other on fire with our little, flickering flames, much to our parents’ chagrin. Plus, someone would always end up getting burned with the hot wax as it dripped down the candle through the



cheap, paper hand-guarder. We would wait with the utmost joy to find out who it would be this year, and we would then proceed to mock the unlucky victim for the rest of the night to heighten their shame. Needless to say, my brothers and I were not very good in church.

Anyway-- backtracking-- “Ding-a-ling-a-ring-a-ling” stands in stark contrast to those monotonous Christmas Eve services because it has something that those services never did — it’s fun! It can maintain its religious themes and avoid the stuffiness of some of the other theologically-sound hymns because of the fun, chaotic, pleasant unpleasantness that makes the song so charming. It’s something nestled into the abysmal choir. And in the mismatched percussion, the clashing guitar, the wailing. In the cheap, tongue-in-cheek lyrics, the endless cycle of the same onomatopoeic rhymes. It’s fun, and I don’t think we always get that in Christmas songs. I smile every time I listen to it. You can almost hear the smile in the choir too, can almost picture the ensemble of singers looking to each other with laughing eyes as they deliver what may well be some of the worst Christmas lyrics ever conceived.

But ultimately, the song isn’t about the lyrics, the tune, or the melody (or lack thereof, as the case may be). It’s about the laughter, the togetherness, the gift of being able to create with friends and family. It’s about running away from the somber, stuffy dogma of the “Christmas Religion,” about making memories that you can look back and smile on from holidays past. It’s about the fact that truth can be brightened by hu-



mor, not dulled by it. It's about the reality that not every song, not every creation, has to be perfect or serious or deeply meaningful to inspire joy or even to have meaning in the first place. It's just fun. It's a gleeful if ephemeral respite from the pressures of perfectionism —Sufjan himself admits as much when he closes the song with, "Alright, let's do a real song now." And sometimes, that's all we need. With "Ding-a-ling-a-ring-a-ling," Sufjan has made a song that exemplifies that fun ought to have a place in the world of art, that fun doesn't lessen the message one is preaching, and that fun for the sake of fun is meaningful.

And so, this song reminds me of my little Christmas Hippo, if you'll remember her. It's ugly, it's weird, but every year it takes its place among Sufjan's Christmas Catalogue, and I could not be happier for it. A symbolic hippo in the barnyard, "Ding-a-ling-a-ring-a-ling" nevertheless demonstrates an important part of the Christmas story, silliness included, and puts a smile on our faces while doing so.

~

Olivia VanVoorhis is an English student and an avid candle lover. After she graduates, she hopes to contribute more writing to the world than just this analysis of "Ding-a-ling-a-ring-a-ling." In the meantime, she has fun cultivating playlists on her Spotify (@yavecave).





# How Shall I Fitly Meet Thee?



by: Shannon Page

originally published December 7th, 2021

Another year, another weekend following Thanksgiving, and I find myself ruminating on yet another melancholy and wistful Sufjan hymn cover. Last year, I wrote about “Ah Holy Jesus (with reed organ),” a Lenten hymn about Jesus’s death. And this year, of all the remaining 25 songs, I chose “How Shall I Fitly Meet Thee?,” an Advent hymn about preparing one’s cold, dark heart to meet the Christ child. Both Lent and Advent are seasons of fasts, not feasts. They are days of restraint and inward contemplation, of waiting and longing and hoping in the midst of despair and darkness. Why didn’t I choose another genre? I ask myself. Something more cheerful or zany or irreverent, like “Up on the Housetop!” Even the cacophony of “Ding-a-ling-a-ring-a-ling” sounds appealing to me now.

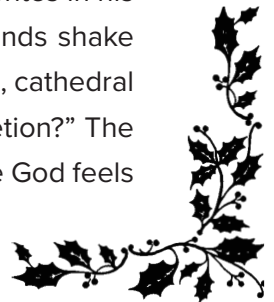
But how could I pick another song? Much of my adult faith has been about longing for God, and Sufjan’s music has been a friend, a touchstone, and a gateway in this longing. There was a time, a long time, when I longed for God because I did not believe in her. I had been an earnest, faithful Christian, a youth group all-star, when I lost my faith in one swift moment, standing in the shower on a weekend afternoon. In a reverse baptism, the hot water brought painful clarity: There was no



God. And still, I longed for her. Every attempt to find God, or pray to God, or enter a church again filled me with shame, because I knew God wasn't true. One of the only times that it felt okay to speak of God, to say "God," without betraying myself was when listening to Sufjan Stevens.

The God of Sufjan's music is the God I longed for. A God who mysteriously does not always heal the sick, but who can take my shoulders and shake my face ("Casimir Pulaski Day"). A God who hides ("Oh God, Where Are You Now?"). A God whose cross does not provide shady relief from suffering ("No Shade in the Shadow of the Cross"), but a God who would cross Lake Michigan for just a moment with me ("To Be Alone With You"). A God who wears my shoes and my jacket, too. ("Vito's Ordination Song"). This was the God I could slowly, gradually begin to believe in, to trust, to sing to, to long for.

Now that I am training to be a priest, one might think I have "found" God entirely, as if God were the iPhone that fell between the couch cushions; all I had to was turn on location services, listen for his alert, then scoop up his sleek, plastic case, and slip him safely into my pocket, to carry with me always. But no, more often, God is the fluttering cloak disappearing around the corner or the scattered seeds of a dream that blow away upon waking. Rainer Maria Rilke writes in his *Book of the Hours: Love Poems to God*, "Our hands shake as we try to construct you, block by block. But you, cathedral we dimly perceive—who can bring you to completion?" The more I try to build God, in all her fullness, the more God feels





out of reach. I am left longing to touch the hem of the cloak, to see the vivid God dreamscape in all its color, but I see through the mirror only dimly.

At each slow pause of Sufjan's piano introduction to "How Shall I Fitly Meet Thee," I feel what Blaise Pascal called the "God-shaped hole" reverberate inside my heart. Before the choir can join in, the question is already mine: How shall I fitly meet thee, God? And give thee welcome due. The nations long to greet thee, and I would greet thee, too...

How shall I fitly meet thee? Each Christmas, God gives the gift of meeting me in the most unexpected place: in the helpless baby lying in a manger. And I meet God in the music that fills me with longing and reminds me that I never want to live apart from that longing. May "How shall I fitly meet thee?" always be my prayer.

~

Shannon Page has been a devoted Sufjan Stevens fan since the O.C. soundtrack and would get a Carrie & Lowell-inspired tattoo if she were braver. When not listening to the Sufjan Christmas catalog, Shannon is a graduate student at the University of Chicago Divinity School and hopes to become an Episcopal priest. She especially enjoys writing and thinking about the intersection of art, music, and faith.





# Mr. Frosty Man



by: Owen Taylor

originally published December 1st, 2019

I love Christmas for the same reasons as everyone else. Spending time with family, enjoying the numerous yuletide traditions, helping Frosty the Snowman prevent an invasion of the undead; we end the year healing our hearts with warm memories. One of the most universal traditions of all is the celebration of holiday music, be they more religious in nature (“Silent Night,” “Away In A Manger,” etc.) or wholly secular (“Jingle Bells,” “All I Want For Christmas Is You,” all the classics). Even with that bounty of seasonal goodness, I consider one of the best collections of Christmas music to be Sufjan Stevens’ collective 5 hours of holiday-oriented tunes.

Inside these 5 hours, you’ll not only discover the greatest Christmas song of all time, but one of the greatest songs of all time, “Mr. Frosty Man.”

This song, which doesn’t even last 2 minutes, is a delusional folk punk anthem/character study on Frosty the Snowman. Sufjan discusses Frosty’s cool personality, his affinity for Yo La Tengo, his summer activities (including air conditioning and nothing else), and his friendship with various ice-themed early-90s rappers. From this, we get a good grip on who Frosty is as a (snow)man; he’s a member of the Wu-Tang Clan.



Instrumentally, it's semi-reminiscent of the track "SuperSexy-Woman" off *A Sun Came*, which may be positive, albeit with a more abrasive edge (demonstrated perfectly within the opening feedback). Sufjan's (acoustic?) guitar playing is unhinged and sounds like it's about to fall apart, yet in doing, so the listener is entranced. Sufjan, through sheer chaos alone, manages to force you to pay attention. The bass, mixed quite loudly in the left channel, blasts over Noah Lennox-esque drums. The bridge repeats a sense of dread, demonstrated through the guitar's continuous strained plucking and a rising feedback loop as Sufjan keeps repeating the snowman's dreaded name.

After one more verse, the chaos can finally be contained no more as it quickly crashes and burns into a musical mess. This is not a song you can have on in the background; you can't make small talk with your in-laws over wine while Sufjan is busy doing whippets with your stereo.

"Mr. Frosty Man" is a Christmas song for more... interesting families. Maybe they have a continuous sense of chaos, or perhaps some aunts love to keep the drama afloat, regardless of why it's a song for them, and that's beautiful.

~

Owen Taylor (@owenpattaylor) is an experimental pop musician from New York, who has fun writing in his spare time.





# Make Haste To See the Baby



by: Tiago Mendes

originally published December 13th, 2021

I first discovered Sufjan Stevens' music during Carrie & Lowell's roll-out. It was February 16th, 2015, and I was delighted to find the new single that had just come out – "No Shade in the Shadow of the Cross." At the time, I found it through the Indieheads community on Reddit, a few weeks after I discovered and started exploring that online platform. For Indieheads, I quickly realized that Sufjan was treated like some kind of god; humorous hyperboles aside, the affection that the musician gathered from that community of listeners was obvious.

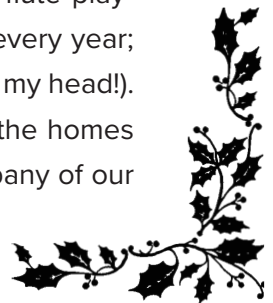
I decided to show "No Shade in the Shadow of the Cross" to my father, an accomplished guitar player, in order to introduce him to a song that seemed to be an example of how anything extremely simple can be so emotionally impactful. To my surprise, my father immediately recognized his name: "this artist has a lot of Christmas songs," was the first thing he said to me. What? Christmas songs? "There must be a misunderstanding here," I thought; can a canonized artist on Indieheads be known by a string of Christmas songs?

Over the next few minutes, my father shared some examples of Sufjan's Christmas compositions with me, and my brain



still wasn't computing the information properly. Something about the contrast between the rawness of the Carrie & Lowell singles and the cartoonish liveliness of the Christmas songs didn't fit in my head. That's how, from the first moment, I was exposed to the main asset of his career: the diverse display of sounds, the breadth of expression and talent, the openness to risk, with the willingness to be simultaneously serious and fun. As Sufjan commonly writes on his Tumblr: "The world is abundant." This statement (which can also be applied to his wide musical expression) is a phrase that has often crossed my mind in my daily life since I first read it. It inspires me, as his music does.

My father knew Sufjan Stevens' Christmas songs because Christmas has always been an important event in my family context. I don't have any particular stories to share, but there are a handful of frames of my Christmases over the years. To properly and culturally contextualize the story, I am Portuguese. On Christmas Eve, my grandparents come to my house for dinner, and we eat boiled codfish with boiled potatoes, cabbage, and egg. At midnight we go together to *Missa do Galo* (Rooster's Mass, literally), where my father plays the chants that are repeated from year to year, cyclically signaling the peace and joy of that night. We don't open the presents until the next morning when we listen to a CD with Christmas songs' covers accompanied by a pan flute playing in the background (it's always the same CD, every year; pan flutes became synonymous with Christmas in my head!). During the 25th, we make three or four visits to the homes of family and friends, spending hours in the company of our

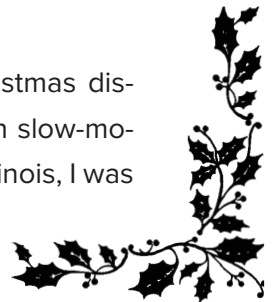


loved ones. Christmas trees, nativity scenes; the warm coats in the winter sun; a full belly, a “stressful” joy (but in a good way). These are intense days full of good memories and a somewhat magical feeling of gratitude.

We only set up the Christmas tree in my house on December 8th (which is a public holiday in Portugal). Also on that day, we usually go to gather moss to make a nativity scene under the tree, with houses, shepherds, sheep, mills, bridges, rivers... It is also more or less from that day on that we start to play Christmas music.

It goes without saying that at Christmas 2015, our holiday’s soundtrack had a new resident artist. But following a specific method: when I realized that Sufjan had not one but ten volumes of Christmas songs, I decided that I wasn’t going to find everything out quickly! The thing is, each year I’ve been allowing myself only one new Sufjan Stevens Christmas album. We have a life ahead of us; why the rush to consume everything wildly? So, each year, I just listen to all the volumes I’ve already heard, plus a new one! The exception was the first year, in which I discovered two at once so as not to overuse the repeat button in those songs too much... in 2016 I discovered volume 3, in 2017 the fourth, and so on. This year I will discover the eighth, and I still have two more years of new Christmas music by my favorite artist!

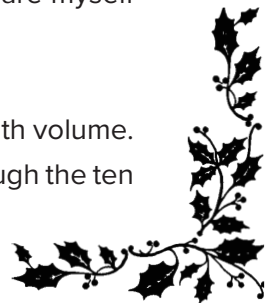
With this methodical uncovering of Sufjan’s Christmas discography, I was also digging progressively and in slow-motion through his main discography. In 2015, with *Illinois*, I was



dazzled and amazed by what I heard! Then, in 2016, Michigan and Age of Adz reinforced my comprehension of his kaleidoscope of sounds. It was around this time that I realized that Sufjan Stevens had surreptitiously become my favorite musician. Almost 15 albums later (7 more of Christmas!), but with a few still to discover (high expectations for The Avalanche and All Delighted People!), Sufjan has become a symbol of the power of music for me.

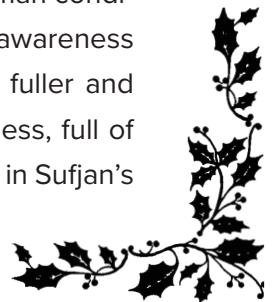
Over the last few years, this blog – “A Very Sufjan Christmas” – has become a companion, a sort of guide to those beautiful days at the end of December. Reading about the experiences of so many people with Sufjan’s music and Christmas made me feel inspired, hurt, empowered, confirmed. Much like the effect the “Humans of New York” page has on me; a feeling of relatedness/connection and identification with others, which inspires me to be better and to want to live my life more intensely. But I didn’t think I had anything to add, as I didn’t have a particularly powerful story to share. However, among the songs that nobody had chosen over the four or five years of the project, I found that there was one of my favorites from the entire Sufjan Stevens Christmas discography. Days later, when I revisited the page, I discovered that this same song was now among the last three that no one had picked up yet. It was the final sign that I needed to grab it with affection and take advantage of its ride to share myself in this text, even without any grand story to tell.

“Make Haste to See the Baby” is part of the seventh volume. Last year, I discovered it on this leisurely walk through the ten



albums. The seventh chapter of Sufjan's Christmas adventures has a more chaotic flavour, with lots of short themes, a versatility of sounds, and a feeling of demos, songs that could have been more worked on. "Make Haste to See the Baby" is also short and wrapped in a lo-fi sound, but it encapsulates a candid light. The timbre of the instrument that opens it (something between an organ and an old concertina) is imbued with a comforting, nostalgic heat. This feeling is confirmed by the second half of the theme, with a distant piano, with an affected and sad reverberation. There is hope in "Make Haste to See the Baby." The night is dark and long, and we have no answers; there are so many moments of unfulfilled silences in our lives. But there is also this faint movement within us, this intuition that makes us travel through our days with a smile on the corner of our lips, this gentle desire to continue, a curiosity for what awaits us, and a confidence that we will not be alone.

Sufjan's Christmas music – like all his music, by the way – has the ambition of crossing his life story (a relatively ordinary one) with a non-conforming attitude towards life. It conveys the expression of a profoundly inspiring attitude, which is at the same time merciful to his past, brutally honest, and with a trusting serenity in an unknown future; in a silence we don't know whether or not it will be filled. This is the human condition – it's Sufjan's, and it's mine. Advancing in the awareness that "the world is abundant" makes this journey fuller and brighter, in an honest encounter with our wholeness, full of contradictions. That's my will, and I think I detect it in Sufjan's





music: I will love, in a tender and open embrace, I will love while I still breathe (and, who knows, even after that).

~

My name is Tiago. I'm a 28-year-old Portuguese guy who loves listening to music, reading about music, dancing with music, and even making music. I also love cinema, poetry, going to the beach, surfing, playing board games, taking long walks, having endless conversations, and spending quality time with people I love. I'm a Ph.D. student making a thesis about cultural public policy. I write about music and other arts at Comunidade Cultura e Arte (in Portuguese). I co-host Sol & Dó, a podcast about music (in Portuguese). Did I already mention I like music? Yeah, I like music. A lot!





# Ah Holy Jesus (with reed organ)



by: Shannon Page

originally published December 13th, 2020

Every year, when the clocks fall back and daylight retreats to the dark's advances, reasonable people don puffy down jackets and collectively rue the approaching season of cold, sunless gloom. In Chicago where I live, there is perhaps no greater topic for small talk than complaining about the weather, and winter brings the liveliest complaints: polar vortexes, wind tunnels between skyscrapers, and dirty snow banks that take up valuable parking spaces. There is much to bemoan about the season.

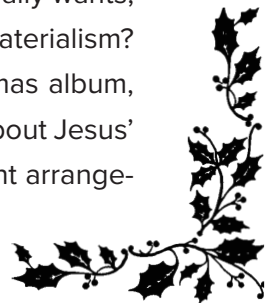
Yet every year, I make it a point of personal pride and a display of character to not be dismayed by the winter gloom, to trick it and outwit it by throwing myself into the loving winter. To kill winter with kindness.

And so I decorate excessively for Christmas, visit the open-air Christmas markets, enter glögg competitions, host a raucous Christmas party, and visit the city's outdoor spaces--even in the snow and bitter cold. Chalk it up to my hardy Swedish ancestors or my December birthday, but I possess a disposition engineered to withstand the elements. One year, on the coldest New Year's weekend in Chicago's recorded history, a friend and I packed a picnic lunch and ate it, gloves and all, in



front of Chicago's Bean sculpture during a dusting of snow. "Why let the winter slow me down?" I say when people, naturally, point out that picnicking in 10 degrees is irrational, if not masochistic. "Besides, once it gets below 10 degrees, you're so numb, you can't really feel how cold it is, so it's a better time to be outside," I explain. Rarely do I gain converts to my 10-degrees-is-better-than-35-degrees theory.

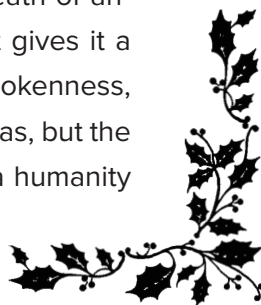
This method of stubbornly loving the winter worked, until now. This year, when the sun set before 5 pm on that first Sunday of Central Standard Time, I gritted my teeth and told myself the same story I always do, "this is fine! I love the winter. What would great-grandfather Gustav think if he heard me complain?" But at last, winter gloom had outrun me. In a pandemic year filled with grief, death, loneliness, and darkness, I found I no longer possessed the relentless, dogged optimism needed to overcome the creeping winter despair. If there was ever a winter for me to find solace in Sufjan Steven's Christmas collection, it is this one. His music embraces the winter gloom and darkness, not just with white-knuckled positivity (though there are boogey-ing elves and Christmas unicorns, of course), but in a way that unabashedly sits in the depths of human brokenness, even in—or perhaps especially in—the Christmas season. Where else can you find Christmas songs about a painful fight on Christmas morning, a child who doesn't know how to voice what he really wants, or an apocalyptic warning about the dangers of materialism? Perhaps most perplexingly for a standard Christmas album, Sufjan includes "Ah Holy Jesus," a Lenten hymn about Jesus' crucifixion and death, three times in three different arrange-



ments on volume seven. “Ah holy Jesus,” the first verse goes, “how hast thou offended, that we to judge thee have in hate pretended? By foes derided, by thine own rejected, O most afflicted.” Here is a song about the depths of human brokenness.

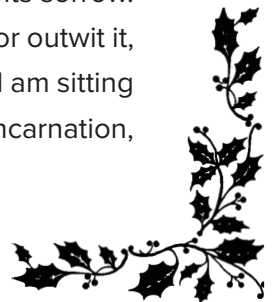
In the second version, “Ah Holy Jesus (with reed organ),” the song begins abruptly and without introduction, almost as if the volunteer church choir jumped the gun and rushed in with their “Ah” at a cue meant only for the organist. But despite this accidental quality, the pacing is intentional. While the first “Ah Holy Jesus” on the volume has a melancholy slowness, the arrangement with reed organ has a racing, desperate effect; as if the song’s message is too painful and too raw to be disciplined, controlled, and measured.

The voices and harmonies sore with that freeness, swelling and sliding with expressions of sorrow and anguish. This is not a performance where the voices blend perfectly together, rather the listener can hear each part distinctly, heightening the discordant minor chords. The organ fades out for the second verse, and we can hear these voices more starkly as they sing: “For me, kind Jesus, was thine incarnation, thy mortal sorrow, and thy life’s oblation. Thy death of anguish and thy bitter passion for my salvation.” The singing swells to crescendos at “sorrow,” “oblation,” and “thy death of anguish,” with a rising harmony on the “death” that gives it a sharp extra punch. This is a song about human brokenness, not about the hope of Advent or the joy of Christmas, but the pain of Christ’s suffering and the brokenness of a humanity



that could sentence anyone to this kind of violent death. So why does Sufjan include “Ah Holy Jesus” in his Christmas canon? And why am I so drawn to it? If I’m being truthful, I’ve always been more comfortable with Christmas than with Easter. Each year, I enter the Advent season, the period before Christmas when Christians remember the generations spent waiting for Christ to come, with joyful anticipation, and I look forward to singing hymns at a Christmas Eve mass. When it comes to Lent, the period before Easter when we follow Christ’s temptation, betrayal, suffering, and death, I have been less eager to be in church. I have sat in Good Friday services when we remember the moment of Christ’s passion, and I have felt, well, nothing. People would sing songs like “Ah, Holy Jesus,” and others would be crying. I would feel terribly aware of my awkwardness, burning with the anxiety that I need to perform some type of grief or pain or emotion, when in reality, I just felt numb and unable to enter into that moment of darkness. I am focused too much on the expectations of what I am supposed to feel, and so I can’t feel anything but the shame of not feeling it.

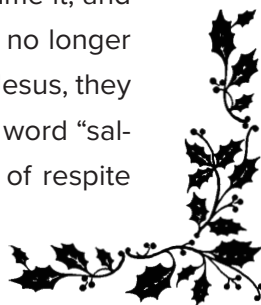
When Sufjan Steven and his friends sing Ah Holy Jesus, it catches me off guard, without defenses. When the choir enters in too quickly and swells rapidly in tandem with the reed organ, I enter suddenly, before I can overthink, into the darkness of the moment, face-to-face with death in all its sorrow. There is no time to analyze it, or fight it, or trick it, or outwit it, or kill it with kindness. The darkness is there, and I am sitting with it, a part of it. For me, kind Jesus was thine incarnation, thy mortal sorrow, and thy life’s oblation.



And in this way, the Christmas story of birth and wonder is intertwined with the Lenten story of death and dying. The God of the Universe longed so deeply to be known to God's creation that this Great Transcendence made itself vulnerable and entered in the temporal world, not as a king or a ruler but as a tiny baby, as Sufjan writes in one album booklet, "cooing and spitting up breastmilk." God entered creation and cosmically altered the relationship between humanity and divinity, temporality and eternity, bound them up together in his own incarnation and birth, but also in his own death. Christians tend to focus on Christ dying specifically on the cross as if the vehicle of death is what is most important in the cosmic mystery of redemption, but it is in the act of dying itself, by whatever means, that God participates in that very, broken human experience, and thus transforms and redeems it.

In Sufjan's "Ah Holy Jesus," we recognize that death is part of the Christmas story. There is no Christmas without Lent, no birth without death, no life without pain, no light without darkness. There is no fighting it or tricking it or outwitting it, not even for God. The only way out is through.

In this particular season of darkness, in a winter filled with the human brokenness of inequity and suffering laid bare by a deathly pandemic, I have no choice but to sit with the darkness and sorrow--not to resist it, but to greet it, name it, and give myself the space to mourn and lament. But I no longer feel despair. When the Sufjan choir ends Ah Holy Jesus, they sing, "for my salvation." They linger longer on the word "salvation," and the organ enters slowly, the first bit of respite



from the rush of anguish prior. There is a pause, a moment at the end to collect themselves, to breathe, and perhaps look forward to that salvation. I hope that we too might find that respite. There is no light without darkness, but there is no darkness without light.

~

Shannon Page has been a devoted Sufjan Stevens fan since the O.C. soundtrack and would get a Carrie and Lowell-inspired tattoo if she were brave enough. Aside from listening to Songs for Christmas, Shannon is a Masters of Divinity student at the University of Chicago Divinity School, and especially enjoys writing and thinking about the intersection of the arts and faith.





# Hark! The Herald Angels Sing



by: Taylor Grimes

originally published December 16th, 2019

Arguably, the most famous rendition of “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” is sung by a group of animated children, and even with decades of built-in nostalgia, we can all listen to that song and admit that it doesn’t sound particularly... harmonious.

If you listen to all 100 of Sufjan’s Christmas songs from the beginning (as I often do), you reach a weird stretch in the back half where our he descends into his most electronic, most dissonant, and most eccentric Christmas tunes. There are songs like “A Child With A Star on His Head,” and “Up On The Rooftop,” which are weird in an Age of Adz type way, but then there’s I Am Santa’s Helper which is weird in an unhinged and completely unexpected way. The entire seventh EP is packed with bizarre holiday-themed oddities, none of which are more out-there than Sufjan’s very own cover of “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing”

Most of the songs on this EP hover around the one-minute mark. They’re messy, improvised, and often involve group singalongs. They’re slightly off-key, just a hair offbeat, and maybe not all-there instrumentally. This makes it the most wtf-inspiring stretch of songs on first listen, but when taken



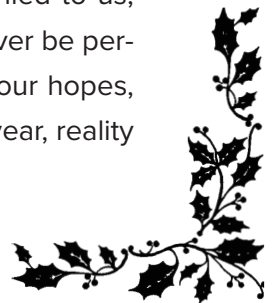


in sequence with the other nine EPs, *I Am Santa's Helper* becomes one of the most accurate portrayals of the Christmas season.

Christmas isn't always picture-perfect snow, harmonic jingle bells, and flawless wrapping paper; sometimes it's an off-key group singalong inspired by spur-of-the-moment Christmas spirit. Sometimes it's a group of carolers that visit your front porch and don't sound that great but warm your heart regardless.

There's a different version of "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" on an earlier EP that's only 46 seconds and feels unequivocally picturesque. It sounds as if it's coming from a music box underneath a perfectly-decorated Christmas tree in a perfectly-organized house sitting in the middle of a perfectly-kept neighborhood. But we all know the holidays aren't like that.

This later version of "Hark" finds Sufjan offering a more, shall we say, "realistic" counterpoint to his own earlier rendition. Sometimes the holidays are messy. Sometimes things are thrown, and words are said that can't be taken back. We look to TV, movies, music, and even commercials to see this pristine version of Christmas that's probably never existed for anyone. It's not necessarily that pop culture has lied to us, it's that we've lied to ourselves. Christmas can never be perfect because nothing ever can. When we pin all our hopes, dreams, and expectations on a single day of the year, reality tends to fall short of that.



Thanks primarily to Charlie Brown, “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” has become a staple of Christmas for many people around the globe, but we’re honest with ourselves, our holiday season probably sounds more like Sufjan’s version.

~

Taylor Grimes is a Portland-born writer currently hunkering down for the winter in Denver, Colorado. He runs Swim Into The Sound in addition to this very site! You can find him on twitter @GeorgeTaylorG where he posts an unhealthy amount about emo music.





# Morning (Sacred Harp)



by: Xanthropocene

originally published December 16th, 2019

The unassuming “Morning (Sacred Harp),” clocking in at two minutes and 27 seconds of instrumental, might be the sort of tune that doesn’t stick in your head upon first listen, doubtless why it has been relegated to this year’s isle of misfit carols. I can understand why it doesn’t get more attention, but I cannot forgive the slight, which is why it brings me great pleasure to go to bat for this piece and hopefully give it some of the praise it deserves. Like “Idumea,” previously covered, the piece is drawn from the Sacred Harp musical tradition, but the treatment of the 300-year-old song (and perhaps even older melody) is different. Whereas “Idumea” provides a faithful choral arrangement, in “Morning,” Sufjan goes back to his roots, dusting off what sounds like every recorder in his collection for a somber carol that comes out eerie and a bit archaic.

I loved the song from first listen because I have always liked my Christmas songs somber. I have long preferred “O Come Emmanuel” and “Light One Candle to Watch for Messiah” to the pop-y, overrated “Gloria in Excelsis Deo,” for example, and “Morning” follows in that same vein. In fact, it isn’t even a Christmas song - the original lyrics are more befitting of a Halloween carol, if such a thing even exists. The song is



about the triumph of Christ over death and is full of imagery of blood, ghosts, and evil:

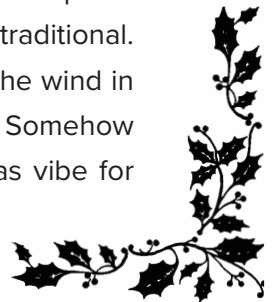
*He dies, the friend of sinners dies,  
Lo! Salem's daughters weep around;  
A solemn darkness veils the skies,  
A sudden trembling shakes the ground.*

*Ye saints approach! the anguish view  
Of Him who groans beneath your load,  
He gives His precious life for you,  
For you He sheds His precious blood.*

*Here's love and grief beyond degree:  
The Lord of glory dies for men;  
But lo! what sudden joys we see!  
Jesus, the dead, revives again.*

*The rising God forsakes the tomb;  
Up to His Father's court He flies,  
Cherubic legions guard Him home,  
And shout Him welcome to the skies.*

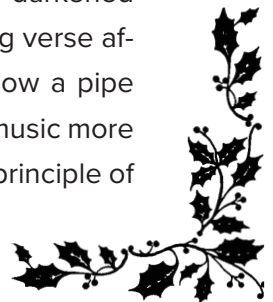
In a Sacred Harp arrangement, the verses are sung in a four-part harmony; here, Sufjan replaces each part of the Sacred Harp choir with a single recorder corresponding to that part's register. Sufjan's version is sparser than would be traditional. His four recorders whistle through the song like the wind in the naked trees of "Zoe" Fitzgerald's music video. Somehow this delicate treatment really brings the Christmas vibe for



me, in a cold-yuletide-morn-in-a-drafty-1700s-castle kind of way. I hope you'll listen for yourself and follow it up with the traditional Sacred Harp version for comparison.

This is the point of the article at which there is usually some deep personal insight about the song in question. I'll have a stab at it. While I have abandoned religion, most likely forever, I cannot kick the craving for the sacred. It's an emotion to me: the deep, inner feeling of awe at something greater than myself. I experience it often as an adult, but it never quite "hits" in the way I felt it as a child. I grew up spending my Sundays at a neogothic revival, century-old Lutheran church, dark brick with a 50-foot-high nave lined with blue stained glass. I always thought, from inside, the ceiling looked like the inside of an upside-down boat, most likely Noah's. We drove there at night on Christmas Eve, sang classic hymns, and had a nativity play. The air was always festive but somber - there was something about that grand, intimidating old building which brought the feeling of ritual in a way a modern megachurch never will.

The grand finale of the Christmas Eve service was "Silent Night" - the church lights were dimmed, candles passed around, and from the flame at the altar, the pastor lit his candle and passed the flame to two congregants, who then passed it to their neighbors, until at last in the darkened church a hundred tiny candles flickered as all sang verse after verse of Silent Night. It always amazes me how a pipe organ and a hundred untrained voices can make music more powerful and moving than any soloist. This is the principle of



the Sacred Harp tradition as well - dozens of ordinary voices combine to make something magical.

When that craving for ritual overtakes me and I listen to the church hymns of my youth, I cannot stand solo performances. I obsessively track down 300-view, low-def YouTube videos of churches in the middle of nowhere, posting their choir performance from the county fair. I am always chasing that feeling of when the lights went out in the big church, and a hundred voices rose as one to make something move in me. Sufjan's Christmas albums have become the lone exception to the no-solo-hymns rule: I think it's the unpretentious way his voice cracks and warbles through them. I chose Morning (Sacred Harp) because it gives me that same feeling. The church is dark, the candles begin to light up one by one, and the swell of a choir of recorders fills the air.

~

Xanthropocene is a meme admin, story writer, a person who makes art stuff, and on top of all that, she has a real big-girl day job. You can find her other works by searching "xanthropocene" on Instagram or substack.





# Idumea (Sacred Harp)



by: Edward Rice

originally published December 5th, 2020

## I.

Somewhere in the absurd collection of goodies that came with my Silver and Gold vinyl box set, amongst the tinsel, the coloring book, the singalong scores, the campy psychedelic clip art collages, and the actual records, there is an essay, penned by Pastor Vito Aiuto of “Vito’s Ordination Song” fame, titled “A Brief Exposition on Advent & The End Times.” If you’ve never read it, I encourage you to dig around and find it next time you get your set out. It discusses how the rise of Christianity during antiquity changed the common understanding of time from cyclical to linear due to its emphasis on progress towards salvation and eventual apocalypse. However, no matter what your cosmology, it’s hard to get away from the fundamental cyclical nature of days and years, so Pastor Aiuto makes a case that the Christian calendar, with its combination of linear progress (Jesus is born on Christmas, dies on Good Friday, comes back to life on Easter, ascends to heaven forty days later, and is coronated as king of the universe in November) and cyclical repetition (all of this happens again and again every year), is a reconciliation of these opposing understandings.

This gives Advent, the season leading up to Christmas, a certain tension, because it represents not just the beginning of



the next journey from birth to coronation, but the end of the previous one. That is, the month before Christmas is actually about the apocalypse just as much as it is about patiently waiting for a joyful miraculous birth to occur. Pastor Aiuto then gives plenty of evidence for this seemingly wild claim, from quotes of early church figures to thinly-veiled apocalyptic undertones in well-known Advent hymns. He didn't even need to mention Handel's Messiah for me to remember how much violence there is interspersed with the shepherds and angel choirs in the so-called "Christmas section" of this oratorio. Here are the words to one of the movements:

*Thus saith the Lord, the Lord of hosts:*

*"Yet once a little while, and I will shake*

*The heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry lands.*

*And I will shake all nations,*

*And the desire of all nations shall come."*

Sure, it ends on a high note, presumably interpreted as a prediction of Jesus's birth by Christians (the text is taken from the Old Testament), but before this desire can be fulfilled, it sounds like there needs to be a massive worldwide earthquake. It's not the friendly livestock-keeping-baby-Jesus-company imagery that pervades more modern Christmas music, certainly.





## II.

Why should we care about this dark historical undercurrent beneath the season that most of us, myself included, now associate more with cozy sweaters, mulled wine, snow, and spending time with our families than with doomsday? First, I would argue that any mass cultural set of rituals, even as seemingly profane and disconnected from any formal belief system as lining up in a parking lot before dawn for blow-out deals on Black Friday, constitutes a religious practice, no matter what motivates any particular individual to participate. Customs such as driving to the Christmas Tree farm and awkward office parties where someone invariably has a few too many may be aesthetically pretty far from Midnight Mass, but they are still things we feel compelled to do every year like clockwork, that give our years structure and meaning. Since moving to coastal California from the East Coast a few years ago, these kinds of things sometimes feel like all I've got to mark the passage of time absent leaves falling from trees and snow days.

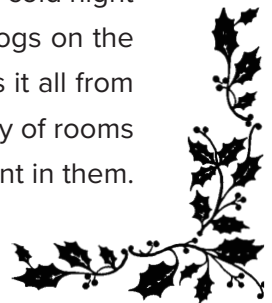
And if we're engaging in a religious practice, it's my strongly held opinion that a religious practice needs to spend some time dwelling on the ugly stuff as well as the pleasant stuff. Life isn't a long stream of happiness and good fortune, so neither should our rituals be. Making an effort to be grateful is an important part of figuring out how to be fulfilled in life, sure, but I think we also need to work on wrapping our heads around unpleasant but unavoidable subjects like death and loss.



I doubt there's anyone on the planet who hasn't been having a tough year. The pandemic is bad enough, but add to that the rapidly increasing number of natural disasters caused by climate change and the global resurgence of fascism, and things seem downright hopeless, if not straight-up apocalyptic. My family and I are blessed to be healthy and economically secure so far, but I'm still sad I don't get to do some of the things that usually bring me joy, like singing in choirs and going to Sufjan concerts (can you imagine how cathartic the shows will be when concerts are finally safe again and he goes on tour?). Evacuating our home in August due to the worst wildfire season in recorded history, though it thankfully turned out not to have been necessary, and then breathing smoke for the next month put me in an even worse mood. If nothing else, this has all made me realize the psychological benefit of occasionally spending some time contemplating the end of the world.

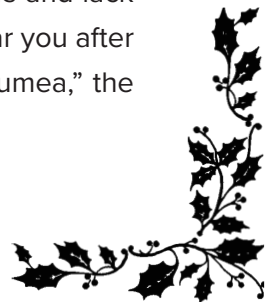
### III.

Volume VII is probably my least favorite of the ten that make up Sufjan's decade of Christmas albums. It goes on forever, and even if I like most of the tracks on it, they don't fit together or flow all that well. Most of the other volumes, despite their occasional oscillations between frivolity and profundity, have a coherence to them, but this one strikes me as the result of a bunch of old pals getting together on a cold night around a bowl of eggnog, throwing a couple of logs on the fire, and fucking around while a live mic observes it all from the corner. I sense this because I've been in plenty of rooms like this, although mine never had a tenth the talent in them.



Studying the liner notes makes me think I might actually not be that far off; much of this volume was recorded during a “frantic caroling session with the Smith family... at the New Jerusalem Rec Room.” I can picture it now: “Hey, how about a 17th-century Lutheran passion chorale?” “Yeah, but after that, let’s do one where we rhyme ‘ding-a-ling-a-ring-a-ling’ with ‘baby Jesus is the king.’” “OK, now let’s do that chorale again, but with an old foot-pedal reed organ this time!” This approach of course makes up for in charm what it loses in polish and coherence.

Towards the end of this oddball collection are two shape note hymns from a hymnal called the Sacred Harp. Shape notes are a musical notation invented in the US in the late eighteenth century to ease the sight-reading of four-part hymns, and the Sacred Harp is one of the most widely used shape note hymnals today. I won’t say too much more about this musical tradition in general as there are many sources all over the internet that can explain it much better than I can, except that it’s a uniquely American form of music — perhaps even the original American form of music — that is still actively practiced today, and that the poetry set by these songs can be pretty jarring to modern ears due to its frequent focus on death. (I’m part of the community that sings this music, and we work hard to be inclusive and friendly, and come from a wide diversity of religious beliefs and lack thereof, so come sing with us in a town or city near you after the pandemic is over!) Here are the words to “Idumea,” the track that I’m supposed to be writing about:



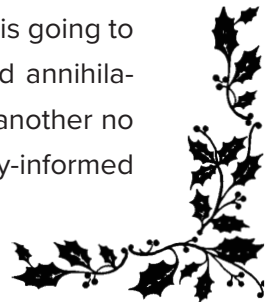
## A Very Sufjan Christmas

*And am I born to die?  
To lay this body down!  
And must my trembling spirit fly  
Into a world unknown?*

*A land of deepest shade,  
Unpierced by human thought;  
The dreary regions of the dead,  
Where all things are forgot!*

*Soon as from earth I go,  
What will become of me?  
Eternal happiness or woe  
Must then my portion be!*

The poem was written by the British Methodist cleric Charles Wesley in 1763 and the music by Ananiais Davisson of Virginia's Shenandoah Valley in 1816. Wesley wrote the text of many hymns still in wide use today, probably most famously "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," also covered in Sufjan's Christmas collection. "And am I born to die?" is a little bit less cheerful, but perhaps we ought not be surprised that the same person could write both a cheery baby Jesus hymn and a gloomy one contemplating the inevitability of death. Sufjan wrote "Super Sexy Woman" as well as "The Only Thing," after all. It's probably healthy to sometimes remember that life is fleeting and everything that you're stressing over is going to be gone someday just like you; that creation and annihilation are always going to be tightly bound to one another no matter how much the modern western Christianity-informed



understanding of time tries to separate them; that we're all born to die but are still allowed to celebrate in the meantime; that December is actually about the apocalypse. Merry Christmas.

~

Edward Stallknecht Rice is a biologist living in California. He makes Christmas albums every once in a while too.





# Eternal Happiness Or Woe



by: Leah Schnelbach

originally published December 12th, 2020

I like any song that sounds like it would be equally at home in a Christmas special or a horror movie. I'm a pretty big fan of Christmas-themed horror in general, which is part of why I love "Eternal Happiness or Woe" so much. I tend to experience Christmas as a media event, so in order to talk about why I think this song is so special, I'm going to have to visit a few other holiday classics.

"Eternal Happiness or Woe" is an addendum to "Idumea," and much like "Let's Hear That String Part Again, Because I Don't Think They Heard It All the Way Out in Bushnell" on Illinois, I think it functions as a chance to keep us in the mood of a song. It's Stevens telling us that the track isn't quite done with us yet. "Idumea" ends on the line:

*Soon as from Earth I go  
What will become of me  
Eternal happiness or woe  
Must then my fortune be*



And in Stevens' recording, it's sung as a gorgeous, ethereal wail. (Here's Edward Stallknecht Rice's excellent take on "Idumea"!)

My guess is that Stevens wanted us to meditate on the tension in that lyric before shuffling us along to the equally gloomy third iteration of "Ah Holy Jesus." He gives us a coda that holds us for another so long minute. It's a breath, a moment of pure sound tucked between songs that rely on dense, theologically-heavy lyrics to tell their story.

It's also intriguing that Stevens chose to follow Idumea, a shape-note song which is driven primarily by the "sacred harp" of a chorus of human voices, with a piece that feels almost like it could fit into The Ascension. The opening notes have nothing human about them, instead relying on a remote, alien hum. It's pretty, but... eerie. The kind of music that plays in the background as a doomed fairy tale child wanders into a forbidding forest, or the doomed astronaut ventures out into the darkness of space.

When human voices finally come in, they bring no comfort. They are nervous, haunted, and layer into the music almost as though they want to disappear within it. And when bells begin to ring, they're not the warm church bells that welcome Scrooge back to life or the homely Christmas tree ornament that tells us Clarence earned his wings. They are shrill, relentless, and almost painful. The voices, a hum before, jump into something closer to a wail. It took me a few listens to finally realize what this reminds me of: the end of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

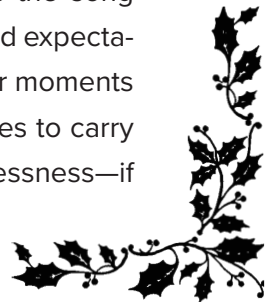


A very different Star, with a very different Baby.

And again, it is a moment that digs into the darker side of Christmas. If you believe in the story, the torture, death on the cross, and resurrection are encoded in this first moment. Every time you've ever heard the story, whether it's a priest telling it during Midnight Mass or Linus stepping into the spotlight in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, that death was already there. The song's title offers eternal happiness as a possibility, but as you listen, it invites us to dwell in the terror of death and the reality of woe.

If you think about it, for people who are Christian, Christmas Eve is one of the most terrifying nights of the year. God has chosen to come and live in the slime and the mud of humanity. It has not chosen a wealthy mother, warm and safe in a rich man's house—it has chosen to be born as a tiny infant of an unwed teenage refugee. It has chosen a life near the bottom of society, at a time when life was rigidly hierarchical. God has chosen a life of pain so It can truly be among us. What could be more terrifying than seeing divinity brought so low? How can anyone imagine anything but woe when you meditate on the future waiting for that child?

And yet, the song's beauty pulls me back from woe every time I listen to it. The alien chanting that closes the song opens up and feels like an attempt to reach beyond expectations for a Christmas mood. Like a few of the other moments scattered across Stevens' holiday work, *EHow* tries to carry us out of ourselves, to give us an idea of timelessness—if





only for a short moment in time. Especially this year, when we're living through our tenth consecutive March, and "timelessness" has taken on a whole new life for so many people, this kind of timelessness, an intentional step out of linearity, seems even more precious.

For all its brevity, EHoW is one of my favorites of Stevens' Christmas songs. Not only is it weird and eerie and beautiful—it feels to me like the contemplative side of Christmas. If you'll permit me to duck back into the comfort of A Charlie Brown Christmas again—my favorite scene is one of the quieter ones. Charlie Brown has just been castigated for his choice of tree, and Linus has just delivered his mini-sermon. But Linus' attempt at theology doesn't bring the group back together, in fact, it does the opposite: Charlie, having decided that he loves his tree for its faults, leaves with it. He heads out into the night and takes a moment to himself under the cold, glittering stars. And that is what I think of when I think of this song. It's a breath, a pause between the louder, weirder stuff like "X-mas Spirit Catcher" and the more traditional stuff like "Silent Night." It's a gap between the noise of commercial Christmas and the piety of religious Christmas. It's the moment I always wish I could take during the holidays, to really think about what the holiday means. To be quiet for a while. To sit under stars and appreciate their beauty whether they lead me anywhere or not.

~



Leah Schnelbach became obsessed with Sufjan Stevens somewhere around hour two of the Christmas collection and hasn't looked back. They're the Senior Staff Writer for the pop culture website Tor.com (where they write about everything from the religious significance of the Avengers to the best episodes of MST3K) and a fiction editor for the literary journal No Tokens. You can find their writing at The Rumpus, Joyland, Volume 1 Brooklyn, Tin House Online, and Electric Literature, among other estimable places.





# Ah Holy Jesus (a capella)



by: Stuti Sharma

originally published December 1st, 2020

I've wanted to write about Sufjan for years, it seems. That's why it feels strange to be writing about this particular Sufjan song, one off one of his long and rambling Christmas albums that I'll admit I don't entirely understand or digest as a whole. I could (one day will) go on about a song like "The Dress Looks Nice on You" and how hearing I can see a lot of life in you has reminded me that I am alive. Or maybe "Casimir Pulaski Day" and how I was homeschooled, and my mom didn't let us have Casimir Pulaski day off unless we could tell her who he was. She, born in an Indian village and twice an immigrant to Nairobi and then the US, definitely didn't know who he was either, but I think she did this to prove her record as a teacher with the discipline to refute people who thought we sat around in pajamas all day. We didn't have the internet, and my sister and I, unsuccessfully, tried to squeeze a 500-word essay out of a two-line dictionary entry on Pulaski, Casimir from our Thorndike Barnhart Dictionary.

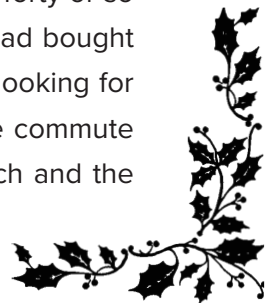
I've always loved reading the dictionary. Words are alchemy. Whenever I came across a word I didn't know, I would write it down and look it up, and then another word would catch my eye, and then another. At fourteen, I squeezed up to thirty words and definitions on an index card every week in my



tinest handwriting. My relationship with words has changed as my understanding of English as a language of oppression and, so I'm left in a confusing love affair like many poets whose mother tongue isn't English. Words, still, allow me to immerse and indulge in this love.

I first encountered this hymn at church. I hated a lot of things about church, like the theological arguments we'd have to dredge up and make airtight to justify doing something common sense like divorcing a man who hits you or squaring up with someone being a jag. Still, I loved the words of the liturgy, the question and answer of basic tenets of faith. There's something about the tradition that made me feel grounded since I claim so many things and yet nothing at all. I've always loved the catechisms. I have loved the hymns. When I believed in the words of the Bible, I loved the kinder commandments, and I strived to learn and live from them. This love has thankfully evolved into my relationship with poetry.

This scene happened many times in 2012: a winter's evening, my mom and sister and I walking to church in the small south suburban Illinois town we moved to because someone from our old Chicago church needed someone to house sit and let us all stay for less than \$300. This was a miracle because even our cockroach-infested basement apartment in the West Ridge was too expensive, so we moved forty or so miles south with only a maroon Dodge van my dad bought for around \$800 and used for work. We are still looking for a church in this small neighborhood because the commute to Chicago is too long for both our regular church and the



Kenyan church we go to, so the methodist church is our current fling. The methodist church has a couple weirdos, but they have a woman pastor (also one of the weirdos), and my mom is in one of the phases where her personal theology accepts this, so we go to the methodist church. We come to the Thursday Knitting evenings with a lot of bitter and mean old women, and this is before Trump though most of them certainly voted for Trump. I'm not sure why we spent so much time around them, but my mom doesn't have the CTA anymore to see her friends anywhere except Facebook, and her and my dad's marriage was hardly social relief that I'm sure she was doing what she could to survive.

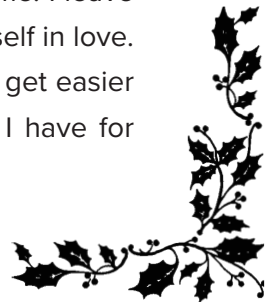
I keep wanting to explain my love for Sufjan defensively because I understand the valid criticism - the concept of a young white man mythologizing and idealizing a country full of genocide. I get it. How do I navigate holding the criticism in its appropriate light but working against explaining, working to claim my right to speak with love here?

Sufjan Stevens isn't asking to be defended and has made his stance on history, politics, and life fairly clear. I am defending my right to love Sufjan as a brown woman who swam and drowned in whiteness and developed a lot of my taste from that simply because it was what was around me or what was leveraged to learn and love to belong. Being defensive and learning to dismantle that is going to be a lifelong healing process for me.



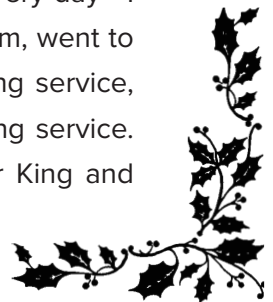
Sufjan showed me how I felt before I knew how to speak it by using only a handful of words and sometimes no words at all. It is in this feeling witnessed that I found healing. What do you do when you've seen so much, remember so much, and know that it's worth talking about but don't know how to do it? Do I just talk about it in therapy? How do I save myself from oversharing with anyone who will listen or, worse, running my story through the mill of capitalism in a memoir cataloging pain? Love for words can be masturbatory - both beautiful things to indulge in, but when done too much and all sloppy, I feel worn out and empty.

When I first heard Ah Holy Jesus (acapella), I immediately cried, something I rarely do upon listening to a song. And I could not tell you the exact reason why. I can try to approximate what I felt though- I cried because it's one of my favorite hymns. It's a Lutheran hymn originally from Germany, and I don't want to go into its deep history because Wikipedia has covered that interesting chapter. It's not a fascination with the Western canon of classics I was educated in that makes me cry because for some cultural crying, I consult a cassette of Lata & Rafi songs that I stole from my dad's dusty collection in the garage when I was packing up to escape my home this year with full knowledge I wouldn't be coming back any time soon. I have left so much behind: my faith, the church, lovers, community projects, my family home. I leave when staying requires me to give up, holding myself in love. This is one of my big life lessons, and it does not get easier with time. To say so would undermine the love I have for someone or something I left.



Because Sufjan Stevens arranges this song as a chorus, all you hear are the voices singing a different part of minor chords, and at that point, the words dissolve, and only feelings are left. Because the song is bittersweet. It's a Lamentations-flavored song, a Psalm-deep mourning. In the singing out of our pain, there's reverie, a religious vision. Because I can cry and know that I'm crying out everything I've been through and witnessed, but I was inspired to cry because something beautiful confronted me. In the song's case, it's unconditional love from Jesus. Because in Christmas, we celebrated Jesus' birth but also understood that he came here to die - and here on the other side of faith, that is a lesson in letting go and of how departures are necessary and can happen because of abundance instead of the absence of love.

More than being the Christian folk singer who flirted with subtle spiritual suggestions in his music, I believe that for Sufjan, Christianity was a tool he was handed to make sense of the world and where he chooses to operate from. I've followed Sufjan's blog for several years, and along with Christianity, he's dedicated to Buddhist texts and humanism as well. His family was part of Subud, an interfaith religious community that believed in a God of life force, and many were part of different spiritual practices. I'm not sure how deep Sufjan's roots with Christianity go, but I resonate with how he presents it. Christianity was part of my every day - I was homeschooled in it from eight am to three pm, went to church two times a week, and stayed for morning service, Sunday School and Bible Study, and then evening service. While others in the youth group went to Burger King and



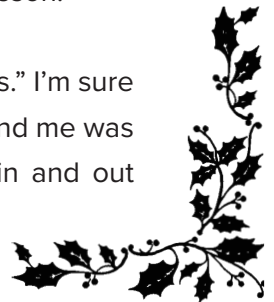
Boston Market with friends, my mom insisted we eat together every Sunday and brought the same green lunch bag with theplas, kabab, rice, chutney, and microwaved it all in the open for all to see and to judge.

I found Sufjan around the time I lost my faith in Christianity and also started facing immigrant and family grief, and I felt like Sufjan was co-grieving with me. As I grieved losing my faith in Jesus, faith that had sustained me, I found a way to be a person of belief. I found a way to be a person of doubt too.

“Ah Holy Jesus” reminds me of winter with my mom and my sister. And the many winters we survived where we walked everywhere and we talked to Jesus together.

The methodist church had a small chapel in a different wing of the church, distinct from the main sanctuary. This chapel had awnings, columns, a pulpit made out of warm-colored wood. Plush velvet lined the pews. There were only about ten rows on each side to keep the setting intimate. The stained glass was yellow, green, and red - it was nothing glorious, but it still felt holy. Even though shame is something I face every day in large doses, there’s a part of me that has always known that I am holy, that we are all holy, that humans everywhere are holy. This makes facing myself a kinder task. I don’t believe in Jesus like I used to, but I thank Jesus for this lesson.

I could be sad inside of a hymn like “Ah Holy Jesus.” I’m sure we sang it once in that tiny chapel, where all around me was a December winter evening, candles flickering in and out





next to stained glass saints. We take the bread, we drink the grape juice. There were days I was racked with guilt because of things that I deemed sinful, and I didn't feel like I should be taking the Lord's body. And yet I did. And this act, the belief I could partake, that has saved me far more than any theological breakdowns of why I am redeemed.

I believe in the divine, and at one point, I understood this as Jesus. The divine holds me in love when I have a hard time holding myself in love, whether through trees, through a friend, through music - that is what saves my soul. The small things keep me surviving. Survival isn't a way to live and can be brittle, but it is a way we hold on to get to life; it is an argument in favor of living. Thawing in a pew saved me. The Domino's across the street from the church with a free slice day saved me. The one older woman from the knitting nights who gave us free yarn that smelled like cigarettes and was outcast because she didn't vote conservative and how acted like our food was not repulsive and spoke kindly to my mom and praised that she could speak seven languages, seeing my mom not being othered, that saved me. My soul, contrary to Christianity, was not saved one time. My soul is constantly in the process of being saved; it goes through many savings. Sufjan Stevens' Ah Holy Jesus asks-- what is saving my soul by holding me in love that I did not know I was worthy of? I am grateful to keep having answers. And so I cry, confronted with the beautiful.

~



Stuti Sharma is a 24-year-old stand up comic, poet, and educator based in Chicago. She's passionate about solidarity, youth, trees, and healing. She was born in Kenya, is of Indian heritage, and was raised in Illinois. She ran an after school program in Chicago's West Ridge, teaches poetry to CPS students with the Chicago Poetry Center, and is a community organizer with Chicago Desi Youth Rising and a science librarian at a public library. She's been published in Belt Publishing's Chicago Neighborhood Guidebook and was a Tin House 2020 Workshop participant. You can find her eating from restaurants where the cooks FaceTime family or in the forests and prairies of Illinois.





# I Am Santa's Helper



by: Van Wilson

originally published December 6th, 2021

The first time I listened to “I Am Santa’s Helper,” something seemed reassuringly familiar. At 30 seconds in, a soaring vocal melody joins the droning dichotomous angst. A quick breath – pause – I’ve heard this before, but I can’t place it amongst Sufjan Stevens’ vast discography. And then it hits me; it’s not on a “disc.” Is this maybe a variation on perhaps the holy grail, quintessential Sufjan melody? The melody to be played “at the end of the world, when women finally get their piece of the pie, and all harm is eradicated, and when the lion and the lamb sleep [take naps] together, and when NFL players learn to knit and crochet....” I quickly opened YouTube and pulled up the fabled “Majesty Snowbird.” Yes, this was it!

But why here, in this song? Aside from a few brief videos and interview admissions (who doesn’t use rhymezone?), Sufjan has shared very little of his creative process. I am certainly curious, but personally, I’d rather pay no attention to that man behind the curtain. However, throughout his catalog, we see examples of Sufjan growing, reimagining, experimenting, and evolving themes and melodies. But the variation and the odd juxtaposition of the “Snowbird” melody in “I Am



Santa's Helper" felt a touch different and perhaps held more meaning than the simplest explanation of experimentation.

During the first few listens of "I Am Santa's Helper," I was put off by the stark absence (rebuke?) of Sufjan's familiar redemptive lens, and the confusing juxtaposition of the two vocal lines. What's more, the main lyric declaring a binary world of "helpers" and "slaves" just felt kind of sarcastic. Where am I in this construct? Sufjan's music almost always has a redemptive quality, and I was struggling to identify it here.

Then, upon identifying the "Snowbird" melody variation, it became satori, clear like a perfect sine wave. This is the response to the small-minded, polarized main vocal. This is the unspoken redemption soaring above the drone of our false contradictions. We are so much more than helpers or slaves (\*begins to put on bike helmet with a giant silver horn, and a suit made of balloons\*), we are Christmas Unicorns.

~

Van Wilson is a partner, father (of two young boys), friend, and aspiring musician. Following a rather mind-altering experience in the middle-aged midst of a deep Colorado winter, he realized there are those of us who are tasked with protecting and expanding certain sacred frequencies of creation and existence. The resonance we feel with the world around us speaks to this truth and to our connection and magnetism towards those who share coherence. May we all plug into this wavelength. Shout out: I'm always looking for musical collaborators! Hit me up! Insta: @worlds\_wilson





# Maoz Tzur (Rock of Ages)



by: Turner Walston

originally published December 4th, 2021

Sufjan Stevens' music defies categorization. He's not just an indie artist. He's not just an acoustic artist, or a classical composer, or a noise artist, or a psychedelic artist. No two successive albums really share the same genre, and often two consecutive tracks within the same album could not be more different.

The same holds for Stevens' Christmas catalog, which spans from earnest renditions of familiar carols to joyful interpretations of secular holiday songs to, well, "Christmas Unicorn." This is why I have a Spotify playlist called "Sufjan Christmas for Others," because if you're not familiar with Sufjan, you're certainly not expecting "Do You Hear What I Hear" to do what it does. Sure we all love Sufjan, but we aren't your average holiday music listener.

But Sufjan contains multitudes, and he can follow "I Am Santa's Helper," with an earnest piano instrumental of "Ma'oz Tzur (Rock of Ages)."

I am not qualified to write about the meaning behind "Ma'oz Tzur." In fact, before this assignment, I only knew it as a palate cleanser between the heavier stuff. It's a pleasant, 42-sec-



ond interlude, the kind of solo piano piece you might hear at a child's second-year recital.

I thought the parenthetical “Rock of Ages” meant that this was an arrangement of the Christian hymn I recall from my Methodist youth. It's not. “Ma'oz Tzur” is a Hanukkah hymn; a history and celebration of God's delivering the Jewish people from their enemies. It's lovely, with more depth than the same secular Christmas songs that have been mainstays on the airwaves for 60 years. Not that there's anything wrong with them, of course, but “Ma'oz Tzur” has a way of centering the listener.

Sufjan's version of “Ma'oz Tzur” caused me to seek out the story and to find renditions by Leslie Odom, Jr. and his wife Nicolette Robinson, and the Maccabeats.

I'm unsure if I'd ever heard the word “twee” before I became a fan of Sufjan Stevens, and then I saw it everywhere in reviews. Its usage implies some sort of dishonesty as if Stevens were sweet for the sake of silliness, as if he were just playing a character. I don't buy it. Beneath the wings and behind the banjo, there is sincerity. What confidence it must take to put “Ma'oz Tzur” on the same disc as “Mr. Frosty Man”!

No, “Ma'oz Tzur” is not a track that I return to very often. It didn't make my Post-Mariah Holiday playlist. But I'm glad it's here, and the next time it comes up, I'll appreciate it just a bit more.



~

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# Even the Earth Will Perish and the Universe Give Way



by: Kaycie Carr

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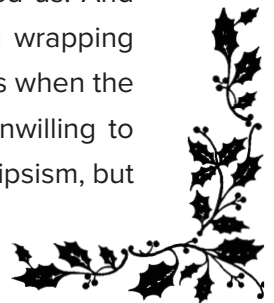
I don't know what to say. I am writing this, to you, the one who reads me, and I've come empty-handed. I haven't made a case for myself, and I won't attempt to. I am confessing: I know nothing. However, it is impossible to ignore what has peered through my window and pounded at my door. The loneliness of winter has arrived, and it carries a trait that is unheard of for anyone but me. I've tried to describe it, but in routine time I've been met with twisted faces and the backs of heads. Some people aren't built happy. However, in my short time on Earth, I've found that many are unable to declare themselves so. Thus reigns before us the practice of cheer; It is being thankful for every gift or being sent to your room. It is tv movie holiday specials or familial contempt. It is commercially minded music or the pitfalls of being together in unconvincing conversation. Now more than any other time of the year, our participation is called for, expected, and required. To leave tradition is to go out of line. It is a cardinal sin. It is the sign of disorder. So to those around me, my quirks are left uncredited, and my joy is a known performance act. But we don't talk about that.





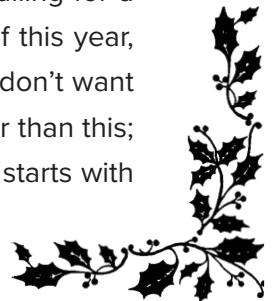
I am writing to tell you of the Sufjan Stevens song “Even the Earth Will Perish and the Universe Give Way,” I am writing to tell you of its worth and how it fell into my peripheral vision, of how it wedged its way between the space that is and the space that wants to be, of how its sonic has driven me up the wall, and with anticipation, I draft this write-up in my sleep. I am here to tell you that I am burdened with the angst of middle age despite only being half-way through my teen years. I am marked by catastrophe; the body counts, the climate reports, premature movie release lists, fast-food twitter clapbacks, governmental incompetence, fast fashion, intensive factory farming, zoonotic diseases, severe weather destruction, police states, fascism, neoliberalism, identity politics, late-night talk show hosts, Amazon, liberal kitsch, content houses, crystal healing tutorials, the decline of punk, patriarchal judgments, Y2K trends, inevitable Star Wars programs, remakes and reboots, streaming services, facetune and photoshop, influencers and wannabe influencers, inter-generational trauma, tumblr discourse, outlet malls, peer rejection, etc. etc. etc.

It is written all over my face. The world is in motion, yet nothing seems to be changing for the better. In my year, I should not ache and understand this song so intimately. I find fault in American traditionalism. It is clear to me that [most] tradition needs to fade away and that modernity has failed us. And to those who hold tightly to their stockings and wrapping paper--what world would exist to have such things when the Earth has become unlivable and the universe unwilling to hold us? Perhaps this is just a case of teenage solipsism, but



I cannot help but feel that I am right about all of this. I feel I am in a play, running rampant around the stage, as everyone adlibs and skews away from the perfectly written script. How can things get any more obvious? Here lies the greatest problem of all: the nexus of environmental devastation and human self-centeredness. (Now, in spite of all I've said, this song ends with a brief flurry of wistfulness and hope; a section of bells chiming and piano trilling, so I will attempt to replicate the scene, wishing to hear that as something further than a far off cosmic dream :)

As the year comes to a close, I look to what has been done to me and by me. I then look inward and cultivate compassion for what has left me in grief. This year for Christmas, I am asking for an image of myself walking on avenues of good fortune, my spirit bright, my heart questioning the validity of this dream-like world, but trusting it nevertheless. I wish to see my friends to give them love in person rather than attempting to comfort them through telepathic rituals and spells of warmth and safety. Whatever happens beyond this writing, I will allow myself to dive into my imagination and dig wells of light to provide solace as we live in the midst of this unreality. Perhaps, this isn't avoidance. Perhaps solutionaries were guided by their creativity before responding to the outstretched hand of god. Perhaps I am calling for a lot, but I give a lot. After the tumultuous throes of this year, I think that's the gift we need to give ourselves. I don't want to pretend that we went through something better than this; I want things to change. And maybe that change starts with



forgoing our idea of perfect normalcy in the realm of a traditional Christmas celebration.

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Kaycie is an amateur creator based in Pennsylvania. She daydreams of going to college in New York to pursue a career in writing and filmmaking. She finds inspiration in the cosmic narratives of her own life as well as the ones found in music, literature, and movies.

