

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Holiday Harmonies: Classic Christmas tunes are as popular as ever

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The chorus from Mater Dei Catholic High School in Breese performs Thursday at the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows. "There is a really powerful message in Christmas songs about Christ's birth," says Becky Long, choir and band director at Mater Dei.

(David Carson/P-D)

ST. LOUIS — On Sept. 10, the Chicago Cubs clobbered the Cardinals, the temperature reached 88 degrees and the Gateway Men's Chorus started rehearsals for "Holiday Homecoming," its annual Christmas show. So, three months later, does "Deck the Halls" make chorus president Kevin Johnson want to deck someone?

"You would think, but no. I just love Christmas music," said Johnson, who owns 50 Christmas albums and has loaded his iPod with Josh Grobin and Clay Aiken holiday hits. "It takes me back to being a kid, opening presents and being with family. The memories and the music are wrapped up together."

Like the scent of a fir tree or the taste of a sugar cookie, Christmas music can transport us in time, boost our spirits, connect us to one another and even open our wallets.

"It's the most music-y of all holidays," said Bunnygrunt guitarist Matt Harnish whose song "Season Freaklings" was part of the soundtrack for the 2003 R-rated "Bad Santa," starring Billy Bob Thornton. "The music is ingrained in all of us."

Today, Harnish produces "A Very Bert Dax Christmas," an annual compilation of holiday songs by local bands. As tracks like "Don't Believe in Christmas," and "Hey Santa Claus (You Son of a X*\$%@)" suggest, the albums skew to the sarcastic, not the saccharine. But to Harnish, Christmas music is no joke.

"Even negative Christmas songs are pro-Christmas because they still acknowledge this is an important holiday," he said.

ALL-CHRISTMAS MUSIC

The holidays certainly matter to radio station KEZK-FM (102.5). About a half-million listeners were expected to tune in to the station during these first two weeks of December. Sensing St. Louis needed more Frosty and Rudolph than groceries and shopping malls could provide, the soft rock outlet introduced an all-holiday format four years ago. Station research confirmed what the rest of us could have guessed: When it comes to holiday music, listeners love the classics.

"The more traditional the better," said KEZK manager Mark Edwards. "People want the originals or today's artists doing the classics."

New songs, however, leave some listeners cold. According to the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, the nation's favorite Christmas carols were composed before 1950. The most-played holiday song, "Winter Wonderland," was written in 1934 by Felix Bernard (composer) and Richard B. Smith (lyricist). It has been recorded everyone from Perry Como to Cyndi Lauper. Runner-up "Sleigh Ride" was penned in 1946 by Leroy Anderson, with lyrics added later by Mitchell Parish.

Edwards introduces new holiday songs each year, but few survive a second season. Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas Is You" has emerged as an exception.

"Josh Grobin and Michael Buble have put out these really spectacular Christmas packages, but they are covers," said Edwards. "It's very different in Britain. Every year artists vie to put out the Christmas song of the year. But when you bring out an original song, people here ask, 'But is it as good as fill-in-the-blank?' The bar has been set pretty high."

We are so suggestible to the power of music that retailers use sophisticated market research to determine which songs send shoppers to the register and which send them to the door. Private Label Radio in Pasadena started creating unique holiday playlists for clients like Victoria's Secret, McDonald's and St. Louis-based Build-A-Bear workshop last summer.

"In a grocery store, the music really is wallpaper," said Hal Stiles of Private Label Radio. "But at J. Crew on Fifth Avenue, for example, the music has a front-and-center role in the whole shopping experience. Customers will come up and ask about specific songs. The key is the match the music to the environment."

Like holiday decorations and sales, carols arrived at retailers earlier than ever this year, said Stiles. Build-A-Bear introduced holiday music on Nov. 1.

"It's to remind customers that Christmas is coming, get your shopping done early," said Stiles. "The stores are getting ready earlier and earlier for the holidays and the music matches that."

CHRISTMAS CAROLERS

But while classic carols have weathered the decades, live caroling has not, said Joan Koontz, a former music teacher and director of the St. Louis Christmas Carols Association. This season, some 500 Association-affiliated groups will raise \$50,000 for local charities.

Homeowners are leery of strangers — even singing ones — on their doorsteps. To calm their fears, carolers often will distribute door hangers in advance.

"It lets them know we're carolers. We're not here to hurt you," Koontz said with a laugh.

The association, started some 95 years ago, distributes song sheets to Scout troops, families, church groups and others, and dispatch groups to spread a little yuletide cheer to nursing homes, hospitals and other institutions.

"This tradition goes back hundreds of years," said Koontz. "As the world gets more and more complicated, it's nice to go back to something so old-fashioned that brings so much joy."