



Shopping tunes: Stores customized music cues holiday mood

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It starts before the tree goes up.

You can hear it before the halls are decked, before you make your gift list, and, in some stores, well before the Black Friday swarm arrives.

Holiday music is pervasive as you pick through the sweater pile, push your cart down the aisle or try on that pair of must-have shoes. And most of what you hear is designed especially for you.

It's not about making you feel all warm and fuzzy, though.

The goal is to "make people reach into their wallets quicker," said Jon Luther, director of audio architecture for Muzak, the Fort Mill-based music programming company.

The carolers who used to sing on downtown sidewalks are mostly a thing of the past. Now the music that makes shopping fun is made by programmers like Muzak and Private Label Radio.

"Our whole thing here is to enhance the store's brand," said Jim Kressler, vice president of programming operations for Private Label Radio, which customizes sounds for companies such as Victoria's Secret, McDonald's and Subway. "From that perspective, all Christmas music is not created equally."

A chain like Starbucks, for instance, plays artists — like Josh Groban and James Taylor — whose CDs are on sale at the counter.

The Finish Line and Athlete's Foot, stores that sell popular running and basketball shoes and assorted athletic gear, have an urban edge; think Run DMC's "Christmas in Hollis."

Abercrombie & Fitch, Gap and American Eagle have a clubby, hip vibe that's an alternative to the mood music of, say, Belk or Sears.

MEMORABLE MUSIC

You might not begin thinking about Christmas until the leftover Thanksgiving turkey is made into soup, but Muzak's Luther said he starts building playlists before most people have Labor Day plans.

"We begin the whole process in the middle of summertime," he said. Muzak customizes for more than 400 clients, including Gap, Sears and JCPenney. Luther said he has noticed a demand for traditional tunes.

"Music is tied to memory quite a bit," he said. "By far, we're seeing a demand for classic holiday music."

It's not "classic" in the same way as "Silent Night," but Vince Guaraldi's well-known soundtrack for "A Charlie Brown Christmas" recently cracked the top 10 in sales at eMusic, the No. 2 music download site behind iTunes.

"There's also a spiritual component that gets lost in superficiality. And that's what the 'Peanuts' special is about," said Michael Azzerad, editor-in-chief of eMusic. "Vince Guaraldi put some really refreshing twists on familiar material. It's joyous and melancholy, which is more in line with holiday spirits."

Azzerad is a fan of holiday music because it's hard to do well. "It's a tricky thing to do," he explained. "What do you do with music that's incredibly familiar?"

Some struggle, like Chris Brown with Donny Hathaway's classic "This Christmas," while others illuminate, like Suffjan Stevens' album "Song For Christmas."

Meanwhile, more artists are putting out Christmas-flavored music. Patti LaBelle and The Isley Brothers are among the many R&B artists who have released Christmas albums this year. Newcomer Colbie Caillat

("Bubbly") has "Mistletoe." Then there are AC/DC, Metallica and Green Day, who have authorized the reworking of their most popular songs as Christmas instrumentals.

"A lot of artists who have established a fairly solid fan base are emboldened and confident about doing Christmas songs just to extend the fan base," said David Brewster, senior vice president of marketing and creative services for PlayNetwork.

The Redmond, Wash.-based company, a leading indie rock programmer, handles in-store music for national brands like Abercrombie & Fitch, Hot Topic, T.G.I. Friday's and Starbucks.

Indie rock has grown from the punk stepchild of modern rock into a respected competitor. You can't turn on a TV without hearing a band from outside of pop's mainstream in a commercial.

And now the same can be said about the holiday soundtracks in major stores.

"I think there is definitely a trend of independent artists tackling Christmas music," Azzerad said. "It's the nature of independents to take matters into their own hands.

"And they're tired of the jolly, bland Christmas music."

Programmers have taken notice, which is why, say, you can hear Low's "Just Like Christmas" in Publix and American Eagle.

HOLIDAY RADIO

Like Muzak and Private Label Radio, PlayNetwork offers what XM Satellite Radio and Sirius Satellite Radio don't: customization.

Radio, though, gives you an option that you don't have in the stores: You can change the station.

XM and Sirius program 24-hour Christmas channels, which is what local station WMHK-FM 89.7 does when it becomes "South Carolina's Christmas station."

The Christian contemporary station, while changing its programming, doesn't alter the artists on its playlists much.

"It's a point of connection in addition to our regular listeners but with people who are not," said Steve Sunshine, the station's program director.

WMHK doesn't play The Temptations' gilded version of "Silent Night," but it does play Nat King Cole's "The Christmas Song (Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire)" and Bing Crosby's "White Christmas," possibly the most popular holiday song ever recorded.

Most important, though, is WMHK's holiday message.

"It's a great chance for us to celebrate that God came to Earth as a child," Sunshine said. "I really just enjoy how many different things artists can do with pieces of music."

WNOK-FM, 104.7 is taking a different approach, keeping hitmakers such as Kanye West, Boys Like Girls and Justin Timberlake on its on-air playlist, but offering 24/7 Christmas music on its Web site.

IT'S ALMOST OVER

Holiday music will be everywhere for the next eight shopping days.

Will "Jinglebell Rock" by Arcade Fire and "All I Want For Christmas Is You" by My Chemical Romance, two alternative bands, make you want that sweater any more or less?

Will traditional versions of "Silver Bells" or "Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas" make it any easier to push through the throng of last-minute shoppers clogging the aisles?

Will a rock version of "Rudolph The Red Nosed Reindeer" make you any happier (or sadder) than the instrumental?

"It's definitely a cue that the Christmas shopping season has begun and yes, you should buy your presents now," Azzerad said.

What is for certain — what holiday music signifies — is that it's Christmastime.

So have a merry one.

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