

# ON SCREEN

## Fast forward to Christmas

BY ROY GREEN  
STAFF WRITER

Although there have been some welcome new additions in recent years to the list of Christmas movies, my favourite titles — the ones I have video copies of at home — haven't changed in a number of years.

There are only three movies I make a point of seeing again each Yuletide and, surprisingly, two of them are of fairly recent vintage: 1983's *A Christmas Story* and 1989's *Prancer*.

In fact, I've already had one recent screening of *A Christmas Story*, the gorgeous little comedy set in 1940s middle America (and shot in Canada).

I showed it to my grandchildren just a few weeks back and now they're asking Santa for their own copy.

### RED RYDER BB-GUN

Peter Billingsley is Ralphie, whose Christmas dream is for a Red Ryder BB-gun, while Darren McGavin and Melinda Dillon do a great job as the parents.

And speaking of wonderful kid actors who have since disappeared, what ever happened to Rebecca Harrell, the delightful little girl who nurses one of Santa's injured reindeer back to health in *Prancer*?

Maybe her problem was she was too much real little girl and not enough actor.

Anyway, she's great and so are supporting stars Sam Elliott and Cloris Leachman.

But there is only one movie that must be watched on Christmas Eve and that, of course, is the 1951 Alastair Sim version of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

When Sim's Scrooge starts whooping for joy on Christmas morning, it's impossible not to get caught up in the Christmas spirit.

And for heaven's sake, don't get the colourized version — it can only really be enjoyed in glorious black and white.

Those are my personal favourites, but there are plenty more Christmas movies available on video these days, including:

- *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946) — A look at how the life of one ordinary man (Jimmy Stewart) can affect the people around him.

### HE REALLY DOES EXIST

- *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947) — Kris Kringle takes a job as a department store Santa to convince Maureen O'Hara and little Natalie Wood that he really does exist. There's a 1994 re-make that isn't too bad, but why bother when the original is so good?

- *One Magic Christmas* (1985) — It falls upon Christmas angel Harry Dean Stanton (Harry Dean Stanton in a Christmas movie?) to restore Mary Steenburgen's belief in the holiday spirit in what is essentially a re-make of *It's A Wonderful Life*.

- *Holiday Inn* (1942) — Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire. Der Bingle sings *White Christmas*. What else is there to know?

- *White Christmas* (1954) — Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye as a song-and-dance team at Vermont Inn. Oddly enough, they resisted the temptation to call it a Holiday Inn.

- *Pocketful of Miracles* (1961) — Glenn Ford is a good-hearted gangster who transforms an old bag lady (Bette Davis) into a society woman.

### A LITTLE NONSENSE

- *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* (1989) — Everyone should have a little nonsense at Christmas. Chevy Chase and Randy Quaid provide it in spades.

- *A Charlie Brown Christmas* (1965) — I know it's only a TV show, not a real movie, but there's something about this semi-sweet little story — and the wonderful music — that I can't resist.

And though I never find it on any Christmas list, I'm including 1944's *Going My Way* with Bing Crosby and Barry Fitzgerald.

In fact, I'm going out right now to pick up a copy and add it to my Yuletide must-see list.



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

## Make it a musical holiday

BY HEIDI RIEDNER  
CORRESPONDENT

More than any other holiday, Christmas is music.

And if you will be entertaining with good friends and good food, great music is a must.

Luckily, a wide selection of seasonal music makes it easy to hit the right note for any gathering.

Christmas is the one time of year when people welcome and delight in a wide selection of song stylings that they wouldn't normally listen to, including classical, choral and jazz renditions of traditional hymns and carols.

Most of us have a seasonal soundtrack dating back to childhood that is associated with the Christmas music our parents played year after year.

As adults, the same music recreates the sentimental memories and nostalgic glow of the season, establishing a repertoire of festive favourites.

It usually combines both 19th-century carols such as *Silent Night*, *We Three Kings* and *Jingle Bells* and movie soundtrack tunes from the 1930s to the '50s, including the favourites *White Christmas*, *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* and *The Christmas Song* (better known as the chestnuts-roasting-on-an-open-fire song).

Over the years, the songs have been interpreted by various artists incorporating a number of genres, producing a huge selection to suit any taste and gathering.

Whether you are planning a casual party for a few friends or hosting a formal dinner for 20, here are some suggestions to create your own personal holiday sound-

track.

A popular choice is still the 1946 *The Christmas Song* album by Nat King Cole. Cole's smooth and luxurious voice is the perfect backdrop for lingering over a sumptuous dinner with friends or family in a relaxed, mellow setting. For many, Cole's

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rich voice raises goosebumps like no other.

To achieve a fun and festive atmosphere for large gatherings, look no further than the sounds of Ella Fitzgerald on either *Ella Wishes You A Swinging Christmas* or *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the George and Ira Gershwin Song Book*. Both provide sparkling, high-spirited show and jazz tunes for a lively evening.

If your goal is to glitz it up and swing your guests right through the night, both discs are highly recommended.

If your party includes children, a good suggestion is *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, by pianist/composer Vince Guaraldi of The Vince Guaraldi Trio. The disc, which includes subtle jazz renditions of *O Tannenbaum* and *What Child Is This?*, is recommended as a great way to introduce children to jazz, while maintaining an air of elegance for the adults.

More formal affairs involving a large guest list will benefit from a traditional selection of classical collections or the glo-

rious sounds of choir music.

Popular choices are recordings of the Vienna Boys Choir and orchestra selections featuring arrangements from Handel's *Messiah* and Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*. They provide an elegant and dramatic atmosphere for a sophisticated dinner party with the good china and crystal.

For something a little different and exotic, check out albums featuring a worldly spin on traditional classics. Suggestions include *A Brazilian Christmas*, *Celtic Christmas* and *Various Artists, The Carols of Christmas II*. The latter includes *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen* by Loreena McKennitt, whose haunting voice is aided by a backing of East Indian instruments.

For an intimate candlelight evening, the voice and guitar combination on *Angels' Glory* features soprano Kathleen Battle with guitarist Christopher Parkening offering an assortment of goodies from traditional French carols to American spirituals. Rare medieval carols are provided by the vocal quartet the Anonymous 4 on the disc *On Yoolis Night*.

Compilation albums are a popular choice because they offer a blend of cross-cultural hymns, carols and songs in classical, jazz, rock and spiritual arrangements.

In addition, many forward some or all of the proceeds to charity. For example, the proceeds from the collection of Christmas music on *Holiday Heroes* benefit Special Olympics in Canada.

With all the choices available, it's easy to add some variety and depth to your musical library and provide a warm and inviting atmosphere for your guests.

## Seasonal soundtracks

BY HEIDI RIEDNER  
CORRESPONDENT

Holiday soundtracks offer unique blends of traditional Christmas carols and musical genres.

The word carol derives from the medieval French word for dance. Previously associated with pagan rituals, carols were introduced into Christmas celebrations by St. Francis of Assisi in the 13th century.

*White Christmas*, written by Irving Berlin and introduced in the 1942 movie *Holiday Inn*, remains the biggest selling single of all time in all genres.

Favoured Christmas collections include the following:

- *A Carnegie Hall Christmas Concert*. The soundtrack from the popular PBS special has been described as the quintessential Christmas album.

- *The Christmas Song*. Nat King Cole. If you haven't heard it, you're one of the few missing out on a staple of every collection.

- *Ella Wishes You A Swinging Christmas*. Ella Fitzgerald. Swinging and rocking, Fitzgerald's voice was once described as the equivalent of a glass of champagne.

- *The Sinatra Christmas Album*. Frank Sinatra. The chairman of the board does Christmas.

- *The Christmas Album*. Classical arrangements from Bach, Handel, Tchaikovsky and more.

- *a winter garden: five songs for the season*. Combines the haunting voice of Loreena McKennitt with some of the most beautifully played music and unorthodox instruments.