

Paper Mache for 12-19-25 by David Read

Nothing gets me into the holiday spirit like the music of the season, and I mean all types of music covering all genres. We are blessed in Yuba-Sutter to have access to our own homegrown music ensembles, not the least of which include the Yuba-Sutter Master Chorale, the Yuba-Sutter Symphony with its annual performance of the Messiah, the Yuba-Sutter Big Band, the ad hoc Tuba Christmas band and I'm sure many more.

My tastes skew more toward the classical. I especially love opera singers' holiday albums even when they perform their renditions of secular favorites including recordings by Welsh Bass Baritone Bryn Terfel and American Soprano Renée Fleming. On the other end of the spectrum, I also like the western swing band, Asleep at the Wheel's "Merry Texas Christmas, Y'all," and RuPaul's "I Saw Daddy Kissing Santa Claus."

I heard an interview recently with Berklee School of Music musicologist, Joe Bennett, who portrays Christmas songs as a strange kind of time machine. You can be stuck in traffic in 2025 and, with three notes of "Jingle Bells," suddenly you're eight years old again, fogging up the car window and believing winter is a story that always ends warmly. Bennett believes that this power isn't magic so much as craft and that these are repeatable patterns that songwriters, knowingly or not, keep rediscovering. Bennett's first insight is that most commercial Christmas hits keep circling the same handful of ideas. He groups the lyrical "aboutness" into six recurring themes being "home for the holidays" (the biggest one), weather songs ("Let It Snow"), Santa legends, holiday parties, being in love, and being out of love. Christmas pop songs aren't trying to explain the season; they're trying to stage it like set dressing for a shared memory.

Then come the sonic cues that instantly tell your brain "Holiday." Bennett points to sleigh bells as a dominant ingredient, showing up in more than 65% of the songs he analyzed, often playing "eight to the bar." Whether or not you've ever heard a real sleigh bell, that rhythmic shimmer has become an audio icon, one that's historically tied, he notes, to the practical warning-bells used on horses in the 1800s. In other words, a piece of old street safety turned into a modern emotional trigger.

There are structural choices made by the songwriters that make these songs singable, portable, and multi-generational. Bennett says roughly 98% of the songs in his dataset are in a major key, a bias toward brightness and communal cheer. He also emphasizes range. Many enduring Christmas standards use nine notes or fewer, and some classics are even simpler. "Jingle Bells," famously, can be built from just five notes. That's not a limitation, it's a strategy. A Christmas song succeeds when grandparents, parents, and kids can all join in without training, without strain and without feeling excluded. Even melody behaves like a welcome mat. Bennett observes how often Christmas tunes move stepwise up or down the scale, an easy pathway for amateur singers that includes a subtle sense of inevitability, like the season itself rolling in.

And yet the segment's most important point is a warning against cynicism which Bennett warns against and calls a "selection effect." We remember the Christmas songs that survived the marketplace, not the "experimental ones" that disappeared. Walter Afanasieff, who co-wrote "All I Want for Christmas Is You" with Mariah Carey, underlines the same truth from the songwriter's side that ingredients don't guarantee a classic. The formula can get you the scent of pine, but it can't manufacture nostalgia. *Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays!*