



# THE GREAT BRITISH FLAKE OFF

An enchanting blend of spectacular cartoon  
animation and fine acting

The Children of  
Green Knowe

TV TIMES  
DEC 20 - DEC 26 ITV PROGRAMMES PAGES 24 - 37



TV CREAM

## OH, COME ALL YE FAITHFUL!

If there's one question we get asked a lot here at *TV Cream*, it's "What was that programme called where it had Hedge and Mo?".

At more seasonal times of year, however, we get asked what we think the best Christmas films, TV shows, pop records, toys, books, games, and things made out of tinsel are. And we've never really had an answer. Until now.

Yes, the greatest minds at *TV Cream*... weren't available, so we've set some of our top resident Occam's Razor-wielders on the case to determine just which are the best. Using a scoring system nicked from an old *Just Seventeen* 'Battle Of The Bands' between Duran Duran and Spandau Ballet, and ignoring all the wildcard suggestions from within TVC Towers such as *Silent Night Deadly Night*, *Hey Mr Christmas*, *What We Gonna Get For 'Er Indoors*, and of course *Thing With Cliff Richard In*, we've set out instead to determine which is really the greatest out of two seemingly level-pegged Cream-era Yuletide totems.

So, you like Band Aid, and you like Band Aid II... but which is best? There's only one way to find out... by reading *The Great British Flake-Off!*

Merry Christmas from all at *TV Cream!*





# THE CHRISTMAS RADIO TIMES VS. THE CHRISTMAS TV TIMES

## THE CHRISTMAS RADIO TIMES

**Y**ou know, there are instances when we get nostalgic for the 35 years or so when you had to buy both the *Radio Times* and the *TV Times* to find out what was on telly. Those days you could get the information the way the broadcasters wanted to give it to you, with a full cast and crew, an illustration instead of a photograph and, if they wanted, something completely daft (“Mae’n Nawr O’Gloch!”). Who wouldn’t want to read a Stewart Lee-penned billing for *Comedy Vehicle* instead of a bland “stand-up comedy series”?

That said, there were obvious drawbacks. Unless you were one of the tiny minority who refused to watch commercial television, or who had ITV on all day, you’d have two listings magazines knocking around the house, meaning you were guaranteed never to find the one you wanted when you wanted it, and planning an evening’s viewing would involve turning several pages. That was especially the case at Christmas when both magazines ballooned in size.

Both guides certainly represented the channels they covered, though. *Radio Times* was a stuffy, fusty publication, printed in monochrome on bog roll, while the *TV Times* was a gaudy picture-packed glossy. The differences were magnified still further at Christmas, though. The Beeb was big on tradition and the *Radio Times* would take on a never-changing format. There’d usually be an illustrated cover of a nice festive scene (with very rare exceptions, like 1985’s *Only Fools* picture), followed by an opening feature where the familiar BBC stars would discuss their Christmas plans. Of course, the likes of Mike Yarwood and The Two Ronnies would turn up here regular as clockwork but that was all part of the charm. A few features later we’d be in the programme pages with remarkably little fuss.

## THE CHRISTMAS TV TIMES

**F**or ITV, Christmas was never as important, thanks to all the shops being shut and so there being fewer adverts around, and they never managed to carve out many festive traditions. Hence the *TV Times* cover could vary wildly, from a horrible

chocolate box illustration of Charles and Diana at Christmas 1983 to Russ Abbott in a tute 12 months later, while the personnel could also be the very definition of a mixed bag, with Kid Creole alongside Brucie and Tarby on the cover of 1984, and Dennis Taylor being highlighted as an ITV 'name' the following year.

Inside there'd be a ragbag of features on whatever shows ITV were serving up that Christmas, often accompanied by huge photos, so 1982's Christmas issue spends two pages detailing the concept of *Chas and Dave's Christmas Knees-Up*, making the actual business of finding the listings a real bind. This was further complicated by the fact that at least one show over Christmas wouldn't be on in your region and there'd have to be two film guides for both the networked and regional films. Add to that all the offers and competitions, especially in the early 1980s when it was fussily rebranded *TV Times Magazine* in a hopeless attempt to pretend anyone bought it for anything other than the listings (around the same time as the: "So much more than..." jingle).

### AND THE WINNER IS...

**O**K, so the current *Radio Times* can play up its 'legendary' status a bit too much, but the Christmas issues of the 1970s and 1980s were as cosy a Christmas tradition as *Carols From King's* and *Disney Time*. The *TV Times* served as an effective time capsule of the fads and fashions of the age, but so did an episode of *Mike Reid's Mates And Music*, and you wouldn't necessarily want to see that again... it's Christmas *Radio Times*!





# THE BOX OF DELIGHTS VS. THE CHILDREN OF GREEN KNOWE

## THE BOX OF DELIGHTS

The state-of-the-art Quantel-driven John Masfield adaptation that launched a thousand tired titular puns for thinkpieces about children's television first hit the small screen in 1984. And didn't we just know it, with the endless *Radio Times* features, *Blue Peter* features, *Six O'Clock News* features and all manner of other hype that frankly put *It's Kevin* (Sundays, 10.30pm, BBC2) to shame.

But the crucial difference here was that, unlike most other things ever to have the PR machine spluttering for mercy, *The Box of Delights* really did live up to every bit of the aforementioned hype. It looked and sounded amazing, the acting was uniformly un-embarrassing, it cranked up all of the festive clichés without ever seeming forced or contrived, and it came at the exact moment before the children's BBC schedules went into *Daytime On BBC1* launch-funding meltdown, and was in a very real sense the feast before the televisual famine. Small wonder, then, that people might look back on the collected attempts of Foxy-Faced Charles and Chubby Joe to get their poncily-gloved mitts on some sort of Troughton-discarded multimedia thingy with such proclamations of high watermarkage.

Of course, much like the near-contemporaneous *A Fairytale Of New York*, it's since become a depressingly convenient off-the-peg Best Christmas Thing Ever No Arguments standpoint for those too-cool-for-school bores who wouldn't dare be seen admitting in public to liking *Santa Claus The Movie* or Shakin' Stevens, but if you can get past that (which is admittedly hard these days) *The Box of Delights* does absolutely everything right, from the genuinely creepy opening titles to the pleasing note of ambiguity added to the original book's notoriously cop-out conclusion and is, frankly, one of the greatest *Singing Detective*-rivalling achievements of an era that we're always positing as the true golden age of television around here.

So successful was it, in fact, that the BBC repeated it in 50 minute compilation chunks over the Christmas of 1986 – in 1985 they'd opted for a book-balancing re-run of decade-old 'drugget'-obsessed snorefest *Carrie's War* – where it came book-ended by a new, post-*Children's BBC* relaunch offering that some would nominate as a genuine contender to *The Box of Delights'* crown...

## THE CHILDREN OF GREEN KNOWE

The *Children's BBC* of late 1986 was almost unrecognisable from the one that had synth-trumpeted *The Box Of Delights* only two years earlier. Gone were the clunky BBC Micro graphics and disinterested continuity man voiceovers, the creaking ageing programmes that nobody had been bothered thinking up a replacement format for, and the preponderance of 'improving' imports foisted upon an audience that just wanted Firestar, Firestar and more Firestar. In their place came the chummy residents of the not-yet-officially-designated 'Broom Cupboard', a large influx of new and up to the minute shows with Art Of Noise-aping theme tunes, and, erm, *The True Story of Spit McPhee*. Well, they weren't going to get everything right, were they?

As part of this new broomery, 1950s-set novel *The Children of Green Knowe* became the long-awaited unofficial follow-up to *The Box of Delights*, occupying the same timeslot and indeed the same settings on the effects console. Theoretically, the story of young 'Tolly' spending Christmas with elderly relatives just before rock'n'roll 'broke' and meeting some 17th-century spooks who don't really do very much shouldn't have been anything near a match for Kay Harker and his all-flying all-size-changing box thingy, but that very same drive for modernity saw it told in an expansive, visually impressive and above all at least faintly resonant for the present day audience manner that couldn't help but strike the odd chord or two.

The subplot about a 'cursed' tree in Green Knowe's grounds aside, which was summarily dismissed by Tolly's surprisingly youthful great grandmother as a load of superstitious bollocks anyway, *The Children of Green Knowe* was simply charming where so many other children's dramas sought to be hard-hitting, emotive, aspirational or just plain dreary bilge about posh uniformed youngsters in the previous century, and if that's not the true spirit of Christmas then what is exactly? Mind you, there was that horrendously realised Walking Statue, but as young master Toseland probably imagined that anyway we can let it ride.

But which was best? Well, we'd *really* love to see Foxy-Faced Charles taking on Alexander's Flute in a *TV Burp*-style showdown, but anyway...

### AND THE WINNER IS...

For being the official Paphides-confounding preferred choice of true Cream-era connoisseurs, rather than the sort of people who can't understand why we keep going on about *Sin On Saturday* and *Luna*, it's got to be *The Children of Green Knowe*...!





# THE RADIO 1 DJs' CHRISTMAS PARTY VS. THE FESTIVE FIFTY

## THE RADIO 1 DJs' CHRISTMAS PARTY

As the inevitable parental refusal to sanction the viewing of Christmas *Top Of The Pops* due to that all-too-familiar serving time scheduling clash was to Christmas Dinner, so trying to hear anything other than the odd snatched audio glimpse of someone asking, “So Dave... DLT... what are your plans for Christmas?” in between the clank of ‘for best’ cutlery and aggrieved grand-parental requests for you to help ‘carrying stuff in’ was to the *Pops*-plugging Radio 1 scoff-fest of paper-hat-ahoy photo-oppery immemorial that was *The Radio 1 DJs' Christmas Party*.

Inaugurated with the station's first ever December 25th back in 1967, the *Christmas Party* – usually recorded in mid-June and in a sweltering heatwave – soon became both a regular yearly fixture and one of those all-too-frequent occasions on which the brow-furrowed late-night specialist presenters were forced to spend teeth-gritting time with the daytime fun-flingers – who pretty much all hated each other anyway – and give at least the vague illusion of novelty present-proffering inter-jock joviality. Famously this clash of ideologically-opposed disc-spinners once resulted in John Peel assembling a crack team of bruisers (among them, erm, Kid Jensen and Paul Burnett) to ‘get’ Simon Bates in the car park afterwards. He never turned up.

The basic format was that between putative mouthfuls of sage and onion, the likes of Wright and Brookes would wheeze with laughter-induced inarticulacy on being presented with something that wittily referenced one of their TV gigs earlier in the year, or if raining, a ‘zany’ baseball cap with some unfunny slogan on it, while the likes of Vance and Long would skulk around mostly out of earshot, occasionally being press-ganged into vouchsafing reluctant vox pops on their acts to ‘watch out for’ in the New Year, or to provide some fake-laugh-accompanied ‘those guys – they’re so crazy!!’ drollery on how those mood-indicating cellophane fish things you got in crackers actually worked. And in between all of this, some of the number one singles of the year would filter through in Juste-occasioned clip form as an unofficial Christmas *TOTP* warm-up in all but name. This, it has to be said, only served to heighten the Duran-deprived agony of never actually getting to see the thing itself.

Although recent events have put something of a dampener on the memory of this once-proud – well, alright, once-something – institution, or at least have done if you're a tedious broadsheet columnist who can't just write about the Seventies and Eighties on face value, the *Christmas Party* probably wasn't *that* exciting if you actually heard the full show anyway. But that's the whole point – nobody ever did, and it always at least gave the impression of being an unmissable feast of fun that you were missing, the odd tantalising overhearing aside. All of which makes it a pretty strong contender, but can it stand up to the might of...

## THE FESTIVE FIFTY

Once you'd graduated beyond the Top 10 and started to prefer the DJs who actually liked The Smiths to the ones who reluctantly played *Panic* when it was in the charts and dribbled all kinds of wacky 'don't hang me, I'll be your best friend' non-joke bollocks over the end, John Peel's listener-voted rundown of the year's musical highlights that Steve Wright probably wouldn't even have considered music in the first place automatically became required late-night festive listening.

First staged in 1976, in a bizarre 'all time greats' incarnation that saw it almost entirely populated by country-rock dullards, prog-rock dinosaurs who were identifiable as dinosaurs before prog had even passed its evolutionary peak, and Derek and The Sodding Dominos, by the following year it had become the familiar last-12-months-only-thank-you assortment of scratchy lo-fi post-punk guitar stuff, exotic sounding Korg-propelled dub reggae made by some blokes in Croydon, scary electronic harshness that changed its genre name every three minutes, session tracks nominated for maximum *ahhhhhhhh* points, and some records so obscure that even the people who made them had never heard of them. And listeners voted all of this stuff into the resultant *Fifty* by the sackful, in longhand and on paper and all of it in the days before anything resembling premium rate phone lines or one-click internet voting were even a half-formed idea in the back of the mind of that bloke that Ant & Dec used to take the piss out of at the end of the *Comedy Awards*. Technically this means that The Raincoats are more famous than Joey Essex. Yes it does. Stop arguing.

What made *The Festive Fifty* even more enjoyable was Peel's inevitable sardonic inter-disc grumbling about the high placings even of records he quite liked (you should have heard him start whenever the Peel-frowned likes of The Stone Roses, Saint Etienne or The Divine Comedy found their way into there, and he once even scrapped an entire *Festive Fifty* when Nirvana were proving too overwhelmingly popular while *Pattern 26* by Manifesto hadn't even got so much as a look in), and general berating of his entire collective listenership for not casting enough votes for however many thousands of Fall records had been released that year. What's more, despite its name and indeed timing, it was just about the least festive thing imaginable, and exactly the sort of convention-subverting in-joke you appreciated when taking a break from skim-listening your newly acquired copy of *Bandwagonesque*.

Nobody has ever tried to revive the *Festive Fifty*, which is a good thing too because it wouldn't have worked without Peel and the eclectic tastes he engendered in his loyal listenership, and if 6Music ever make noises in that direction you are instructed to deploy the wheelclamps with immediate effect. For its nigh on 30-year existence, though, *The Festive Fifty* was a crucial barometer of, well, lots of records that you didn't much like at the time but have found yourself inexplicably desperate to know the name of ever since.

### **AND THE WINNER IS...**

A close call this one, as the *DJs' Christmas Party* is a anecdotage-heavy gift that, alarmingly, just keeps on giving, but for showing the diversity of the BBC in a manner that proves anyone who wants to do away with the license fee is a plank, and indeed for having precisely sod all to do with Christmas, it's got to be the *Festive Fifty*!





# CHOCOLATE ADVENT CALENDARS VS. TRADITIONAL ADVENT CALENDARS

## CHOCOLATE ADVENT CALENDARS

The Holy Grail of Advent Calendars for any Cream-era child, the chocolate Advent Calendar was proof positive that your parents loved you. Yes, for 24 days in December it was acceptable to eat chocolate before your Frosties or Ricicles, leaving you with a spring in your step on the way to school.

Of course, the portion of chocolate would be so tiny as to barely be sufficient to even register on your tastebuds, but it was there *every day*. For 24 days, we lived like kings.

Back in the day tiny Mars Bars were on offer, usually with a fairly dull overall design with just some Christmas Crackers and ribbons in the Approved Mars Colours, Cadbury's would be in on the action with more traditional festive scenes and your actual Dairy Milk, and even Nestles would have something or other. Probably Milky Bar related.

Nowadays, the Chocolate Advent Calendar has lost its allure somewhat, the market dominated by the also-rans of the chocolate world, Kinnerton, providing a range of disappointing Mainstream Entertainment Brand Licenced calendars, containing sub-cooking chocolate moulded into vaguely festive shapes, filling your mornings with not so much a spring in your step as a grudging lurch.

At least they don't make the Christmas Eve one bigger anymore.

## TRADITIONAL ADVENT CALENDARS

Nowadays seemingly restricted to the Quiet Children, those born to outwardly religious parents, you won't find the traditional Advent calendar piled high in a bargain bin on the 8th of December, begging to be bought at Four For A Pound. These are an altogether loftier product, none of your gaudy designs on high gloss cardboard, we're talking traditional images. Invariably this meant a watercolour paint picture of Mary in a cowshed while the Three Kings look on over the manger with December 24th revealing a big star. That was the law back then.

Now, that might seem dull compared to the sassy Chocolate calendars, but those kids who had a trad calendar had true excitement; every day, a unique image, every day the excitement of pelting downstairs to tell their parents whether they'd guessed right the night before.

A simpler time. But while you might not see them in the shops so much these days, at least you could reuse them year after year.

### **AND THE WINNER IS...**

Because the true meaning of Christmas is being able to use the same decorations again and again... it's Traditional Advent Calendars!





# A CHRISTMAS GIFT TO YOU FROM PHIL SPECTOR VS. NOW: THE CHRISTMAS ALBUM

## A CHRISTMAS GIFT TO YOU FROM PHIL SPECTOR

So, the big question – what are you going to put on the office stereo for the three weeks leading up to the big day? Well, the conventional faces off with the contemporary (well, sort of) in this audio showdown, and in this corner we've got with Phil Spector's sensibly attired Wall Of Sound crew, cheered on by the Ghost Of Christmas Past.

Originally given a JFK-dampened release in 1963 as *A Christmas Gift For You From Philles Records* ('Philles' being Phil and his pal 'Les'), Spector's offering is a seasonal compendium of dependable classics from his regular stable of artists. It all harks back to a more innocent era when musical acts invariably followed a simple 'The [Nouns]' naming rule, with half the tracks here performed by The Ronettes and The Crystals (with the shortfall picked up by, erm, Bob B. Soxx & The Blue Jeans... no, us neither).

Even without an endless parade of Radio 2 documentaries to explain just how they got "that classic Wall Of Sound sound", there's no doubting the charm and the craftsmanship that went into the making of this album, with *Frosty The Snowman*, *Santa Claus is Coming to Town* and *I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus* being definitive heraldings of Yuletide glee. And indeed more recently *Glee*, but let's not dwell on that.

These days, however, Phil Spector doesn't get the affectionate acclaim he once did, nor does the album get the exposure it once did, due to a rather unsavoury recent conviction which we won't be going into here. So you'd think we'd be handing the victory over to Now - The Christmas Album as a foregone conclusion.

## NOW: THE CHRISTMAS ALBUM

Not so fast, as a cursory glance down the tracklisting of the other corner-occupying chart-raiding Virgin-Records-collated mob that make up *Now: The Christmas Album* reveals a certain number by a certain Gary Glitter. So, with a quick burst of air to suck through our teeth, let's try to ignore that and carry on.

There have been many permutations of the nominal *Now!* Christmas album

in recent years; in fact, we've had a new – or at least rejigged – compilation for the past three years, each bizarrely carrying the same name and making absolutely no attempt whatsoever to differentiate between releases. To latterday *Now!* torchbearers EMI, Christmas has proved such an elastic concept that Robbie Williams's maudlin *Angels* managed to find its way on such a compilation. Here, though, we're concentrating on the first bash at it, from 1985. Which, lest we forget, was the first occasion on which *Now That's What I Call Music* deviated from their usual numbered release format, building up a series of 'who is this for?' spin-offs that would ultimately expand to include ...*Reggae*, ...*Relaxing Classical* and, unfathomably, ...*Disney Princess*.

Welded into the office tape deck each December, the *Now: The Christmas Album* carried the more upbeat offerings of Wizzard, Slade, 'Thumbs Aloft' Macca and the Plastic Ono Band, yet modern-day hits also dominated, with both Band Aid and Wham's chart-fighters from the previous year present and correct. There's even a nod to the 'roaring log fire' Christmas evoked so well by Spector's collective, with Johnny Mathis's *When a Child is Born* and Bing Crosby's *White Christmas* rounding it all off. For sheer flexibility, Richard Branson's guys appear to have got this one in the bag.

Yes, in *Now: The Christmas Album* we would seem to have, at face value, the Swiss Army knife of Chrimbo tuneage. But Ashley Abram has dropped a real clanger here. For he has included *I Believe In Father Christmas* by Greg Lake (the carpet-straddling middle one in between Messrs Emerson and Palmer), which is basically just a soliloquy protest at the commercialisation of Christmas. Quite the Trojan Horse of party poopers, with its apparent ear-pleasing melodies masking the misery-inducing lyrics. You'll hear it every year, but, like a newly married couple picking *Every Breath You Take* as their first dance, we know better.

### AND THE WINNER IS...

So the win goes to Spector and his definite-article-prefixed lovelies... it's *A Christmas Gift To You From Phil Spector!*





# SCROOGE (1970) VS. SCROOGED (1988)

## SCROOGE (1970)

**S**traight out of a sick version of the Quality Street tin is how this film begins. A *Christmas Carol* has obviously been filmed umpteen times, so a new “definitive” take is needed to ensure a place in history. How to do it? Simple! With a hearty cry of “’s Ebenezer Good”, the stage is set for the first musical version.

As with so many of the literary musicals of the late 1960s, the one big problem here is the bloated length. Fatter than the biggest goose in the shop, this one weighs in at just under two hours - throw in the Christmas ad breaks on ITV, and it starts edging towards the three-hour mark of bum-numbdom. The original story is a short, sharp blast of redemptive Christmas cheer, not *War and Peace II*. Of course, this is mainly because of all of the musical numbers. It may seem harsh to damn a musical for its songs, but the unfortunate truth is that there are far too many of them here, and a lot of them aren’t much cop - a rare major misfire for Leslie Bricusse. However, the *I Hate People*, *Thank You Very Much* and *I Like Life* songs are genuine sugar plums - you can understand how a big blast of the last named could convert any Scrooge.

The whole thing is beautifully acted - Albert Finney, neither too young nor too old, but just right: and a cast groaning at the seams with well-loved character actors fit to rival Saint Nick’s bulging sack - David Collings, Mary Peach, Gordon Jackson, Laurence Naismith, Derek Francis, Roy Kinnear, Molly Weir, and TV Cream (Films)’s gold standard for such things - both Geoffrey Bayldon *and* Marianne Stone. And the pre-redemption Scrooge-freaks-out sequence, involving death, demons, chains and a *Doctor Who*-type vortex - is the best ever put on film. Trim about 20 minutes of Terpsichorean goose fat off, it’d be near-perfect.

## SCROOGED (1988)

**T**his ‘un appears to be onto a loser from the start, being basically yet another modern-dress “gee, Mr Bill Cosby dressed as Father Christmas, Sir, are you the *real* Santa?” Yank variation - but it does have its strengths. The devil is very much in the detail.

Whether it’s Scrooge surrogate Frank Cross’s attempt to turn Christmas into a never-ending variation on *Die Hard*, or Carol Kane’s tweely-brutal Ghost of Christ-

mas Present repeatedly sloshing Cross over the head with her wand when he least expects it, there are so many little bits that sparkle in this film like particularly beautiful snowflakes that it ends up with a lot going for it. Not that it's perfect - far from it - the awfully sweet little children on show here aren't a patch on Scrooge's snotty-nosed, raggy-arsed urchins, and Bill Murray - as so often on screen - comes across as a smug git even post-redemption.

But... it's notably shorter than *Scrooge*; there's only really one (admittedly nauseating) song; and Cross's double-take fake Death/real Death encounter is a genuine shiver-down-the-spine moment, almost matching the Grand Guignol of the Finney version.

And the casting, Murray possibly aside, is superb - Bobcat Goldthwait, Karen Allen, Michael J. Pollard... and, best of all, David Johansen, epitomising 'affably terrifying' as the mercurial cabbie Ghost of Christmas Past. Weigh both films together, and it looks like a 17-all tie - but one has to win here. The deciding factor? The best delivery of a line of dialogue in any film ever. Take a bow, "It's a *boh-one, you lucky dog!!!*"

### **AND THE WINNER IS...**

Johansen narrowly edges a victory in this festive throw-down... it's *Scrooged!*





# MERRY XMAS EVERYBODY VS. I WISH IT COULD BE CHRISTMAS EVERY DAY

## MERRY XMAS EVERYBODY

The seasonally thrifty Noddy Holder and Jim Lea didn't start with a blank stave on their Yuletide perennial. The song was already written, albeit as two separate ditties that had been grafted together after being rejected as melodies during the band's bover boy phase in the late 1960s. Holder had the chorus and Lea the verse, and soon they sussed out that the two could merge. During an American tour in the summer of 1973, they went to a New York studio and laid down the backing tracks, save for the drums (more on that in a bit), and Holder sat up all night with – ahem – stimulants in a hotel room trying to sort out a new lyric. His idea was to make it an anthem of festive familiarity and, in a method later used by Suggs on *Baggy Trousers*, just wrote down everything he knew of a Walsallian wassailing Yuletide in a long list, then tried to piece it together.

Perhaps the most telling line is: “Look to the future now, it's only just begun”; this was Holder's one concession to the present, a Sandbrookian fending-off of the cosiness associated with drunken grannies and home-made sleds. 1973 was a grim year, politically, economically, and socially – strikes, banking crises, power shortages, inflation, they'd all affected society through the year and Holder, aware acutely of this, wanted to add a smidgeon of optimism. Accidentally, the line also cast him as something of a sociocultural prophet - a lyric penned in the summer was about to take on a whole new meaning with the announcement, just after the song had got to number one, that the three-day week would begin on New Year's Eve.

Some of the stories associated with recording enhance the song's mystique and charm. The echoey chorus was achieved by putting numerous extension cables into the microphone, and feeding them out of the studio door and into a corridor, where people working in adjacent studios (who had never heard of Slade) watched them singing a Christmas song, in summer, in the wrong kind of room, and looked at them as if they were unhinged. John Lennon was recording *Mind Games* next door (so people thought Slade were unhinged while *he* was there...), and spotting him with a harmonium gave the band the idea to put one on the hook of their song. And it's also poignant that Don Powell, who had been out of action since a car crash which killed his girlfriend, made his studio comeback when recording the drums.

*Merry Xmas Everybody* went to number one, stayed there through most of January 1974 too – without needing to flip the record to make *Don't Blame Me* the new A-side – and charted every year of the decade afterwards. It went platinum in 1980, charted every further year until 1985, and has been back in the Christmas charts at least once each decade thereafter. Nonetheless there is one thing wrong with it, very wrong with it. The same problem, in fact, as its old rival...

## I WISH IT COULD BE CHRISTMAS EVERY DAY

And that shared problem in full? You can't dance to either of them. Mind you, *I Wish It Could Be Christmas Every Day* does usurp Slade's effort on other factors. It's more varied a recording; cash registers, speech parts, a children's choir and actual sleigh bell effects all accompany Roy Wood's effusive vocals. His imagery is more idealistic, sticking with logical gimmicks (snowmen, Santa, beaming kids, only one of which you have ever been likely to see at Christmas), though having a frozen beard does, however, hint at darker, more personal stuff, as if Wood had suffered an Arctic explorer's painful rip-off when clearing the ice off his windscreen one especially cold winter.

The song is a minute longer than Slade's, thanks to the unusual refrain of, "When the snowman brings the snow" sung by a kids' choir from the Midlands who were ruthlessly replaced for cold hard cash-related reasons for *Top of the Pops*; a London stage school sent a batch of slightly-too-keen pre-teens instead. Ultimately, the song probably failed due to a split vote, as Gary Glitter also had a (non-festive) single out, and he ended up sandwiched between Holder and Wood (shut up) and the New Seekers (no really, shut up) in Christmas week, when a new chart wasn't calculated anyway. Indeed, that Christmas top four included three number ones; Glitter was there before Slade, the New Seekers succeeded them, and Wizzard were squeezed out by all of them.

It gets the airplay each year and indeed the odd re-issue - it nearly made the Top 20 at Christmas 1984 - and Wood himself is still happy to dole out the anecdotes and use the royalties each year as a pension plan (though we won't mention that credulity-begging Wombles hookup), but just as in 1973, he has still to bow to his fellow Midlanders when it comes to having penned the first Christmas song people think of.

But at least *Merry Xmas Everybody* has a stand-in-circle-join-hands-sing-chorus-loudly element to it; the Wizzard waxing struggles to manage even that. For the record, the only Christmas hits you can dance to are the ones by Mariah Carey and Shakin' Stevens. With Wizzard, it's best to smile, sing (until you realise you don't know the words) and then go get a round in.

## AND THE WINNER IS...

Slade edge it through familiarity, sales and slightly more memorable headgear ... it's *Merry Xmas Everybody*!





# MERRY XMAS (WAR IS OVER) VS. WONDERFUL CHRISTMAS TIME

## MERRY XMAS (WAR IS OVER)

Where is Christmas Beatles Band? They made some fine Christmas records for their fan club members - even the 1968 and 1969 discs where all four recorded separately and George clearly wants nothing to do with the whole affair, largely still listenable because they're produced by Kenny Everett - George made the decidedly odd *Ding Dong Ding Dong*, and Ringo put out a whole festive album (in 1998, unfortunately). But these are the two hits, the songs that in their way summarise the divergent paths of the duo after 1970 - one sounding huge, infused with New York spirit and political sloganeering, the other... well, some people want to fill the world with silly love-of-Christmas songs, and what's wrong with that?

On the one hand, we have *Happy Xmas (War is Over)*. A testament to the preference of fun to fear, it came out of "WAR IS OVER! if you want it", a phrase that had been kicking around John and Yoko's activist aphorism handbook for a couple of years before recording, at least more directly to the point and quotable than that whole 'HAIR PEACE BED PEACE' phase.

Allying it to the season that it 'tis does mean the superglue marks show up in trying to connect one standard, a simple to understand optimistic Christmas anthem the Harlem Community Choir could hammer home reinforcing as they do so that the festive season is for the kids, with another less personally achievable aim - it is, after all, pretty much out of the vast majority of people's hands what ultimately happens within a war.

As if to annoy Macca a bit more, *Let It Be* costumier Phil Spector popped by and finally found a relevant use for all those sleigh bells and timpani he'd been slaving songs in for years. That all-together-in-the-mix-now spirit does start to overwhelm the thing before too long, especially as towards the end Yoko appears to be attempting an operatic scale. As if out of record buyers' spite, The Fray's 2006 cover was a much bigger Billboard hit than the original ever has been.

## WONDERFUL CHRISTMAS TIME

And on the other side, there's Fab Macca Wacky Thumbs Aloft's demonstration of the minimalist melodic qualities of the Prophet-5 synth. Recorded during the sessions for *McCartney II*, which might explain why it sounds like a man

with young children wanting on some level to amuse and delight them and choosing for whatever reasons to prepare by being locked away in an airless room with just some early synthpop records for company and half an idea of what to do with this new knowledge, it is of course, sentimental as all hell.

It's Paul McCartney writing a family Christmas song, it can't help but be. While John directs his sentiments to "weak and strong" and "black and white", Paul assumes the world is already feeling good on their own terms, not just for it being Christmas time but apparently because "the moon is right". Is he still scared of tales about full moons?

So which is officially the best? If we're looking towards the real sign of a good song being the best to cover on acoustic guitar, as "real music" aficionados still insist, Lennon's is the easier as it's pretty one-paced underneath the production (literal) bells and (figurative) whistles, but Tom McRae has proved *Wonderful Christmas Time* can be made to sound highly ironic. As for the best to parody, Peter Serafinowicz's *Let's All Have a Sexual Christmas Night* is good, if one-joke, but it's not the Shirehorses' *Happy Xmas (Fighting's Brilliant)*, as played once live on Simon Mayo's show and never properly recorded. As for using the B-side to expand the basic idea, while Yoko commandeered the reverse of *Merry Xmas (War is Over)* for her own crystalline *Listen The Snow is Falling*, which now sounds like turn of the Tens US east coast dream-pop with a touch too eager vocalist, *Wonderful Christmas Time* came backed with *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reggae*, which is violin-led and otherwise sounds like you'd imagine. Never really got over *C-Moon*, Macca.

Ultimately, we're giving the choirs of children singing their song the nod over the actual choir of children singing someone else's song. People go so much out of their way to profess hatred for it round this time of year that someone needs to stand up and retort that not everything needs layers of arrhythmic complexity or even meaningful video imagery.

### AND THE WINNER IS...

For all its idea that Paul could knock this sort of simplistic melody off in his sleep and in this case probably did, there's no doubting his is a lot more fun where John, Yoko and co pull back from celebration in favour of vague hope, and therefore maybe befits the general mood better... it's *Wonderful Christmas Time*!





# THE REVOLVING CHRISTMAS PUDDING VS. THE REVOLVING SANTA HEAD

## THE REVOLVING CHRISTMAS PUDDING

In 1977, after stuffing the Jubilee, it was time to do the same to the turkey when BBC1 came up with this heartwarming tribute to peace on Earth, goodwill to all men through the healing power of suet.

The RCP (as the cognoscenti call it) was an undeniable classic of its kind: a straightforward representation of a plum pudding of unfeasible balance (outside of Fatty Fudge's dining-table, has a perfectly spherical pud ever been seen?; come on, it'd just roll off the table and fall on the floor, like in that song that Calvin was always singing to annoy his mum in the comic strips), with the minimum of fuss. While the icing has an unsettling oozing quality that's sorely reminiscent of a Ron Jeremy pop shot, the little sprig of holly on top is just pertly lovely, seasonal without being twee.

And it's all nicely non-secular. Whatever our religion, who doesn't enjoy stuffing their faces at Yuletide? Short of making the thing a big revolving Tunnock's selection box, the Beeb couldn't really have done much better. Okay, it's decidedly unimaginative, but it's welcoming, jovial, and comes in handy when the Go Gos are demanding an extra place setting for their Dalek. Although the props guys did fall down on one point. Imagine how neat it'd have been to see the thing in brandy butter/vodka margarine flames at Christmas dinner time.

Compared to other seasonal globes, the RCP is a classic of less-is-more, apart from that slightly disgusting-looking sauce. If it had broken down, would it really have mattered? It summons up fond feelings of family togetherness, distended stomachs, and ruined teeth for those lucky enough to find the sixpence. Okay, that's starting to sound not quite so good. And the Beeb really should have made the sauce pattern in the shape of the continents of the Globe.

## THE REVOLVING SANTA HEAD

Oh dear. Leave out the old (roast) chestnut about how it broke down and stuttered like Max Headroom, that was an unfortunate accident that could have happened to any mechanism. But what were the Beeb thinking in 1978?

In theory, it's all so sound: the jolly head of Father Christmas revolving as

though he (or you) had had one post-prandial Tia Maria or something too many. Sounds all smiles and ho-ho-ho jollity. Except that the Beeb, to their credit, remembered to include one traditional BBC yuletide ingredient: to scare the living bejaysus out of their viewers along with the MR James adaptation. What we got was a revolving, severed head sitting in a pile of fake snow. Worse, it had two faces. Even more underwear-threateningly still, the over-enthusiastically jolly red cheeks and lips instead made Little Saint Nick look like a drunken cannibal. It was genuinely disturbing.

The RSH (as the cognoscenti call it) was, ultimately, a terrifying misjudgement. But let's not be too unkind: those who have seen it have never forgotten it. It also served as a handy subconscious reminder to switch over to BBC2 if *Doctor Jekyll & Mister Hyde* was about to be shown in some form. And it knocks the mistletoe off of David Tennant prattling about with some reindeer.

The RSH does, despite what you've heard, have its plus points: it's undeniably Christmassy, attempts to summon up the requisite festive bonhomie, and draws on traditional seasonal icons. None of which stop it from being a near-Lovecraftian horror and far too complicated-looking for its own good, all carefully-drafted chubby cheeks and bristling beard.

### **AND THE WINNER IS...**

It wasn't perfect, but unlike the Santa Head it was at least partway there... it's The Revolving Christmas Pudding!





# CHRISTMAS EVE VS. BOXING DAY

## CHRISTMAS EVE

**T**he ultimate day of anticipation; presents piled below the tree, your parents sending you out of the room for reasons you didn't know, but would find a few years later after the discovery of the non-existence of Father Christmas that they were wrapping presents. Perhaps a strained conversation as relatives descend on your home to make everyone feel a bit awkward, your mum telling off your dad for ignoring her mum while he pretends he's watching the news, your dad later swearing in the kitchen as he peeled the spuds for the morning, nicking his finger in the process.

Yep, Christmas Eve has it all. The telly is better, Channel 4 lobbing out *The Snowman* at 6.20pm without fail, some half-cocked Christmas special of a Big LE Bollocks show with your Brucie or your Noel in a Christmas jumper, the whole day an excuse to eat nought but mince pies and sandwiches as you try to save room for the next day's Biggest Meal Of Them All.

Some people even open their presents on Christmas Eve, but that's just all wrong. How can they get something to simple so atrociously wrong? Tsk.

## BOXING DAY

**R**olling out of bed only half an hour later than Christmas morning itself, rushing down to play with the Big Present, the other presents ignored already. BBC2 throwing out a budget Tom & Jerry Save Christmas-style cartoon made for an American Saturday morning TV strand in 1978 with all wrong animation at 6.45am, at least a day too late and barely watched.

Your mum had made far too much food the day before, and it's barely been touched; you can eat all day, at irregular times, and still you get called down from your room at half five for a plate of chips with all turkey and cranberry sauce.

More relatives descend either slightly too early in the morning for anyone to be awake enough to be happy to see them, or more often just as you're all sitting down to watch a film on the new VHS, interrupting and disappointing all. If lucky, they've bought more presents for you, if unlucky, they've bought your cousins who insist that what they got for Christmas is much better than what you got, but they're kept in your house for slightly too long and by 5pm they're admitting that your *Mr Pop* is far better than their *Frustration*.

**AND THE WINNER IS...**

Boxing Day, on all counts. And Christmas is only 364 days away.



## JOYFUL AND TRIUMPHANT!

**T**he *Great British Flake-Off* was put together by TJ Worthington, with contributions from Matt Rudd, Ken Shinn, Simon Tyers, Steve Williams, Dan Thornton and Peter Thomas, with top design work by Graham Kibble-White. Special thanks to Steve Berry.

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And now, if you'll excuse us, *Great Big Groovy Horse* is on...

