



INTRODUCING

Wu Jian Stevens

Seasonal Affective Disorder
BLOWN YOUR MIND!
Say Yes!
Carnival Cornucopia

Unicorn Christmas

MUSIC AL JAMROZ
STEAMED OYSTERS
HOLIDAY HAPPINESS
LAWN

PEACE LOVE ALPHA OMEGA DEATH
PROMOCION

GIFT BOX
EXPERIENCE

CHRISTMAS

Shasotto

FIMPMY CHRISTMESS

Hill

MERRILY WE MASSACRE

Steamed Oysters

BQE

CARNITAS

ALPHA OMEGA

DEATH

BLACK MAGIC SANTA

Say Yes!

MESS

DEATH

クリスマス

LAWN

SIRACUSA

TEAM



I SING MY HOLLY-JOLLY, CANDY-COATED CHRISTMAS SONG OF VINDICATION
by SUFJAN STEVENS

Fads come and go; fashions fade; governments corrode, combust, or give way to revolutions; and the phantom public exercises its ideological fickleness with the flimflam incongruity of an amusement park ride, but Christmas is forever. Civil laws are bent and beaten, rendered irrelevant or painfully amended while planets turn their lonely gravitational ellipses surveying the solar system with reckless abandon awaiting the collapse of the red giant, but Christmas is forever. Marriages dissolve, are absolved, or simply withdraw into those empty mental passageways of regret, but Christmas is forever. Wars are waged as with the convenient paraphernalia of board games while world peace resides in the dusky colors of the unattainable horizon, but Christmas is forever.

Hairstyles, nail colors, necklines and skinny ties come and go (as expedient patrons of a whorehouse), but Christmas is forever. Soft drinks and culinary treats, best-sellers, paperback page-turners, blockbuster Hollywood thrillers, chart toppers, record shakers, heroic capers, championship makers and personal heartbreakers recede into the vast oblivion of memory as each whimsical woe-begotten trophy moment is successively surmounted, supplanted, dumbfounded, blessed, buried and put to rest, but Christmas is forever. We may climb onto various bandwagon fads of the new millennium, trending new-wave dream pop, post-ironic afro-punk, big-band beach jam, shoe-gaze summer blues, bi-polar boy band bonanzas, disco dub, chill-wave, spoken-word poetry rave, Ethiopian jazz fusion, dreadlock drum circle, Delta-basin blues, folk-metal friend-rock faux pas, speed metal social network disaster, krunk, punk, skunk-pop, teen-bop, hip-hop highland scotch square dance, line dance, break dance, funky house, future garage, Gamelan gender bender, glam metal, glitch wave, grind core, girl band, boy-toy, heavy metal, jitterbug jungle, reggae, soul, slow-mo, scatter-ska, skittle core, riddle core, fiddle horror grind-gore, soft-shell pole-dance, role-play-Canto-pop-romantic-slow-dance-stutter-core, and bang-on-a-can new music marathon, all the subterranean, cross-cultural, multi-media, interdisciplinary, death-defying, cross-over, genre-bending multiplicity of music fashions instigating cultural fatigue faster than the speed of sound, but Christmas is forever.

We may find ourselves surreptitiously savoring the critical-mass, fever-pitched, media frenzied Fashion Furies propagating their everlasting offspring of clothing disasters, soap-boxing the renaissance of bell bottoms, skinny jeans, jelly bracelets, tight-rolled soft pants, baggy knickers, halter tops, V-necks, high-waisted mom jeans, dad's plaid jackets, brother's cleats, sister's slippers, pocket pleats, tweed suspenders, cut-off half-shirts, Hasid chic, neo-grunge, corduroy, tie-dye, hippie halter top, mash-up fashion disaster-on-ice, and yes, we may even endure the black-hole apocalypse of cornrows, bjas, kulats and shoulder pads, but Christmas is forever (and always in fashion).

What is the secret of the Christmas Season's Enduring Captivation of Black Magic that casts its spell on our hagridden selves? Year after year, winter upon winter, the inescapable, inexorable Gay Old Yuletide rears its annual headache with the same mortifying gong-show of cultural paralysis, and we find ourselves (like Pavlov's dogs) possessed by a fervent, celestial fever, psychologically distended, emotionally upended, physiologically conquered, psychically squandered, beaten, broken, busted, maladjusted, reduced, in fact, to that clammy, pre-pubescent Christmas wish-list spoiled brat kid of our insatiable childhood, throwing an empirical fit on Santa's lap, faced with the hard-candy facts of reality, knowing for certain we will never really get what want for Christmas, or in life, for that matter. This is the true horror-show-tragic-comedy-slap-stick-community-theater, James Joyce-fundamental-catharsis-of-the-holidays: the unflappable, existential emptiness that perseveres in the heart of modern man as he recklessly pursues his absurd search for happiness and comes up empty handed. Happy Holidays to you, too.

And yet, I continue to sing my song of Christmas, in spite of certain failure, in spite of the plague of locusts, political ennu, natural disasters, stock market crashes, fanaticism, fundamentalism, bio-terrorism, entrepreneurialism, alcoholism, didacticism, high blood sugar, heat-seeking missiles, hernias and hypertension, money, masochism, mislaid plans, police raids, riots, marches, role-reversals, rickets, parking tickets, tax abatements, credit card statements, anachronism, catechism, cancer, cannibalism, Mount Etna, Morse code, diastemas, holy wars, carcinoma-sarcomas, celebrities, Chia pets, naturalism, narcissism, nepotism, nuclear war, fast food, slow food, square dance, happenstance, saw tooth, shark attack, Mac attack, heart-break, broomsticks, Bic pen, red hen, dogmatism, fatalism, journalism, scholasticism, jumping spiders, baby back ribs, plastic bibs, feast or famine, floods, fault lines, flesh-eating bacteria, flying monkeys, pragmatism, populism, superstition, Jersey Shore, Wheel of Fortune, wainscotting, wire tapping, Tom Cruise, Vanessa Redgrave, Lindsay Lohan, Albert Einstein, and the worse case scenario, i.e. quicksand. In spite of my best judgment, in spite of public opinion, in spite of common decency, in spite of seasonal affective disorder, mental disease and Christmas fatigue, I've continued the musical tradition (ever onward forever amen), in pursuing all the inexplicable songs of the holidays, season after season (without rhyme or reason), relentlessly humming, strumming, finger-picking, ivory-tickling, finger-licking, soul-searching, fact-finding, corporate ladder-climbing, magic hatter rabbit hiding, rapping, slapping, super-sizing, miming, grinding, flexing, perplexing, plucking and strumming all the celestial strings of merriment with utmost Napoleonic fever. This tradition will not die.

What is it about Christmas music that continues to agitate my aging heartstrings? Is it the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen? Or the boundless Potential Energy inherent in this bastard holiday so fitfully exploited, subverted, confounded, expounded, adopted and adapted with no regard for decency. Christ-

mas is what you make of it, and its songs reflect mystery and magic as expertly as they clatter and clang with the most audacious and rambunctious intonations of irreverence. And all its silly-putty, slippery-slope, slap-dash menagerie of subject matter (be it Baby Jesus or Babes in Toyland) readily yields itself to the impudent whims of its contemporary benefactors, myself included.

The most enduring songs of the Christmas canon jingle-jangle their everlasting promises not only of gingerbread cookies and sugar-plum fairies, but also of peace on earth and good will toward men, conjuring a fantasy weekend getaway vacation where confectionery figurines and military nutcrackers commingle with the parliamentary peacekeeping forces of the United Nations. You can have your angel food cake and eat it too, for the Christmas message ultimately mollifies our cosmic anxiety (who am I?) with a celestial-seasoning, body-massaging, hypoglycemic consolation of soothing conclusions: that if God is with us, who can be against us? And still we rattle our New Year's noisemakers with the fierce combustion of the living dead, irritatingly aggrandizing our exponential litany of Christmas wishes. God saved the world, but the world is not enough. We simply want more. These are the greedy anthems of the post-modern Christmas. These are the greedy anthems of humankind.

And what of the pop indulgences proliferating the easy-breezy Christmas songs of the 1950s and 60s, where sleigh bells jingle over hill and dale, where chestnuts roast on open fires, where cheeks are rosy-comfy-cozy, where mistletoe hangs advantageously overhead, inspiring sex, lies and videotape? Christmas music does justice to the criminal, marrying sacred and profane, bellowing obtuse prophecies of the Messiah in the same blustery breath as a candy-coated, holly-jolly, TV-jingle advertising a string of lights and a slice of fruitcake. The incarnation of God is a troubling metaphor, but what of the various contemporary manifestations of pop culture further cluttering the Christmas crib? Rudolph, Jack Frost, Suzy Snowflake, Santa Claus, Scrooge McDuck, the Grinch, Heat Miser, Dominick the Donkey, Old Man Winter, Charlie Brown, Frosty the Snowman, Snoopy, Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner and Blitzen--these feisty protagonists play host to a psychedelic Christmas pageant eradicating the sanctimony of the saints by grab-bagging, arm-wrestling, pigeon-holing, water-boarding, conning, conniving and confiscating their way to the frontlines of holiday fever, waging an all-out cultural war on Christmas.

Am I alone in fighting off this impetuous adversary of unrighteousness? (Or am I part of the problem?) For whatever reason, here I sing, army of one, holed up in my room, surrounded by hymnals, oratorios, music charts, sacred harp books, paper-clipped-photo-copied Readers Digest Christmas catalogs--all the sanctimonious weaponry of Yuletide incantations, the impeccable canon of Christmas carols--sounding my barbaric yawn above the snowy rooftops. My song is love: my song is hope: my song is peace. I conjure the fruitcake world of my own imagination with steadfast affection for the unattainable bliss of Christmas promises. (I want a perfect body, a

warm bed, a full stomach, a pair of shoes, a feast for the table, and a conscience clear of all the calamity of missteps, misunderstandings and mistakes I've made in the past.) My song is steadfast: my song is forgiveness: my song is justice: my song is solitude. And so, in this canopy of Christmas music, I summon the company of angels, the helper elves, the shepherds keeping flock, the innkeepers, the coupon-clippers, the marathon runners, the cross-country skiers, the bottom feeders, the grocery baggers, the toll both ticketers, the bridge and tunnel drivers, the construction workers, the ice cream makers, the street sweepers, the community of saints, the Virgin Mary, the Holy Spirit, the Prince of Persia, and all invisible hosts of heaven to assist me in this absurd cosmic adventure, pursuing holly-jolly songs of hope and redemption with a sacred heart for the enduring love of the holidays, for the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Fortunately, I'm not alone in making a scene. I'd like to acknowledge my co-conspirators ("et tu, Brute"), who've willingly indulged in this feverish tradition over the years, participating in all the late-night pageantry, hand-clapping, hocketing, harmonizing, guitar-strumming, scat-singing, tambourine shaking, booty-breaking, gingerbread baking, hallelujah-happy-holiday-Christmas-madness, god-forsaking merry-making, including: Aaron Dessner, Bryce Dessner, Richard Reed Parry, Clara Claus, Olivier Manchon, Marla Hansen, Raymond Byron Raposa, Gabriel Kahane, Daniel, Elin, Lilly, Ida Smith, C.J. Camerieri, James McAlister, Casey Foubert, David Stith, Alex Sopp, Vesper Stamper, Cat Martino, Sayard Egan, Rosie Thomas, Sonya Hofer, Sebastian Krueger, Nathan Lithgow, and Brian Wolfe. We sing the body electric. Am I forgetting anyone?

I would also like to acknowledge those who have labored in the design, illustration, and production of this album, investing time, energy, and creative fortitude for the love of Christmas, including: Jessica Dessner ("Ornament in Space" and "Christmas Unicorn" pencil drawings), Christian Acker (cover typography), Matt Gordon (Apocalyptic Tableau pencil drawing poster), Karl Jensen (Star Ornament and directions), Clara Klaus (barn owl painting), Kevin James Stone ("I Am Santa's Helper" cover), Vesper Stamper (various clip art gone wild), Ellis Ludwig-Leone (chord charts gone wild), and Stephen Halker (who designed the Christmas tattoos, Christmas stickers, "Let It Snow" airbrush cover, "Christmas Infinity Voyage" cover, airbrush unicorn, and various clip art gone wild, etc.). We sing the body electric. Am I forgetting anyone?

Of course! Last but not least: Thank You, Kind Reader, Courageous Listener, and Faithful Companion. Your love is better than silver and gold. May all your dreams come true.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.
And many happy returns of the day!
XXOO--S.S. (Christmas 2012)

**SANIA
BFF**

Best CHRISTMAS Ever!

FOR SO



Say Yes!

STROKE

UP

HOLIDAY HAPPINESS



*Attaining
Consciousness*



We live in an age where our conception of history is profoundly "telic," or goal-directed--that is, we live in the belief that there is an end, a "telos," towards which all things are inevitably moving. This makes us a people consumed with looking both backwards (in order to make meaning from what has gone before) and ahead (so as to discern where we might finally arrive). Yet, in the cosmic scheme of things, this is a characteristically "new" perspective, for in antiquity it was believed that history was cyclic, and that "time" was an empty medium lacking meaning in and of itself. In some sense, there was no such thing as "history," since the Greco-Roman mind gave itself to truths outside of time. Their conception of reality derived its essence from what was stable and observable (as opposed to the arbitrary vagaries of the actions of humans): consider the ever-repeating flow of seasons, the visible order and beauty of the universe, sunrise and sunset, growth and decay (hence the Stoic theory of the cyclic destruction and recreation of the world). Abstraction was for them the vehicle of truth and salvation.

On to this landscape arrived Christianity (building upon the foundation of Judaism) with a conception of a personal God creating the cosmos "ex nihilo" (out of nothing), making human beings in his image, even deigning to use human beings to move the world along a narrative culminating in the salvation of the universe. Within this paradigm, time now had a beginning, middle and an end, and people played a critical role in the divine drama. Time ceased to be cyclical (and perpetual), acquiring a pronounced directionality marking a straight line from the six days of creation to a single day of judgment, the great and terrible Day of the Lord.

This novel view that history was, in fact, a story, compelled the early Christians to see within (or impose upon) the ever-repeating Julian calendar another way of marking time, a calendar celebrating the life-story of the God-Man, Jesus: his birth, life, death, resurrection and Second Coming. And because Christians understood Jesus to be representative of humanity as a whole, this new ecclesiastical calendar (celebrating the linear shape of that one human life) bestowed upon the earth a new and uniquely narrative self-description. Because God himself had a birth (Christmas), so the world was understood to have been supernaturally birthed ("In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth..."). Because God suffered death and destruction (Good Friday), so the earth would someday come to an end ("But the day of the Lord will come like a thief...the

heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed." 2 Peter 3:10). Because Jesus was raised (Easter) and ascended to glory (Ascension), so the world would someday be raised to new life ("...a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." 2 Peter 3:13). This new narrative calendar upended the circular repetition of history to suggest a singular, divine power (Alpha & Omega) with a cosmic story to be told (beginning, middle, and end).

But among the seasons of the Christian ecclesiastical year, Advent is the paradox, the crux, a cataract perched between Christmas (December 25) and "Christ the King Sunday" (the Sunday that falls between November 20 and 26), the celebration of the enthronement of Jesus as the King of the Cosmos ("Christus Pantokrator"). But Advent's location between the birth of the Messiah and His prospective enthronement has acquired for this season an uneasy character, a tension-filled existence marrying the joyous (and even sentimental) anticipation of a new birth, and the fearful expectation of judgment. The early appearance of Christmas carols on our radio stations is just one sign of our desire to dwell upon that lighter mood of Advent. But we have not (nor cannot) evacuate it of all its terror. Even in its connection to Christmas, Advent foretells the arrival of the Christ who came to the world for terrible judgment ("I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!"). Even its name prohibits any sentimental focus exclusively on the birth of Christ. "Adventus" is a Latin translation of the Greek "parousia," the same word the New Testament uses to speak of the Second Coming of Jesus, the event the Bible says will bring a violent end to all things.

This connection between Advent and the end of the world is an old and deep one. Although the church year now begins with Advent, in the early medieval period, when the liturgical cycles were still in flux, mass-books began the church year with Christmas, making Advent the conclusion of the year, securing for it a decidedly eschatological character. The four weeks of Advent were given over to consideration not of bucolic scenes of rosy-cheeked cherubs singing sweetly to the shepherds, or children sledding the snow-capped hills of Currier & Ives, but of the Four Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. Fittingly, much of the early liturgical content that the church compiled for worship during the season of Advent was related to the Last Judgment, giving little accommodation for the maudlin idylls of the newborn baby. In Advent lectionaries we find apocalyptic texts like Luke 21:25-33:

And there will be signs in the sun and the

moon and the stars...people fainting with fear and foreboding of what is coming on the world...They will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

In Advent sermons we see apocalyptic ruminations broiling with exuberance, such as this homily from St. Gregory the Great: "As our adorable Saviour will expect at His coming to find us ready, He warns us of the terrors that will accompany the latter days in order to wean us from the love of this world...". Even the musical sequences are foreboding ("Vox clara ecce intonat" ["Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding"] and the 13th century "Dies Irae" ["Day of Wrath"] resound with apocalyptic intonations). The familiar pleasantries of most Christmas hymns ("Away In A Manger," et al) are easily undone by the far more devastating doxologies of Advent. Charles Wesley's "Lo! He Comes With Clouds Descending" is especially vivid, describing the Messiah's "dazzling body...robed in dreadful majesty" amid restless exhortations ("Come to judgment! Come to judgment!"). These Advent materials cast their eye to what the Old Testament prophets simply called "The Day."

It's hard not to think of Advent functioning centuries ago much as horror/thriller movies do in our culture ("The Day The Earth Stood Still," "The Day After Tomorrow," "Independence Day"), a ritualistic way in which one can imagine one's own demise (and/or even the annihilation of the entire universe) before the actual event. This preoccupation with mass extinction is fundamental to Christian eschatology and, perhaps, inherently human. But do other religions invest as much existential weight in the end of the world? Of course Ancient Egypt (famous for its mummies) reveled in the particulars of each man's death ("The Book of the Dead" is as meticulous about spiritual judgment as it is about embalming rituals), but its religious texts make no mention of a universal doomsday. The Hindu concept of "samsara" (the continuing cycle of life, i.e. reincarnation) emphasizes a perpetual world that has no end. Even the presumably apocalyptic "Long Count" of the Mayans (predicting 2012 as the final year of existence) turns out to be misunderstood: that the Mayans lived through (and explicitly reveled in) multiple Long Count culminations casts doubt on an exclusively "doomsday" reading of their calendar. Indeed, Christianity, with its vast literature of prophecy, and its relentless obsession with the narrative arc (creation, fall, redemption), seems to have maintained an unfortunate monopoly on the End Times, for better and for worse. From what other fertile ground could the famed futurist John

Nelson Darby have cultivated that uneasy school of "dispensationalism" in the mid-19th century, an apocalyptic strain of evangelicalism that mines biblical texts to predict exact dates and particulars of the approaching Rapture, when believers will be "caught up in the clouds" to meet their judgment (Tim LaHaye's popular "Left Behind" series provides a tabloid explication of this process in no fewer than sixteen novels). The residual doomsday-fever in America is a pervasive and undeniable force, not only in Baptist pulpits and Pentecostal pews, but also in the Zionist persuasions of our political leaders and in the cataclysmic exploits of our Hollywood films. How many times have we reveled in the blockbuster theater of destruction, witnessing the annihilation of our cities and national monuments in the wake of alien invasion, meteorological retribution, or the wrath of God? For Americans, the end is near, and we love it that way.

But all these attempts at augury may well deny the true purpose of our eschatological inclinations. Perhaps the inevitable "conclusion of catastrophe" explicitly conveyed on our movie screens speaks not of a cosmic conundrum with universal ramifications, but of something much more personal. Might it be that the obtuse imagery of the bible's apocalyptic texts (St. John's psychedelic drug trip in the Book of Revelation, the Hollywood blockbuster Book of Daniel, the UFO tracking of Ezekiel) are not merely esoteric puzzles to be solved or obtuse events to be feared, but jagged fragments of a divine imagination captured in dreams (and books, and movies) illustrating something rather simple: that since we are part of creation, we must also defer to its ultimate end--that of destruction.

While the apocalyptic portion of Advent may be an articulation of those vivid images (inherent in our anxious and anticipatory hearts), it is also much more than just an expression for the living. It is ultimately a call to participate in a regular rehearsal for death itself, through meditation, contemplation, and self-examination. For even as we soldier through the corporate commodity of Christmas consumerism, for even as we cozy up to hot cocoa and Bing Crosby, for even as we make the yuletide gay (mailing family photo cards, fruit baskets, and Christmas newsletters), for even as we participate in all the self-sanctifying rituals of the Advent season, we miss the obvious: that Advent is ultimately about death.

The end is near.

You are going to die.

Happy Holidays.



DONE go

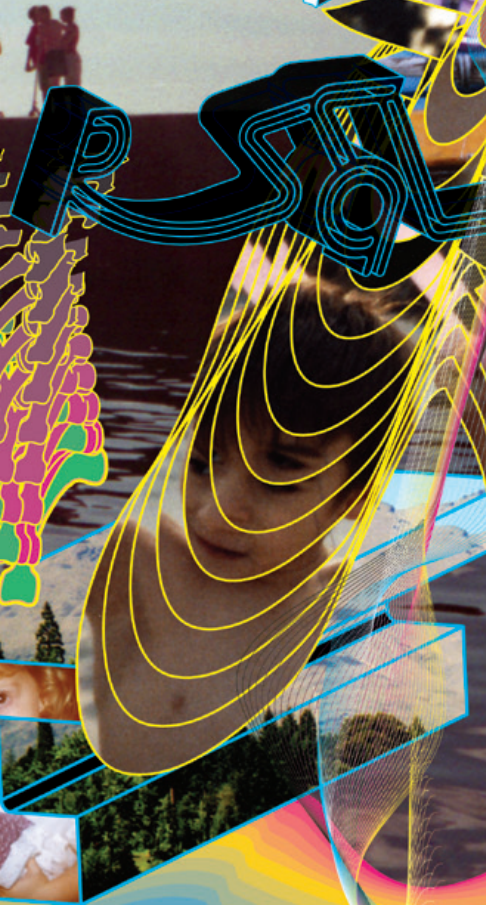
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What are we to make of this vicarious conifer hacked at its base, severed from the wild, ceremoniously hauled into the comfort of our homes, decorated like a birthday cake, venerated with popcorn and flashing lights, fashioned with bangles and baubles and industrial tinsel, magnified with carols, grandly perched beside the hearth, honored and adored with all the best intentions of Christian idolatry: the gatekeeper of gift-giving, the Tree of Life, the icon of Christmas commodity? What is the real story of the Christmas tree?

In my own disruptive childhood home, we observed the veneration of the tree with unrepentant holiday fever, as good Americans. Our tree of choice was a Douglas fir, the cheapest one on the lot, with its confident posture, industrious coat, and blue-green needles soft to the touch. As disciples of Steiner (and benefactors of food stamps and WIC), we favored hand-made ornaments: cranberries, popcorn, and marshmallows joined by needle and thread, chains of construction paper glued together in a geometric mosaic, nativity scenes engineered from toothpicks and cotton balls, aluminum foil as reflective punctuation thrown hither and thither like a ticker tape parade. Of course, we had the occasional heirloom ornament ordered from a Sears catalog: "Baby's First Christmas," our grandmother's retro curios from the age of the space race, and a dangling music box that played a horror-film reduction of "Carol of the Bells." We lined the tree with light bulbs, oversized and opaque, all the colors of the rainbow. The apex was majestically crowned with the archangel Gabriel, resplendent in gold lamé and a porcelain face painted like Betty Boop. Our tree was a thing to behold, a patchwork pageant of kitsch and community theater, divinely inspired, no less than Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, a magnum opus worthy of religious worship. It stood there boldly dressed for the prom like some post-pubescent icon lavishing in our reverent admiration (proud parents with cameras), which we conferred with all the glories of Christendom and capitalism. We oohed and awed, gasped and genuflected in its multifarious, omnipotent presence: the honorable Yule Tree, our Sacred Oak, the Tower of Babel, the Maypole, the cosmic fertility symbol, the implacable Rod of Righteousness, Our Pagan Idol, Our Christmas Tannenbaum, Our Holy Grail.

The annual imposition of the natural world (fir tree) on the domestic stage (living room) at the height of winter may appear a fraught and frivolous holiday tradition bordering on madness, the most blatant of situational ironies. But the manifold interpretations of the Christmas tree may expand far beyond its miscellaneous color wheel of tacky ornamentation, and I'm inclined to invoke a scatological critical theory of my own invention in order to demystify its coded branches. For every ornament hanging on its limbs there is a story to be told of Man vs. Nature.

Did you know: An estimated 35 million Christmas trees are butchered and bedazzled in the name of tradition every year? Am I ruining Christmas for you?

When distinguishing origins, modern celebrants of the Christmas tree may find themselves in two conflicting camps: Pagan or Christian? Good or Evil? Paper or Plastic? Is the disembodied tree a sacred, sacramental symbol or the steadfast relic of ancient idol worship? On which side do you stand: ornamented evergreen as Christian allegory (God's Family Tree) or the enigmatic steely monolith jutting out from

Stanley Kubrick's movie set (to the consternation of Neanderthal Man) in "2001: A Space Odyssey"? In what odd historical space does this fickle tree reside?

For those who vote Pagan, the evidence is boundless. Oak cults, Yule logs, and Bacchanalian pageants incorporating various evergreen paraphernalia suggest the predecessor to the Christmas tree is an amalgamation of a multitude of pagan props, and a full recuperation of all sources would unravel a grab bag of pantheism, occultism, and witchcraft. (It's a pagan tree, Charlie Brown!) Early church leaders branded the custom idolatry as readily as American Puritans, who, in 1659, outlawed the celebration of Christmas altogether (Puritans in England described the holiday, and its pagan tree, as "wasteful and immoral.") So how has this tree craze persisted in spite of opposing judgment? Shall we chalk it up to a primordial tick? The ubiquitous tradition

of a "World Tree" in multiple ancient mythologies (from American Indian to Mongolian) suggests that tree worship was the phenomenon of a collective unconscious moored to a residual tree fetish inherited from our primate ancestors residing in the forest canopy. But let's be honest: a Paleolithic reading of anything is speculative smoke and mirrors at this point. So let's jump ahead to the evergreen itself, a plant celebrated for its constant fertility, a symbol of steadfast life. Its mysterious vigor had special significance in most primitive tree cults, and its enduring characteristics were still being celebrated by the time of the ancient Romans. The "pinea silva" (sacred pine groves) attached to pagan Roman temples resembled the modern Christmas tree farm. On holy days, Roman priests called "dendrophori" ("tree-bearers") would cut a sacred pine, decorate it, and carry it into the temple as an offering to the gods. Of course,

it's no accident that Christmas corresponds both to the winter solstice and the festival of Saturnalia, the most important Roman feast in honor of Saturn (the god of agriculture), commemorated by revelry, banquets, and gift-giving. Romans marked December 25 as "Dies Natalis Sol Invictus," or Birthday of the Unconquerable Sun. The "everlasting" boughs of the pine tree symbolized prosperity, virility, and new life (resolutely green in spite of the sun's absence), and were widely used in rituals of worship during this time, and as ornaments in the home. Holly sprigs (like bulbs of garlic) were thought to repel evil and illness. As the evergreen's distant cousin, the mistletoe's romantic association was made sublime by its dual association with mortality (death) and progeny (sex). In "The Aeneid" the plant is represented as the unique gold bough (fertile key) with which the River Styx is crossed to give Aeneas access to the underworld. To the Romans, the whitish berries of the mistletoe also represented Jupiter's genitalia (semen) and were used in fertility rituals. Its feminine complement, holly (whose red berries symbolized a woman's menstrual blood), was used in Celtic rituals to the Goddess Danu, the great mother of the gods, whose association with moving waters, rivers, and oceans ("The Divine Flow") suggests the evergreen's fertility status was not bound by gender. Blood, semen, sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll. Is the Christmas tree just another metaphorical nymphomaniac?

At this point you may be wondering how this expository treatise on the Christmas tree has doggy-paddled so far into the waters of pseudo-sexual theory. These fertile affiliations are not as obtuse as one might think. Did you know: the popular German hymn "O Tannenbaum" isn't actually a Christmas carol (originally, it makes no mention of anything Christmas), but a ballad of unrequited love, contrasting the "treu Blätter" ("trustworthy branches") of an evergreen tree with an unfaithful mistress (who presumably runs off with another suitor). Sex sells, and the story of heartache pursues the lovesick soul of man. So why can't these be part of Christmas too?

They can. Christianity is an odd religion of co-option, where Easter bunnies commingle with Passover meals, resurrection, vampirism (the blood of Jesus) and Christmas trees, the latter of which is never mentioned in the bible, of course. But sacred trees abound in scripture, and the bible revels furiously in the metaphorical significance of its miscellaneous plant life: the cedars of Lebanon made up Solomon's Temple; the leaves of the fig tree concealed Adam's nakedness; the timber planks of gopher wood made up Noah's advantageous ark (and let's not forget the olive branch that promised a safe landing). There's the notorious elocution of a certain shrub festooned with unrelenting flames (the burning bush--proud predecessor of the Christmas tree), as well as the poetic disposition of the "oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor" (Isaiah 61:3). Of course, the bible begins with a garden and ends with a war, but trees play an essential role in both. Paradise has the infamous Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the Book of Revelation includes a lesser-known "Dozen-Fruit Tree" producing twelve kinds of fruit for every month of the year (the twelve days of Christmas?): "And the leaves of the tree were for the



healing of the nations" (Rev. 22:2). If the opportunistic tree hugger is only occasionally maligned (little Zacchaeus clamoring for better sightlines), the bible's take on the specifically "decorated tree" indulges in condemnation, as manifest in Jeremiah's hostile critique:

For the customs of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter. Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk.

This is as close as we get to a Christmas tree in the bible and it's an incriminating declamation, rousing firm believers to speculate the worst case scenario: is this diligent tree fetish of ours just one more contemporary faux pas instigating our eternal damnation in hell? (Are we entertaining idols unawares?)

But no, let's first consider the most legendary of religious trees, where Christ was crucified--the cross at Golgotha--decorated for death with an ornament of thorns. How does the tree of Calvary equate with the tree of Christmas? Could the Christmas tree (celebrating all the sentimental pageants of Christ's birth) be nothing more than a harbinger of his gruesome death on a different sort of tree: the wooden cross for public execution, and an icon for universal salvation? (Incidentally, the Greek word for cross--"stauros"--literally translates as "a wood stake" meant for impaling meat [the Lamb of God] as it cooks over a hot fire. Meditate on that next time you deck the halls with boughs of holly.)

But of course, these morbid excavations do no justice to religion, nor do they fully explain the ulterior motives of that oblivious evergreen affixed like a Christmas scarecrow in our living rooms. Could more recent history shed greater light on its origins? Protestant mythology would have us believe Martin Luther conceptualized the first Christmas tree after perceiving the stars through the boughs of evergreen trees at night. The Germans bequeathed us many traditions (hamburgers, hot dogs, Easter eggs, and yes, Yule trees), but there is no factual evidence to support this sentimental anecdote. The earliest incarnation of a Christmas tree may possibly be found in the Paradise Plays of the Middle Ages, theatrical pageants narrating the fall of Adam and Eve (whose feast day incidentally falls on December 24). These plays implemented a singular prop--the paradise tree, decorated with fruit--meant to represent the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden, the horticultural object from which all the sins of humanity evolved: a tremendous burden for a plant of any size. This theological association poses a few interesting problems for modern man: are we meant to ponder the scope of Original Sin as our sons and daughters plunder their bounty under the Christmas tree? As a symbol of "that hereditary stain," is the Christmas tree merely a reminder of the cosmic division between man and his Maker? Or, to put it more poetically: as once we strolled confidently in the balmy air of the garden of Paradise in God's abundant fellowship, are we now, as defectors of human depravity, left to contemplate the first existential tragedy--the Fall of Man--in the lonely shadows of a balsam fir, glazed with rainwater beside the white chickens? This theology of

evil augments ever more despondent paths of interpretation. Just as Adam and Eve consumed the fruit of the paradise tree, invoking original sin, so do we, in harvesting gifts, partake of the deadly fruits of Christmas: that of commerce, commodity and greed--all the flavors of the Seven Deadly Sins fashioned in various garments of wrapping paper. To unravel that handsome facade of Bloomingdale's gift wrap is to peel back the skin of the apple (or pomegranate, or quince), inviting all manners of damnation onto your oblivious path of unrighteousness. Have I ruined Christmas for you?

The Christmas tree's affiliation with wealth, power and commodity are not an unfortunate coincidence, for the rise in popularity of this seasonal home furnishing (in America, at least) coincided with the spread of industrialism, the emergence of the middle class, and an infatuation with British royalty. In Post-Reformation Europe, only the wealthiest of Protestants procured trees for the holidays (Catholics still preferred the quaint Christmas crib, and the Vatican wouldn't unveil its first Christmas tree until 1982). German immigrants may have brought the tradition to America in the 1700s, but the Christmas tree didn't become a countrywide institution until the mid-19th century, and only when prompted by a minor media blitz. A widely distributed woodcut of Queen Victoria's Christmas tree in an 1850's issue of "Godey's Lady's Book" (the most widely circulated magazine of its time) captivated the public imagination and sent thousands of Americans on a chopping spree, hell-bent on emulating Her Majesty's Christmas Booty. By then, the wounds of the Revolution were but faint echoes, the Civil War a looming affliction on national identity, and Hollywood's galvanizing Golden Age a century away, so America, in need of celebrity salvation, looked across the ocean to an oblivious royal tree and found a convenient pop icon. (The first Christmas tree farm arrived 50 years later, adding cost and convenience to the escalating tree craze.) Post Civil War, America flexed its industrial muscle, exploiting landmass and natural resources to leverage its status as a global superpower. As the middle class loosened its belt to privilege (and disposable income), the Christmas tree joined a host of other icons of American democracy: baseball, cars, apple pie, and Coca-Cola. The Bolsheviks outlawed the Christmas tree in communist Russia in 1917, but by the 1930s, Santa Claus was cozying up with a Coke and a Christmas tree in the soft-drink's infamous magazine ads, urging Americans: "Thirst Knows No Season." So long, winter of our discontent: money transcends nature.

The first national Christmas tree didn't arrive on the lawns of the White House until 1923, and only then at the urging of a former GE employee (the tree was decorated with more than 2500 electric bulbs). Rockefeller Center erected its first tree ten years later, a soaring Norway spruce, but still no match for the contiguous skyscrapers clamoring above it. Now shaded by the trophy high-rises of venture-capitalism, the Christmas tree began to shake off any remaining residuals of religious sanctity (pagan or otherwise) to embody its new status symbol as corporate commodity: an emblem of industrial power and prestige. And you thought nature always wins.

Today, every December, the Christmas tree is as ubiquitous as McDonald's, advertising its entrepreneurial assurance in various public spaces--city hall promenades,

airports, train stations, and shopping malls--ordering onlookers to admire all the corrupted colors of its majestic splendor: a symbol of progress, innovation, and the unflappable confidence of capitalism. I have no critique for those who take offense at the religious imposition of a Christmas tree in a public space, but I urge you to consider even more offensive measures: the Christmas tree as an icon for environmental catastrophe, a prophetic token of the End Times, the impending death of our planet. As a tragic testimony to man's dominion over the earth (the domestication of plants and animals), the Christmas tree has become nothing more than a symbol of environmental bondage, illustrating all the negligent ways in which man has taken possession of the world in order to destroy it. Transcending all the ordinary regulations of nature, man has conquered the earth--through extraordinary arrogance, heedless manipulation, voracious exploitation, and industrial design--ravaging the vast capital of her domain in the name of progress. Captured and commodified, ridiculed and raped, the Christmas tree inhabits our homes with emasculated terror representing the worst case scenario: that of an indentured servant, or, worse, a stuffed animal (taxidermied safari trophy), propped up in the corner, representing the most reprehensible of environmental disasters. In a word: the Christmas tree is our bitch. Pardon my language, but the social and ecological implications are tragic. The proliferation of the Christmas tree (with its correspondence to industrialism, corporate greed, and exponential population growth) follows an inverse correlation to the decline of the natural world. This is no unhappy accident. For even as glaciers recede, ice caps melt, and oceans rise, our stomachs get fed, our stockings get stuffed, and our Christmas trees get fitfully framed with ever more useless and immeasurable Christmas commodities wrapped in ribbons and foil, an insatiable surplus of extraneous waste fated for the bowels of your local landfill, glazed with rainwater, beside the white chickens. Have I ruined Christmas for you?

For those of you offended by this expository sacrilege run rampant, let me assure you: I still believe in the integrity of the Christmas tree, in spite of free-enterprise (and all its evil machinations), in spite of my psychobabble (and all its worst intentions). I am a man of convictions. And I believe the tree speaks of a simpler, quieter, self-evident truth far more mysterious than that of Christian tradition, Capitalism, Paganism, or Coca-cola: that of unconditional love. Forgive me for the sentimental U-turn, but have you read Shel Silverstein's "The Giving Tree"? Perhaps this is an unfashionable standby, but the profound mystery of that story is undeniable: nature, uncorrupted by selfish causes, gives itself over to the world, generously, and without fault, in spite of common sense, in spite of certain death, in spite of the alleged antagonism of Darwinian Theory--survival of the fittest. Nature loves you. God loves you. I love you. And, even now, standing proud in your living room, the Christmas tree loves you, too. Of course, naysayers (and industrialists) will brand us as ideological hippies, pointing out the prevalence of violence and destruction in the natural world around us--the injustice of the food chain, the antagonism of predator and prey, illness and disease, the meteorological havoc of earthquakes, hurricanes, floods and droughts. But these, of course, are misrepresentations of evil. Our inclination to personalize, anthropomorphize, and categorize environmental malevolence is a naive error. We eagerly apply identification to tropical storms in order

to have a name (and a face) onto which to project our moral outrage. Yes, the earth abides by reckless laws, wreaking havoc on our daily lives, upending all manners of civic and social convenience, but it does so most certainly without deliberate wickedness. It is simply running its course. ("The sun shone, having no alternative"--Samuel Beckett). Would that we could say the same for mankind, which is running a course steadfast into oblivion.

The fact is: nature has no intention, nor force of will. It does not seek to manipulate nor orchestrate its cause for self-gain through the calculations of conscience, that inexplicable gene of the Divine Mind supposedly relegated to humans, failed stewards of creation. Lacking self-consciousness, nature's consciousness is cosmic--that of the universal order of creation (before "logos")--allowing it to participate (without judgment) according to the laws of perfect disorder--entropy, accident, and chaos--echoing the wilderness of the furthest galaxies, the immeasurable vast pandemonium of outer space, the unknown wasteland of our conception, the "void hovering over the waters," the ephemeral, chemical sludge from whence we came (or, the Big Bang, if you prefer advertising catch phrases).

A vast portion of our universe is, in fact, inconceivable, and therefore incommunicable, but the giving tree is the most righteous of observable objects, and its concrete modifiers are governed by love--steadfast, stoic, deeply rooted, unself-conscious, palpable and present, the tree is a biological saint. Its song is of a generous, meditative tone, for it only seeks to give itself over to you in fullness, offering shade, fruit, beauty, air, aesthetics, perfumes, oils, sweet syrups, aromatherapy, energy and fuel, to name a few. Lacking willpower, it is antithetical to mankind. Shirking chaos, it is antithetical to the void. Inhabiting boundless beauty and indefatigable resource, the giving tree is a symbol of strength, a monument to generosity, and a testament to the unsurpassable power of love imbued in all of creation. And perhaps this is why we cannot shake that vainglorious Christmas tree obsession: inherent in our urgency to seize the natural world, slaughter its young, and haul its unfortunate corpse into our living rooms like some Christmas cadaver (dressing it up like a drag queen) there exists a latent (if somewhat dysfunctional) desire to pay homage to (and participate in) that guiding light of goodness residing in the tree itself. We may honor its merits with paper chains, festive baubles and popcorn balls (and all the pageants of American consumerism), but can we stop for a moment and consider the price of such artifice, and examine our hearts, contemplating the consequences of our actions, and be inspired to love (uncontrollably), to serve the natural world (unconditionally), and to give (generously) to all mankind (your brothers and sisters), without finding fault?

For the sake of the earth (and of our souls), I certainly hope so. In the meantime, have yourself a merry little Christmas.



WANT
FOR

FUNKY

WISHES

WISHES

CHRISTMAS
STEVENS

VOL. 6: GLORIA

1. SILENT NIGHT
words by Joseph Mohr; melody by Franz Xaver Gruber;
English translation by John Freeman Young
2. LUMBERJACK CHRISTMAS/ NO ONE CAN
SAVE YOU FROM CHRISTMAS PAST
music by Aaron Dessner (©2012 ABD13 Music/ASCAP),
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Sufjan Stevens (©2012 New Jerusalem Music/ASCAP);
words by Sufjan Stevens
3. COVENTRY CAROL (featuring Marla Hansen)
16th-century English Carol
4. THE MIDNIGHT CLEAR
music by Aaron Dessner (©2012 ABD13 Music/ASCAP),
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THE BEARDED ONE
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6. GO NIGHTLY CARES
music by John Dowland
7. BARCAROLA (YOU MUST
BE A CHRISTMAS TREE)
music by Aaron Dessner (©2012 ABD13 Music/ASCAP),
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words by Sufjan Stevens
8. AULD LANG SYNE
words by Robert Burns;
music: traditional Scots folk melody

VOL. 7: I AM SANTA'S HELPER

9. CHRIST THE LORD IS BORN
music by Leoš Janáček
10. CHRISTMAS WOMAN
words & music by Sufjan Stevens (©2012 Public Domain)
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music by Johann Schop; harmony by J.S. Bach
12. HAPPY FAMILY CHRISTMAS
words & music by Sufjan Stevens (©2012 Public Domain)
13. JINGLE BELLS
words & music by James Lord Pierpont
14. MYSTERIES OF THE CHRISTMAS MIST
music by Sufjan Stevens (©2012 Public Domain)
15. LIFT UP YOUR HEADS YE MIGHTY GATES
words by Georg Weissel;
translated by Catharine Winkworth
music by Thomas Williams
16. WE WISH YOU A MERRY CHRISTMAS
16th-century English carol
17. AH HOLY JESUS
words by Johann Heermann;
music by Johann Crüger
18. BEHOLD! THE BIRTH OF MAN,
THE FACE OF GLORY
music by Sufjan Stevens (©2012 Public Domain)
19. DING-A-LING-A-RING-A-LING
words & music by Sufjan Stevens (©2012 Public Domain)
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music by J.S. Bach; adapted by J. Troutbeck
21. MR. FROSTY MAN
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22. MAKE HASTE TO SEE THE BABY
music by Sufjan Stevens (©2012 Public Domain)
23. AH HOLY JESUS (with reed organ)
24. HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING
words by Charles Wesley; music by Felix Mendelssohn
25. MORNING (Sacred Harp)
words by Isaac Watts; music by Amos Pilsbury
26. IDUMEA (Sacred Harp)
words by Charles Wesley; music by Ananias Davison
27. ETERNAL HAPPINESS OR WOE
music by Sufjan Stevens (©2012 Public Domain)
28. AH HOLY JESUS (a capella)
29. I AM SANTA'S HELPER
words & music by Sufjan Stevens (©2012 Public Domain)
30. "MAOZ TZUR" (ROCK OF AGES)
traditional Jewish hymn
31. EVEN THE EARTH WILL PERISH
AND THE UNIVERSE GIVE WAY
music by Sufjan Stevens (©2012 Public Domain)

VOL. 8: CHRISTMAS INFINITY VOYAGE

32. ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD ON HIGH
music & words by Sufjan Stevens
(based on the original hymn)
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words by Noël Regney;
music by Gloria Shayne
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words & music by Sufjan Stevens
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35. IT CAME UPON THE MIDNIGHT CLEAR
words by Edmund Sears;
music by Richard Storrs Willis
36. GOOD KING WENCESLAS
words by John Mason Neale;
music: 13th Century carol
37. ALPHABET ST.
words & music by His Majesty Prince
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music by Sufjan Stevens
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words by Isaac Watts;
music by Lowell Mason
40. THE CHILD WITH THE STAR ON HIS HEAD
words & music by Sufjan Stevens
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VOL. 10: CHRISTMAS UNICORN

50. HAVE YOURSELF A MERRY LITTLE CHRISTMAS
words & music by Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane
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51. IT CAME UPON A MIDNIGHT CLEAR
words by Edmund Sears; music by Richard Storrs Willis
52. UP ON THE HOUSETOP (featuring Vesper Stampler)
words & music by Benjamin Hanby; arr. by Sufjan Stevens
53. ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD ON HIGH
traditional French carol
54. WE NEED A LITTLE CHRISTMAS
words & music by Jerry Herman (©Jerryco Music Company/ASCAP)
55. HAPPY KARMA CHRISTMAS
words & music by Sufjan Stevens (©2012 Public Domain)
56. WE THREE KINGS
music by John Henry Hopkins, Jr.
57. JUSTICE DELIVERS ITS DEATH
var. & arrangement by Sufjan Stevens
based on the song "Silver & Gold" by J. Marks
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58. CHRISTMAS UNICORN
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written by Ian Curtis, Peter Hook, Stephen Morris, and Bernard Sumner
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VOL. 9: LET IT SNOW

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words & music by Walter Kent, Kim Gannon, Buck Ram
(Gannon & Kent Music Co./ASCAP, Piedmont Music Co./ASCAP)
42. SANTA CLAUS IS COMING TO TOWN
words & music by J. Fred Coots and Haven Gillespie
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43. THE SLEIGH IN THE MOON (featuring Cat Martino)
words & music by Cat Martino
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44. SLEIGH RIDE
words & music by Leroy Anderson and Mitchell Parish
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45. AVE MARIA (featuring Cat Martino)
words by God Himself; music by Franz Schubert
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words & music by Sufjan Stevens (©2012 Public Domain)
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words & music by Jule Styne and Sammy Cahn
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48. A HOLLY JOLLY CHRISTMAS
words & music by Johnny Marks (St. Nicholas Music Inc./ASCAP)
49. CHRISTMAS FACE (featuring Sebastian Krueger)
words & music by Sebastian Krueger
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