

MUSIC

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year: suave, funky, soulful. (And check out the quirky cover, painted by Paul Moschell.)

"The Ultimate Gift" is already in heavy rotation in my CD player.

This CD's mostly original music, with a few covers (Paul McCartney's "Wonderful Christmastime," "What Christmas Means to Me," and a funky, stripped-down version of "Little Drummer Boy" featuring drumming, handclaps and vocals.)

But all the rest are original songs. That's a brave move, but Mr. Patterson, who released "Wines & Spirits" late last year, is more than up to the task.

"That First Christmas" is about spending that first Christmas without the one you love. "Christmas At My House" looks back at how Christmas was when he was a kid, sung to a charged up, funky beat — a song you could dance to in a club.

Mr. Patterson sounds like the musical love child of Sly Stone and Prince.

And he's not afraid to wear his heart on his sleeve. In "This is the Season," he unabashedly sings in the chorus: "It's so, so lovely/It's so, so good and sweet/It's so, so heavenly to me."

A pretty accurate description of Mr. Patterson's "The Ultimate Gift," itself.

"Classic Christmas" / George Strait

No frills, nothing fancy. No vocal theatrics or quirky arrangements.

George Strait's "Classic Christmas" is 10 traditional Christmas songs sung and performed in a straightforward (no pun intended) way.

There are hymns such as "Joy to the World," "Silent Night," and "O Come, All Ye Faithful," and less religious fare such as "Up on the Housetop" and "Deck the Halls."

You'd think with such simplicity this would be a boring Christmas CD.

But it isn't. It's far from ho-hum. It's comfortable in the way a well-worn pair of jeans or your favorite leather jacket feels.

With 10 songs — and all but two songs less than three minutes long — it's a quick spin. But it feels leisurely, not rushed.

Wish I could say the same for the disc jacket. The information is minimal; no mention of musicians playing on the CD, or what instruments. (The band seems to include a fiddle and a mandolin... and maybe a steel guitar? In any case, Mr. Strait's voice isn't the only thing that twangs.)

A note from Mr. Strait says he picked his favorites, the ones he grew up hearing and singing, "and added a little country flavor to make them sound more like me."

They do. This is Christmas music, George Strait style, and it sounds good: traditional holiday music done traditional country-style.

"Home for Christmas" / Sheryl Crow

I was in a Hallmark store a few weeks ago, shopping, when I began paying more than passing attention to the Christmas music they were playing.

It wasn't yet December, but I was

intrigued by the sounds I was hearing: a woman soulfully singing "Go Tell It On the Mountain,"



"White Christmas," "The Christmas Song (Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire)." It had a retro feel, and I wasn't sure if I was listening to something modern or something recorded decades ago.

There's a snail's pace version of "I'll Be Home For Christmas" that sounds as if it came right out of the 50s; you could slow-dance to it to the low glow of only the Christmas tree lights. Ditto for "The Bells of St. Mary's."

The voice sounded familiar, but I just couldn't place it.

When I went up to the counter to purchase my cards, I saw the CD: it was "Home for Christmas" by Sheryl Crow. Without hesitation I bought it. And have had absolutely no regrets.

It's a mellow-sounding CD, with Booker T (of Booker T and the MG's) playing organ on four of the cuts and a horn section that also helps give it a sassy feel.

The beginning of "O Holy Night" starts with horns playing "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear," with street sounds of cars and traffic in the background. Ms. Crow sings the first verse (while someone shakes a handbell to solicit donations), then segues into "O Holy Night."

Ms. Crow penned one song for the CD: "There is a Star That Shines Tonight."

"This Christmas Aretha" / Aretha Franklin

Aretha Franklin is the undisputed Queen of Soul.

No one can put across a song the way she can.

And Aretha Franklin singing Christmas music? What could be better?

Unfortunately, "This Christmas Aretha" is initially a disappointment.

It opens with "Angels We Have Heard on High," and Ms. Franklin is all over the place while singing her "glorias." It's just too much — frills upon frills upon frills.

With the next song, she sings Donny Hathaway's "This Christmas" with her son, Edward Franklin. It opens with a little skit that's far too cute to be listened to more than once: Ms. Franklin getting a phone call while cooking Christmas dinner. (The CD also



ends with a strange rewritten version of "Twas the Night Before Christmas" that seems out of character with all that has come before.)

But things start sounding like classic Aretha with "The Lord Will Make a Way," especially with the extended jam at the end. There's also a great closing jam on Gamble and Huff's "Christmas Ain't Christmas (Without the One You Love)" with Ms. Franklin and background singers proclaiming over and over, "Jesus! He is the reason, reason for the season!" Then, on "Silent Night," we have the Queen seated at the piano, accompanying herself.

I think, simply, she tries too hard with this CD at times, throwing in any and every vocal pyrotechnic in her arsenal.

She grew up singing gospel music; if anyone should put out a superlative Christmas album that's meaningful and moving, it's Ms. Franklin.

All singers' voices change as they age; I only wish Ms. Franklin made a Christmas album a decade or more ago, without all the overproduction.

"A Swingin' Christmas" / Tony Bennett

Tony Bennett recorded "A Swingin' Christmas" just before he turned 82. His voice, too, has changed over the years, becoming a little more textured, no longer what it was in his prime.

But still, this CD works. It's partially due to Mr. Bennett's skill in singing and phrasing — the man can still swing — but also due to the first-rate musicians he chose to accompany him: a four-piece band, led by pianist Monty Alexander, and the 13-piece Count Basie Orchestra.

This is a Christmas album that's bold and brassy.

He's chosen traditional songs:

"I'll Be Home For Christmas," "Silver Bells," "Winter Wonderland," "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas."

But there are quiet moments too: "Christmas Time is Here," "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," "The Christmas Waltz." He also sings a duet with his daughter, Antonia Bennett: a sweet version of "I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm." Ms. Bennett has a sultry voice, and I wish she'd been featured on a couple more songs.

Listening to this album, you can picture Mr. Bennett on stage in a little jazz club, singing, pausing to let a musician solo. (There are nice piano solos by Mr. Alexander throughout, including on "Silver Bells" "My Favorite Things," and a harmonica solo by Toots Thielmans on "All I Want for Christmas is You.")

The CD jacket includes two winter scenes painted by Mr. Bennett. And the cover photograph — 14 people seated around a table, about to eat a Christmas turkey — is a clever re-creation of Norman Rockwell's iconic "Freedom From Want" painting.

"A Swingin' Christmas" is just what you'd expect from Mr. Bennett: a class act.

"What a Night! A Christmas Album" / Harry Connick Jr.

Has Harry Connick Jr. ever released an album that isn't impeccable?

"What a Night! A Christmas Album" is no exception. Mr. Connick's released at least two other holiday albums; he's an old pro at this.

Mr. Connick's a triple threat, singing, playing the piano, and arranging.

"What a Night!" is jam-packed with Christmas music: 15 songs, four of them original. This is the musical equivalent of a hearty Christmas dinner...with seconds and dessert too.

Everything is delivered in his bright, brassy Big Band sound, with the New Orleans flavor coming out strongly on songs such as "Please Come Home for Christmas" and "We Three Kings." ("Santariffic," a Mr. Connick original, sounds almost like stripper music!)



Mr. Connick's always trying new things with his arrangements; check out the unusual piano accompaniment on "O Come All Ye Faithful." And his version of "Dance of the Sugarplum Fairies" is soulful and funky.

The only misstep seems to be "Winter Wonderland," on which he lets his young daughter Kate sing.

"I'll Be Home For Christmas" / Brian McKnight

Brian McKnight's "I'll Be Home For Christmas" has got to be the smoothest Christmas CD of the pack. It's smooth, but no snooze.

Mr. McKnight croons his way through a dozen songs, managing to make each and everyone of them sound like a love song, even "Silver Bells."

The production is pristine, the arrangements creative and Mr. McKnight's voice as seductive as ever.

A number of guest artists visit: Vince Gill duets on the love song "Christmas You and Me" (a Brian McKnight original), Noel Schajris joins in on "Silent Night," Josh Groban adds his beautiful voice to "Angels We Have Heard on High" and Take 6 closes the album by harmonizing on "Bless This House."

Mr. McKnight's two sons, BJ and Nikolas McKnight, also join him.

"I'll Be Home For Christmas" includes a Christmas Medley of "What Child is This," "Away in a Manager" and "The First Noel," with Mr. McKnight

accompanied only by acoustic guitar.

You'd be hard-pressed to find a Christmas album that's sweeter or more tender. This is definitely a dim-the-lights, sit-in-front-of-the-fire Christmas CD.

"Verve Unmixed Christmas" / Various Artists

Verve Records went into their vault and selected 11 songs for their "Verve Unmixed Christmas" CD. They picked a bunch from the '60s, but also went back to the '50s and late '30s. With a line-up that includes Shirley Horn, Nina Simone, Billie Holiday, Count Basie and Dinah Washington, how could you lose?

Admittedly, the tunes push the boundaries of anyone's definition of Christmas music. There's Louis Armstrong's "What A Wonderful World."

And Billie Holiday sings "I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm," which is about cold weather (and snuggling). Christmas isn't mentioned at all. But gosh, it's so great to hear Billie Holiday sing, I'm not about to complain.

(The cut also contains a couple of great musical solos, which aren't credited in the jacket information. More background information on each song and artist would've been appreciated.)

Ms. Horn delivers a sultry version of "Winter Wonderland," as does Ella Fitzgerald on "What Are You Doing New Year's Eve?"

This is mostly mellow album, but B-3 organist Jimmy Smith's cover of "God Rest Ye Merry Gentleman" (sic) livens things up with his unique, zesty arrangement.

On separate disk, Verve's also released "Verve Remixed Christmas," which features remixed versions of each song on this album. So if you're a purist, pick up "Verve Unmixed Christmas"; a reconstructionist, "Verve Remixed Christmas." And if your tastes are more catholic, pick up both. ■

