

ALL ABOUT JAZZ

MCG Jazz does Christmas: New Holiday Releases From Ann Hampton Callaway and the Pittsburgh Jazz Orchestra



The inevitability of new Christmas albums often fills jazz journalists with dread. And while some may assume it's because we're a cynical breed with unreasonable standards and upturned noses, that couldn't be further from the truth (in most cases). The reason jazz journalists approach new Christmas albums with caution is simple: the number of slipshod, hastily-produced, derivative holiday albums produced in a given year *always* seems to significantly outweigh the number of quality Christmas projects that appear in the same time frame. But rest assured, every year also seems to offer a few winners in this category. In 2015, Pittsburgh's Manchester Craftsmen's Guild is responsible for pushing two of them through the pipeline to the public.

Tired of the same dozen-or-so Christmas tunes delivered in every permutation possible? Then this one will likely bring a smile to your face. Vocalist extraordinaire [Ann Hampton Callaway](#) delivers a dozen fresh songs—only one has seen the light of day before—that capture the Christmas spirit without pandering to past recordings. None have "new classic" written on them, but all are expertly shaped and pleasing to behold.

The music was written or co-written by a variety of Grade A composers—Callaway, Emmy-winning composer Wesley Whatley, celebrated vocalist-composer [Michael Feinstein](#), and several other top-notch tunesmiths—and

the lyrics come from the pen of two-time Emmy-winner William Schermerhorn. Add nearly thirty stellar musicians to the mix—the New York Voices, Five Play, flautist [Hubert Laws](#) , saxophonist [Gerald Albright](#) , and trumpeter [Claudio Roditi](#) included—and you have a sure recipe for success.

The album kicks off with the heartwarming "On Union Street (A Christmas Street)." Callaway is backed by a septet, but the arrangement—courtesy of [Marty Ashby](#) and [Mike Tomaro](#) —makes the band sound much bigger. It's one of the most memorable tracks on the album, remaining fixed in the mind for this writer after a mere two listens. As the album plays on, it quickly becomes clear that there are no throw-away tracks. There are, however, some that rise above. "One Star" is one example, shining brightly with percussion backing, a silken trombone solo from [Jay Ashby](#) , and some notable soprano soloing from saxophonist [Steve Wilson](#) ; the lightly-scored "I Saw A Sparrow," with Marty Ashby providing sensitive support on classical guitar and Laws' flute channeling the titular bird, is another.

As the playlist plays out, humor makes an appearance via the slow and sly "Santa Doesn't Like Me"; pianist Ted Rosenthal's trio, augmented by [Janelle Reichman](#) 's tenor saxophone and [Jami Dauber](#) 's trumpet, delivers the pleasantly waltzing foundation beneath Callaway on "Christmas Isn't Christmas At All"; a well-wrought song verse introduction and trad jazz ideals help to change things up for "I Want To Play Santa"; and samba sounds serve to seduce on "What Good Is Being Cranky (When It's Christmas Time)." And there's even more to be found after that.

This project was eighteen months in the making, and its architects' attention to details and desire to get things just right come through in the music. If that isn't enough to sell people on this album, then the cause—with all proceeds going to "support the MCG jazz program and its mission to preserve, present, and promote jazz"—may do the trick.

BY [DAN BILAWSKY](#),