



the talented artists visiting Charles for the holidays. Mykal Gilgore, a singer with Broadway experience, goes to passionate extremes in the gospel number "Go Tell It On The Mountain." Don't think Charles gets lost in the crowd. He and equally bold jazz musicians like saxophonists Jacques Schwarz-Bart and Brian Hogans invest songs with their crackling inventiveness and harmonic ingenuity. With only guitarist Randy Napoleon accompanying him on "I'll Be Home For Christmas," Charles conveys complete, stunning emotional involvement.

Ordering info: etiennearcharles.com

Far more conventional, the **Fred Hughes Trio** contributes to the special time of the year with ***I'll Be Home For Christmas* (ShoreThing Records 1215; 45:36 ★★½)**. This well-regarded Washington, D.C.-based pianist and his bandmates demonstrate that with the right melody, harmony and rhythm sensibilities even the most comatose of standards can breathe again.

Ordering info: fredhughes.com

Mr. Claus knows exactly which album to turn to when he's in need of a roots-music fix: ***A Blues Christmas* (Alligator 9203, vinyl and download; 40:21 ★★)**. This collection finds 14 roster acts—their tracks lifted from two old Alligator holiday CDs—sending messages of sensual revelry. Blues powerhouse Shemekia Copeland wraps her tonsils around the terrifically clever "Stay A Little Later, Santa," and the late Koko Taylor sings "Merry, Merry Christmas" with typical zest. Everyone from Elvin Bishop to Marcia Ball to the Holmes Brothers drinks heartily from the 'Gator wassailing bowl.

Ordering info: alligator.com

As the band's fans are well aware, the lead vocalist of **Sharon Jones & The Dap-Kings** has full-throated energy to spare. The group's new album, ***It's A Holiday Soul Party* (Daptone 037; 34:08 ★★½)**, commands attention for how much it sounds like lusty soul of the 1960s and early '70s during Christmastime. This version of "White Christmas" sounds like a track by the Ike & Tina Turner Revue that was stashed away in a record company vault. Beyond hearty partying, Jones' most convincing singing is done on "Please Come Home For Christmas." She's to be applauded for her inclusive attitude, too, as she expends high emotion on the

Hanukkah salute "Eight Days."

Ordering info: daptonerecords.com

Santa would be remiss if he didn't place some gifts of rowdy holiday music under the tree. **The Brian Setzer Orchestra's *Rockin' Rudolph* (Surfdog; 34:02 ★★½)** finds the ex-Stray Cats rockabilly singer-guitarist focusing tons of mirth on the usual picks, plus a couple originals and the cartoon Flintstones' goofball "Yabba Dabba Yuletide." Setzer showcases his guitar prowess on "Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas," while "Carol Of The Bells" makes a favorable impression with its matrix of classical, rock and blues. Big band jazz takes over in swinging style on "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing."

Ordering info: surfdog.com

Starting in the mid-1980s, a holiday album credited to **The dB's & Friends** has been recycled every 10 years or so with new tracks alongside holdovers. ***Christmas Time Again* (Omnivore 152; 69:22 ★★½)** features wholly enjoyable old songs by the jangle-rock dB's and a version of "The Christmas Song" by indie-rock icon Alex Chilton. But that can't be said about new, undercooked turkeys basted by pop singer-songwriters such as Lydia Kavanagh.

Ordering info: omnivorerecordings.com

Bluegrass queen **Rhonda Vincent's *Christmas Time* (Upper Management Music; 37:00 ★★½)** stands out from the country crowd thanks to her smooth-textured tenor voice and bright fiddling. Sure, there's some commercial drivel here, but Vincent's highly melodic songs "Dreams Of Christmas" and "Christmas Time At Home" are nice—*real* nice. Willie Nelson and Charlie Daniels are among the guests who drop in to celebrate the season. **DB**

Ordering info: rhondavincnet.com

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IT'S CHRISTMAS ON MACK AVENUE

Mack Avenue Records celebrates the season with its brightest stars in a collection of familiar and maybe not-so-familiar holiday tunes. While "Santa Claus Is Coming To Town," "Little Drummer Boy" and Vince Guaraldi's Charlie Brown classic "Christmas Time Is Here" stand tall on the holly bedecked mantle, "Santa Claus, Go Straight To The Ghetto" makes a welcome addition to the Yule time repertoire.

mackavenue.com