

Sounds of the season

CDs offer tunes to set the holiday tone

By **STEPHEN A. IDE**

James Taylor's Christmas CD, "A Christmas Album" (Hallmark, www.hallmark.com) costs \$11. In a season of love and giving, the music industry apparently is so distrustful and fearful that people will copy and steal Taylor's CD that they've blocked it from playing in anything but a standard CD player. That's no problem for many folks, but if you are among the growing legion of music listeners using your computer, your DVD player or your car stereo to play your CDs, you're out of luck. Forget about trying to copy it to your iPod. Merry Christmas from Hallmark.

A warning on the face of the 38-minute CD tells buyers that the CD may not be compatible, but it's a shame that Hallmark thinks people won't spend \$11 for an artist as popular as J.T. Ironically, a free Christmas track is offered for download at www.jamestaylor.com. So I guess it's OK to use your computer to hear one song, at least.

Oh, yes, the music, as you might expect, is wonderful. Taylor sings classics like "Winter Wonderland," "Jingle Bells" and "The Christmas Song." Joining Taylor are producer/musician Dave Grusin and more than a dozen other musicians and singers. Notable is a lovely, playful duet between Natalie Cole and Taylor in "Baby, It's Cold Outside."

Taylor's arrangements are refreshing and natural, almost conversational. He sounds as joyful as the season. But unless you are a devout James Taylor fan or use only a regular CD player, don't waste your money on this CD. It's not worth the trouble.

We fish you a merry one

A much better choice this Christmas season is "Merry Fishes to All" from Trout Fishing in America (www.troutmusic.com). The Grammy-nominated Arkansas duo of Ezra Idlet and Keith Grimwood has a knack for penning and recording catchy, uplifting and funny songs. This is their first Christmas CD, and its sheer silliness and fine performances will delight children and adults, as they vary from folk to jazz.

They sing of a child's "First Christmas" in the comical, poetic fashion that has become the trademark of these Parents' Choice award winners. Songs list a child's complaints in "Santa Brought Me Clothes" and "I Got A Cheese Log" or the complete joys of a "Snow Day."

Other songs focus on original themes, like the cocoa-coated "Chocolate



"Merry Fishes to All," the first Christmas CD by the duo Trout Fishing in America, combines silly songs and fine performances.'

Christmas," "Bob and Bob" (the unique tale of two six-sided snowflakes), their take on the lame annual "Christmas Letter" or the request to Mrs. Claus to control Santa's eating in "Just Because, Mrs. Claus."

One listen to Trout Fishing and you'll be hooked. This could be the sleeper hit this holiday season. Highly recommended, all ages.

The CD that keeps giving

For a mixture of songs that span Christmas, Hanukkah, Thanksgiving, Halloween and spring and summer, Geof Johnson offers his fifth CD, "Songs for All Seasons" (available on two Web sites: www.cdbaby.com; and www.songsforkids.net).

In a variety of styles, from folk to rock to bluegrass and more, Johnson

sings simple, upbeat melodies. The 29-track, 62-minute CD includes seven songs for Christmas and Hanukkah and six for Thanksgiving.

Johnson's songs are filled with lovely images and are designed for young children. Songs like "If I Had a Dreidel" will delight young kids, with its repetitive chorus, "Spin around, spin around . . . and we all fall down."

Johnson adds his own vocal sound effects to tunes like "Santa's Out Tonight."

I have to admit, after a short while, I wanted to skip through most of these songs, but the repetitive nature and cute melodies would likely appeal to young children. Ages 2-7.

For 'twens and teens

Adolescents and fans of Radio Disney will appreciate the release of "Jingle Jams" (disneyrecords.com), a collection of 17 upbeat holiday songs by the young Disney stars Hillary Duff, Aaron Carter, Ashlee Simpson, Jesse McCartney and others.

This CD blends renditions of popular Christmas songs, like "Winter Wonderland," "White Christmas" and "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" and others with originals like the hip-hop inspired "I Love Christmas," by Fan 3 or the Raven-Symoné pop tune "My Christmas Wish." Though it's unlikely this CD will supplant your holiday favorites, this is a pleasantly produced alternative. Ages 2-14.

Karaoke carols

Disney continues its karaoke series with "Christmas Favorites," a set of eight instrumentals and vocal choral versions of the same songs that kids (or others) may sing to. The lyrics are provided in the CD booklet, and the vocal versions include Disney characters speaking amid the choral arrangements: "You're next, Minnie."

Folks with karaoke machines will have the lyrics displayed on their screens. The songs include holiday standards, from "Deck the Halls" to "We Wish You a Merry Christmas." Ages 2+

Crossing creeds

Fans of Fox's "The O.C." will appreciate the release of "Music From the O.C.: Mix 3 – Have a Very Merry Chrismukkah!," with songs by The Raveonettes, Jimmy Eat World, The Long Winters and others. For the uninitiated (which included me until recently), "Chrismukkah" is a made-up holiday for the show, which features a family born of a mixed marriage.

Holiday music, from crossover to Transfer to digital

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As one of my colleagues put it, “it’s the best of both worlds.” Presents for eight nights and then a lot of presents in one day.

Despite the album’s silly title, I actually enjoyed this mix of fresh holiday songs performed by some of today’s young bands. The music consists largely of rock songs with Christmas themes, with the exception of the sparsely arranged bluesy take on the traditional “Rock of Ages,” performed by Ben Kweller.

From the slow-and-steady,

electrified Raveonettes tune “The Christmas Song” to the upbeat sarcasm of Eels’ “Christmas is Going to the Dogs,” you can almost see the heartwarming yuletide images being shown with the show’s Cohen family.

When placed in your computer, the CD contains a link to Fox extras online. However, at the time of this writing in November, the link wasn’t working. All ages.

Transfer tracks

The Manhattan Transfer’s jazz-inspired vocal renditions of Christmas classics are a welcome relief from the highly stylized renditions performed

by many artists. Since the early ’70s, the group has offered an alternative sound grounded in jazz and intricate vocal harmonies. The reissue on CD of their 1992 “The Christmas Album” (Columbia) includes 11 laid-back standards, produced by Johnny Mandel and Tim Hauser, including Tony Bennett on “The Christmas Song.” Listening to these tracks will take the edge off the hustle and bustle of the holidays. Highly recommended, all ages.

Don’t go hear

Digital Activity’s “Xmas: Vol. 1” is a tepid collection of ambient,

instrumental Christmas carols perhaps best served as background music. This set of digital music is difficult to listen to. It’s cold and rhythmic, though just barely melodic. Geoff Westen and company try to pull off holiday standards, like “Jingle Bells,” “Home For the Holidays” and a dreadful “Silent Night.”

It’s hard to imagine why anyone would want to listen to this at all, given that there are so many better choices out there. Unless you are a huge fan of digital music, avoid this CD. (Disturbing Music, www.disturbingmusic.com

Also available . . .

Other Christmas releases include: On Columbia: Andy Williams, “The Andy Williams Christmas Album,” originally released in 1963.

On Columbia-Legacy: Ray Conniff, “Here We Come A-Caroling,” originally released 1965; Frank Sinatra, “Christmas Songs by Sinatra,” originally released in 1946. This CD now includes 15 tracks, three of which

were previously unreleased and four of which are previously unreleased alternate takes; Andy Williams, “Merry Christmas,” originally released 1965.

On Lovely Baby Music (music4babies.com): Raimond Lap, and “Baby Christmas,” the sixth in the Lovely Baby series.

Stephen A. Ide is an editor at The Patriot Ledger.