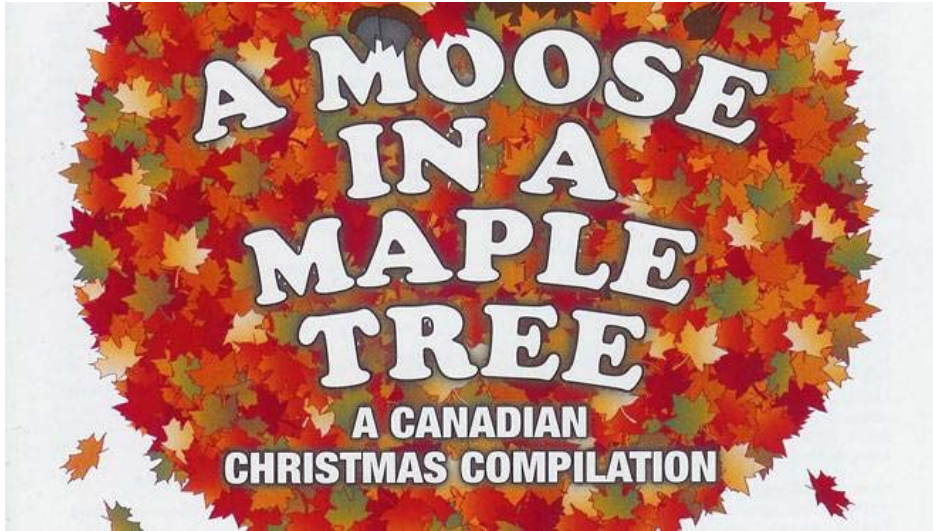


Holiday CDs branch out

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A singing goalie, a pop star with soul and a one-man Christmas Carol among the season's offerings



The timeless classic, Honky the Christmas Goose, has been rescued from obscurity on Townsin's Canadian Christmas compilation CD A Moose in a Maple Tree (Polyglot).

Before I begin delving into this year's bumper crop of Christmas releases, I'd like to raise a cup of spiked eggnog to author, songwriter and producer Tony Townsin for having the gumption to bring one of my favourite holiday singles into the digital age.

I'm speaking, of course, of the timeless classic Honky the Christmas Goose, recorded by Toronto Maple Leafs goalie Johnny Bower for a charity single in 1965.

The song reached the Canadian Top 40 (No. 29, in fact) before becoming consigned to the hands of record collectors and diehard Leafs fans, but it's been rescued from obscurity on Townsin's Canadian Christmas compilation CD A Moose in a Maple Tree (Polyglot).

Available at HMV, Chapters and independent music retailers, A Moose in a Maple Tree is raising money for the Coalition for Music Education (www.musicmakesus.ca) while providing some CanCon Christmas cheer from a wide range of artists.

Besides the original recording of Bower's rugged novelty — let's face it, he sings like you'd expect a goalie would — there's also an amusing take on The Chipmunk Song by alt-pop duo Tegan and Sara (with their mom doing the David Seville part) and the winsome Picture Books in Winter by Forest City Lovers' Kat Burns, going solo under the name Kashka.

East Coast content comes from New Brunswick's Les Mechants Maquereaux with a jaunty Mon Beau Sapin, and Townsin puts a Canuck spin on traditional favourites with the title track, a reggae version of 12 Days of Christmas, performed by Chris Murray, and The Night Before a Canadian Christmas by Aboriginal hip-hop artist K.A.S.P. They won't make anyone forget Bob and Doug MacKenzie's version of 12 Days, but they're fun in their own way.

Halifax singer Meaghan Smith has already been a holiday hero, joining Jill Barber and Rose Cousins on A New Kind of Light, a 2007 benefit CD for FEED Nova Scotia (which is still available, incidentally, at their website and Rockingham headquarters, and at retailer around Halifax).

Now her particular blend of naughty and nice surfaces again on It Snowed (Warner Music Canada), a thoroughly delightful collection of original and familiar Christmas tunes with a winter-fresh pop sparkle.

Besides the childlike delight of the title track, revived from A New Kind of Light, there's the flirty Christmas Kiss and a gender reversal on Baby, It's Cold Outside, where Smith is the aggressor and her target trying to get out the door is Buck 65.

She even conquers my aversion to Little Drummer Boy with some new rhythmic and melodic twists.

Eleanor McCain takes the "naughty" and "nice" idea literally on her new release Holiday (Retriever Records), as the categories for

each of its two discs. There's nothing especially mischievous about the first half, no covers of I'm Gettin' Nuttin' for Christmas or Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer (thank Santa), but it delineates her adult contemporary pop versions of Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas and What Are You Doing New Year's Eve from the more sanctified hymns of the "nice" side.

The New Brunswick vocalist has a lovely voice, full and expressive, but the arrangements of the vintage pop tunes aren't enough to distinguish them from the dozens of versions we've all heard before. More impressive are the ancient melodies, like Lo How a Rose E'er Blooming and In the Bleak Midwinter, which have their own glow, thanks to McCain's delicate approach.

For Holiday samples, visit www.eleanormccain.ca (<http://www.eleanormccain.ca>).

If your preference runs more to teen contemporary, you probably already have a copy of what will likely be the biggest selling Christmas disc of this or any other season for years to come, Justin Bieber's Under the Mistletoe (Island). To be fair, the Biebster has come across with a solid release for his fans and not just a Christmas cash-in, with 15 pop and soul-lite tracks, featuring guests like Boyz II Men, Busta Rhymes and the Band Perry paying their respects.

You can also hear some maturity creeping into Bieber's voice on songs like Only Thing I Ever Get for Christmas and the pop-reggae Mistletoe. He doesn't sound so much like the elf that sang One Less Lonely Girl two years ago.

The record isn't entirely without padding though; his "duet" with Mariah Carey on All I Want for Christmas Is You (subtitled Superfestive!) sounds like they just inserted his voice into her original 1994 recording.

Even so, it's less jarring than the new pairing of Dean Martin and Scarlett Johansson on the umpteenth repackaging of Dino's Christmas catalogue, My Kind of Christmas (Hip-O/Universal).

My kind of Christmas usually includes watching the best screen interpretation of Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol, with Alastair Sim's unmatched portrayal of that penurious miser Ebenezer Scrooge.

The 1951 film gets a stunning new visual presentation on this year's 60th anniversary DVD and Blu-ray, but if you want to enjoy the timeless story in the car while en route to the grandparents' for turkey dinner, take along Dickens' A Christmas Carol (Off the Leash) by Halifax actor Jeremy Webb with Scott Macmillan's score performed by Symphony Nova Scotia.

The idea of one person doing all the characters goes back to the author himself, who was known to give public readings of A Christmas Carol, and it was notably accomplished by Star Trek: The Next Generation's Patrick (Make it snow) Stewart.

Webb has been doing his one-man act for a few years, skilfully outlining the story's moments of comedy and tragedy with studied attention to each part. The one-hour, 40-minute presentation, spread over two CDs, is a delightful way to get reacquainted with a classic.

Webb also performs A Christmas Carol a number of times around Nova Scotia this month, including two symphony shows at Halifax Rebecca Cohn Auditorium on Friday at 7 p.m. and Saturday at 2 p.m. For a full schedule, go to www.offtheleash.ca (<http://www.offtheleash.ca>).

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