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Cool Christmas concept

If you were interviewing, say, Radiohead or Arcade Fire or, basically, anyone apart from Sufjan Stevens about their 42-track box set of Christmas songs, your first question would almost certainly be a whispered 'why?'. As it is, Stevens is a man who spent most of 2007 working on The BQE, an orchestral work about a motorway, once released a concept record about the Chinese zodiac (2001's *Enjoy Your Rabbit*) and whose rise to cult heroism was famously fuelled by his declaration that he intends to write one album for every state of the US (he's thus far made two – 2003's *Michigan*, and 2005's *Illinois*). So *Songs For Christmas?* Perfectly normal.

'As a songwriter, I've always been troubled by the tradition of Christmas music,' notes the ever-earnest Stevens. 'It's so pretty, overwrought and sentimental, and it never seems very cool to me. So these songs started as an exercise to study the Christmas repertoire and to kind of get over my criticisms. Now I think I'm thrilled to death by the exaggerated nature of Christmas music; you could spend years researching, studying and meditating on it.'

► I'm thrilled to death by the exaggerated nature of Christmas music; you could spend years researching, studying and meditating on it ◀

Raised in Michigan and resident in New York, Stevens is such a one-off that a concise introduction is nigh-on impossible. It's easier to simply note that *Illinois*, his breakthrough and last studio album proper, is a dazzling fusion of folk and classical music, and that the lyrics are as good as any you'll ever hear, from meticulous serial killer portrait John Wayne Gacy, Jr, to the overpoweringly sad requiem for a friend, *Casimir Pulaski Day*. *Songs For Christmas* isn't the proper follow-up to *Illinois*, nor is it even really new, having received a very limited release last year. In fact, it's a lovingly packaged compendium of five EPs made for friends and family between 2001 and 2006 (he's done a 2007 EP, though not made it commercially available) that only came into being as a result of his polite fan base.

'A lot of the songs were available online, which I have no qualms about,' he recalls, wryly, 'but then people started to write letters requesting that I officially release them because they

MUSIC INTERVIEW

Sufjan Stevens

Listeners should expect the unexpected from Sufjan Stevens' 42-track Christmas box set, as **ANDRZEJ LUKOWSKI** found out

felt guilty stealing them off the Internet. I thought that was hilarious, but I love these big concept albums, so I enjoyed putting it all together. That was a real indulgence for me.'

If *Songs For Christmas* is occasionally an aesthetic triumph more than a musical one, that's not to stop the final disc, last year's 11-track *Peace EP*, being frustratingly good for a man who hasn't put out a proper album in almost three years. Despite the faint preposterousness of almost everything he does – *SFC* features tracks called *Did I Make You Cry On Christmas Day?* (Well, You Deserved It!) and *Get Behind Me, Santa!* – the reason it works is because he's almost pathologically thoughtful about his art. So yes, there are lots of songs about elves, and the pastoral loveliness of the music is occasionally daubed with a

coating of sleigh bells, but lurking behind the OTT titles and covers of carols is probably one of the few intelligent Christmas records ever made.

'I have all kinds of criticisms about Christmas and the nature of our society,' notes Stevens, 'but I also think that how a culture celebrates and acknowledges its traditions and holidays says a lot about the conditions in that society. Christmas is now about boosting morale and boosting the economy and about immediate sensory stimulation: gorging yourself on food, drinking a lot, partying, loud music, commodities; it's almost like doing drugs. With Santa and the elves, the reindeer and the Grinch and all these other Christmas personalities, these things are all about the collective unconscious. At this time of year, it's dark and we spend a lot of time cooped up and we have these kind of hallucinations. That's what those songs are trying to reflect.'



Not so tacky: Sufjan Stevens has created a slightly dark festive collection, with the occasional sleigh bell thrown in

So *Songs For Christmas* really is more than a curio. It's also worth a listen because there's no telling when we'll next hear from Stevens. Perhaps his most contrary quality is that he's massively prolific, but reluctant to release music simply because he's recorded it and it's good. The 2007 EP may or may not get officially released, though the fact he's currently running a competition where the winner gets the

copyright to a new Christmas song by Stevens suggests it might. Although the fans are hoping the *States* project will be continued soon, their hero seems as in the dark as anybody about what he'll do next.

'I can't really speculate about the future,' he sighs, 'because I don't really know. I'm working on so many things at once and nothing really makes sense right now. I just spent the

last nine months of my life on this dilapidated motorway [The BQE], so I need to get away from that for a while.

'But recently I've been thinking that music is a mysterious form and it doesn't have to have a contextual meaning; maybe it's time that I meditate on meaninglessness.'

Songs For Christmas (Rough Trade) is out now. www.sufjan.com

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RATINGS GUIDE

★★★★★ Excellent
★★★★☆ Very Good
★★★☆☆ Good
★★☆☆☆ Adequate
★☆☆☆☆ Poor