

# Tired of the same old Christmas songs? So were these countercultural carolers

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Published: December 4, 2025 8:19am EDT



What happens when the grinding sounds of metal music collide with the innocence of Christmas?

*Alexander Koerner/Getty Images*

With Mariah Carey and Wham! saturating airwaves with their holiday tunes, it's beginning to sound a lot like Christmas.

But if all you want for Christmas is a reprieve from stereotypical Christmas music, you're not alone.

Despite the fact that they often rebel against conformity and commercialism, many countercultural musicians have been inspired to produce holiday tracks of their own. Because the symbols of Christmas are so widely recognizable, juxtaposing them with the sounds and values of more niche musical styles can have striking effects.

Here's how genres like roots reggae, thrash metal and pop punk have added new layers to familiar holiday tropes:

## **A roots reggae Christmas revival**

Certain sounds elicit certain expectations.

If you hear sleigh bells and a children's choir, lyrics about wintry fun can't be far. If you hear off-beat reggae guitars and Jamaican accents, you'll probably picture pot and palm trees, not Christmas.

And yet the roots reggae sound of Jacob Miller's "We Wish You A Irie Christmas" infuses the classic "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" with Rastafarian liberation theology.

Singers of the classic carol – which some historians trace to 16th-century England – clamor for figgy pudding, a traditional British Christmas dessert. They refuse to leave until they get their sweets: "We won't go until we get some / So bring it out here!"

By contrast, Miller's Christmas is "irie," which, in Jamaican Patois, roughly translates to contentment and inner peace.

In his version, Miller points out that poverty and joy are not mutually exclusive: "We rub it and dub it to the Christmas 'pon a broke pocket this year." He also stresses freedom from material desire: "Don't kill nuf oneself to buy it all."

After all, the biblical Christmas in Bethlehem had no toys – and no snow either, just like the Caribbean.

For Rastafarians like Miller, the renewal promised by Christmas was deeply personal. In the track, a word that sounds like "Ice-mas" is actually "I's-mas." In Rastafarianism, the "I" is the deity contained in each person. Miller's Christmas revelers dance to their own divinity, anticipating a return to the promised land.

In doing so, Miller turns a simple, well-worn carol into an anthem of self-worth and liberation.

## **Thrash metal Christmas horror**

Other genres can recast an innocent carol's lyrics into a horror story.

The 19th-century German carol "Kling, Glöckchen, Klingelingeling" was written from the perspective of the "Christkind," a Christmas gift-bringer in parts of Europe and South America. This "little Jesus" brings gifts in countries where Santa Claus isn't part of holiday traditions.

Each stanza is framed by a melody and words that evoke the sounds of a ringing bell, which are reflected in the title. In the carol, the Christkind implores children to let it inside so it doesn't freeze to death. Next, the Christkind promises gifts in return for being let into the living room. Finally, the Christkind asks the children to open their hearts to it.

Who could corrupt this child-friendly pitch for piety?

Enter Thomas "Angelripper" Such, a former coal miner and the front man of the German thrash metal band Sodom.

Where earlier heavy metal could be gloomy and occult, Sodom raised the temperature even more with gory, blasphemous lyrics, buzzsaw guitars and snarled screams. Sodom's side project, Onkel Tom Angelripper, has recorded metal versions of popular German songs, including "Kling, Glöckchen, Klingelingeling."

Without changing the lyrics, the thrash metal sound transforms the carol's wholesomeness into horror. A twee wind arrangement is cut off by heavy, distorted guitars and a growled "Kling." Metal musicians often use these sounds to evoke feelings of danger.

Angelripper's caroler sounds more like a large predator who manipulates and bribes his way into a home. In this framing, the final stanza's line – "open your hearts to me!" – sounds less like a call for communion and more like an ominous threat of mutilation. It's a home invasion akin to that in the classic Christmas movie "Home Alone," but it's all terror, no humor.

This musical corruption of ambiguous lyrics lays bare the fragility of festive innocence.

## **Christmas grief gets the punk treatment**

There's a whole catalog of melancholic Christmas songs, from Elvis Presley's "Blue Christmas" to Bing Crosby's "I'll Be Home for Christmas."

But few touch on painful themes of substance abuse, suicide and guilt like the raw-yet-catchy "Christmas Vacation" by pop-punk pioneers the Descendents.

For better or worse, many of the Descendents' songs are unabashedly immature, petulant and sometimes offensive. Yet their boyish bravado puts moments of vulnerability into relief.

"Christmas Vacation" is no different.

Over jangly guitars and sparse bass, front man Milo Aukerman recalls an alcoholic friend or partner who "took a vacation into oblivion." And while this turn of events wasn't a surprise to the narrator, that didn't change anything: "I knew about your plans / I really did understand / But you didn't let me know / I wasn't invited to go."

The lyrics portray a process of ongoing grief. What makes “Christmas Vacation” poignant is its lyrical vacillation. The narrator wonders: Did she leave forever? Will she be back? Is she to blame? Am I?

The vocal harmony in the chorus – a pop punk staple – mirrors this ambivalence. In the track, the joining of voices starts to sound like a wail. An expected feature of pop punk is transformed into a moving expression of grief and loneliness: a common, less celebrated, holiday experience.

Rather than sneer at or mock Christmas, these three tracks give voice to the complicated emotions that can accompany the holidays. Miller evokes gratitude and hope; Angelripper provokes fear and vulnerability; the Descendents dwell on grief and longing. And all three perspectives end up complementing the focus of mainstream music on food, fancy gifts, snow and family.

Florian Walch does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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