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NOW THAT'S WHAT I CALL REAL CHRISTMAS No. 1s

(Contributed by Clive Booth)

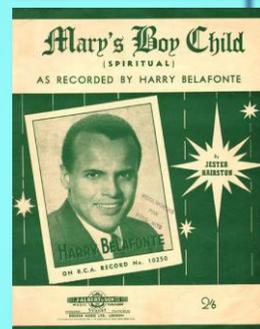
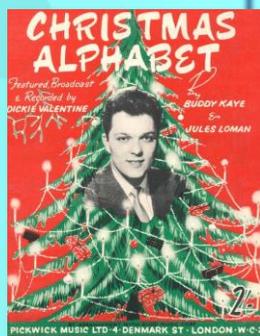
This article contains interactive text – wherever you see blue coloured text, click on it and it will link to the song in question.

Since the New Musical Express commenced publishing weekly record sale charts back in 1952, people have eagerly looked forward to discovering which song and which artist would be at the number one spot over Christmas. The artists themselves, or at least their recording companies, would increasingly set their record release dates and promotional drives to take advantage of the sales boost that Christmas usually brought.

We recognise a lot of the songs that have hit that coveted number one spot over the 68 Christmases the charts have been going, but when we look back, the ones that were actually Christmas oriented have not been as common as we might suppose. In fact, only a dozen of them have been arguably 'Christmas' songs.

It took four Christmases, until 1955, for a Christmas song to first top the Christmas chart. It was Dickie Valentine's '[Christmas Alphabet](#)'. You know the one - it starts *C is for the candy around the Christmas tree, H is for the happiness with all the family*, before going on to complete the word Christmas in similar fashion. It was quite a hit for Dickie Valentine spending three weeks at the number one spot - but it wasn't even the original of the song, it was a cover of a [McGuire Sisters](#) version issued the year previously.

Two years later, in 1957, Harry Belafonte topped the Christmas chart with '[Mary's Boy Child](#)'. Although clearly a Christmas song, the tune wasn't actually written as one. It was originally a calypso called 'He Pone and Chocolate Tea', though it was never recorded as such.



Sometime after its composition the tune was given new words by its original composer (Jester Hairston) after a Hollywood choir asked him to write a Christmas song for it. Harry Belafonte heard the song being performed by the choir and the rest is history. The version that hit the number one spot in the UK was different from Belafonte's US version, released a year earlier, in that it had a longer running time. That longer running time meant that it became the first single with a running time of over 4 minutes to top the UK chart.



After that, there was a long break of fifteen years before the next clearly Christmas song hit the top of the charts in 1973 – and what a Christmas song it was! Today, nearly fifty years later it still remains much in demand – the song was '[Merry Christmas Everybody](#)' by Noddy Holder and Slade. It was a huge hit for the group, but like the previously mentioned Harry Belafonte song, the tune, or rather the chorus, was not originally written as a Christmas one. It started life, written by Noddy Holder in 1967, as '[Buy Me a Rocking Chair](#)', then in the summer of 1973 after Slade decided they wanted to record a Christmas song, Holder rewrote the lyrics overnight, creating one of the most lasting Christmas pop songs. It's probably also worth mentioning here that the success of 'Merry Christmas Everybody' prevented another much-loved Christmas song, Wizzard's '[I Wish it Could Be Christmas Everyday](#)' from reaching the top of the chart.

After that earlier fifteen year wait, we didn't have to wait as long for the next one as it arrived the very next Christmas (1974) – it was Mud with '[Lonely this Christmas](#)'. The song was sung by Les Gray in the style of Elvis Presley with a performance convincing enough to fool many people into believing it really was Elvis. There are at least eight

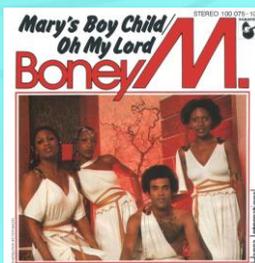


recordings of the song on YouTube, all falsely attributed to Elvis. One even claims the recording was found down the back of a sofa in the Jungle room at Gracelands, but the truth is that Elvis Presley never recorded the song.



Two years later, in 1976, we got our next Christmas themed number 1. It was Johnny Mathis singing ['When a Child is Born'](#) and just like a couple of our previous number ones, it had not been written originally as a Christmas song. It was originally called [Soleado](#) (a Spanish word meaning

Sunny) and had been recorded four years earlier in 1972, by the Italian keyboard player, [Ciro Dammicco](#). No words were sung on this original version, but it proved such a popular tune that other artists picked it up and added their own. In 1974 there was a German version titled [Tränen Lügen nicht](#) ('Tears do not lie') followed in 1975 by a Turkish version, ['Gözyaşları Yalan Söylemez'](#) (also meaning 'Tears do not lie'). In the same year the French came up with, ['On ne vit pas sans se dire adieu'](#) ('We do not live without saying goodbye') then the Czechs did a version titled [Měl jsem rád a má](#) (I loved you and still do). In 1976 there was a Slovak version titled [Rozchod](#) (Farewell), plus the Johnny Mathis version called 'When a Child is Born' which arrived here just in time for Christmas. That wasn't the end of other versions though as the Hungarians came along with [Édes Kisfiam](#) (My sweet little son) in 1978, the Spaniards with [Te amaré, te amo y te querré](#) (I will love you, I love you and I will) in 1981, and finally Poland, in 1992, broke the mould with the oddly upbeat [Blondyneczka](#) (Little Blonde One).



In 1978, the second Christmas number one on our list, Harry Belafonte's ['Mary's Boy Child'](#) made a return to the number one spot. This time performed by Boney M, who bought back the calypso beat in which the tune had originally been composed. The composer, Jester Hairston, approved of the new version saying, after hearing it, "God bless my soul. That's tremendous for an old fogey like me".

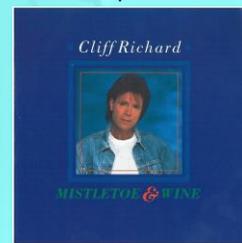
In 1984 along came Band Aid with ['Do they know it's Christmas'](#) which bought together many recording artists of the day for a charity single to raise funds to support the victims of a famine in Ethiopia. The record sold well, but it wasn't well appreciated by the music press. The New Musical Express termed it a 'turkey' stating, "Millions of Dead Stars write and perform a rotten record for the right reasons", whilst Sounds said "It's far from brilliant" and Melody Maker called it 'an anti-climax'. In 2010 one of the songs writers, Bob Geldof, confessed he was responsible for two of the worst songs in history and 'Do they know it's Christmas' was one of them. He added "It was all about generating money ... The song didn't matter: the song was secondary, almost irrelevant." And raise money it did, over £8 million to aid the famine victims, so I think we can forgive Bob.



The next Christmas themed number one arrived quickly for the very next Christmas in 1985. The song was ['Merry Christmas Everyone'](#) by Shakin' Stevens

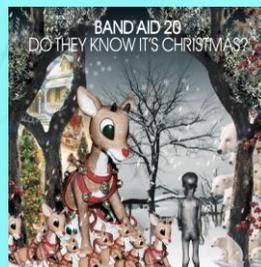
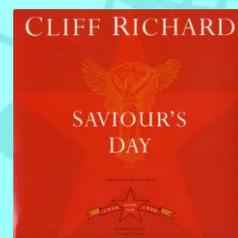
which had been recorded for release the previous Christmas. However, as the earlier mentioned 'Do they know it's Christmas' was expected to be such a big hit at Christmas 1984, Shakin' Stevens cancelled the scheduled release of his own Christmas single and held it over for twelve months. It proved a good decision because the record went to the top of the charts when it eventually reached the shops.

In 1988 Cliff Richard, the man who puts the Christ into our Christmas songs, arrived on the scene with ['Mistletoe and Wine'](#). However, once again everything was not as it seemed for a version of the song had already been performed twelve years earlier in a musical called 'Scraps', which was based on the Little Match Girl fairy-tale. The song was performed ironically in the musical after the little match girl had been kicked out into the bitter snow. In 1986 the musical transferred to television and was renamed [The Little Match Girl](#) with Twiggy performing the song whilst in the role a prostitute. Cliff Richard heard and liked the song, but insisted that some of the words must be changed to give it a more religious context before he'd record it. One of the songs composers, Leslie Stewart, was initially worried about the song losing the edge it had in its original context, but eventually he agreed to the lyric changes and another Christmas number one was born.



In 1989 a new version of 1984s ['Do they know it's Christmas'](#) topped the Christmas charts with a new cast of mainly British and Irish recording artists billed as 'Band Aid II'. It was another big fundraiser which was recorded and produced in an amazingly short time. Bob Geldof contacted record producer Pete Waterman about doing a new version on the 1st December. Waterman immediately cancelled his pending wedding and got straight into contacting various performers. Everyone hit the recording studio two days later on the 3rd December and the song was released to the public on the 11th December, just in time for the Christmas market.

In 1990 Cliff Richard was back at number one for Christmas, this time with [Saviour's Day](#), a song, which, unlike some of the others above, was actually written as a Christmas song. It's an odd choice of title though as Saviour's Day is actually an Islamic event held in honour of Wallace Ford Muhammad, the founder of the Nation of Islam (an Afro-American political party). Saviour's Day would be the last Christmas song to reach number one for fourteen years and



it was 2004 before the next one hit the top spot. It was another reworking of ['Do they know it's Christmas'](#) which had already topped the Christmas chart in 1984 and 1989. It was performed by Band Aid 20 another ensemble of recording artists, this time raising funds for the victims of fighting in the Darfur region of Sudan.

And, as it turned out, that that was the last Christmas themed single to reach number one at Christmas. Seventeen years later and here we are, still waiting for the next one.