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For the Record

Special Christmas albums make – and – keep spirits bright.

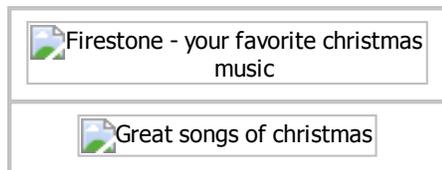
To some people, Christmas just wouldn't be Christmas without spending every free moment scouring the state for the perfect tree. For others, unwrapping a special ornament or whipping up a batch of cookies from a treasured family recipe conjures up the spirit of holidays past.

But for me, nothing grants such powerful access to days gone by as the music that played a noteworthy part in my childhood: the Christmas LPs that Akron's Goodyear and Firestone tire companies released annually during the 1960s and 70s.

I slip one of these discs onto my turntable and place the tone arm into the well-worn groove of the first track. The lofty strains serve as my passport to places that grow more precious with each visit.

Music has given my life constant rhythm. My mother tickled the ivories on our old upright with aplomb, and my father told stories dating back to the Roaring Twenties, when he played saxophone in his high school jazz band. But it was his record collection that made him the envy of the couples he and my mom socialized with. His preference was Big Band-era hits: Helen O'Connell and Bob Eberly's swinging version of "Tangerine" with the Jimmy Dorsey Orchestra; Glenn Miller's hypnotic "Moonlight Serenade"; Benny Goodman's frenzied "Sing, Sing, Sing" ... on and on it went. As the '40s slipped into the '50s and turned into the early '60s, my father added the jazzy sounds of the George Shearing Quintet, Nat King Cole's "After Midnight" sessions, and every album Frank Sinatra recorded ("Songs for Swingin' Lovers!" and "Point of No Return" had repeated encores on his 1955 Emerson console hi-fi.)

For me, transformed overnight into a Beatle maniac at age 7 after the group appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1964, my father's songs were the bane of my prepubescent existence — as distasteful as the dose of castor oil I endured for childhood ills, or the liver and onions that made all-too-frequent appearances at our supper table.



The feeling was mutual: My parents were none too pleased about my taste in music, either. As far as they were concerned, the Beatles' sound — a cacophony made by kids badly in need of haircuts — represented all that was wrong with the world. Although the Fab Four's American record company of choice was Capitol — the same one that Ol' Blue Eyes recorded under — they were clearly unwelcome in our house.

Musical battle lines were drawn, with no end to the conflict in sight.

Ironically, it was the Firestone and Goodyear Christmas LPs that came to the rescue, ultimately leading to a truce accompanied by harmonious understanding. For immersed as I was in everything Paul McCartney, I was also enamored with Julie Andrews. I had seen her onscreen in "Mary Poppins," the same year the Beatles invaded America. In my mind, she morphed into the big sister I didn't have: charming, talented and a patient listener. I wanted to be just like her, right down to her remarkable four-octave vocal range.

So, for my ninth birthday in November 1965, my parents saw an opportunity to encourage my burgeoning obsession with all things Andrews (and perhaps relegate my rock 'n' roll fixation to second-class status) by presenting me with Firestone's fourth holiday album, featuring the songstress' rendition of "The Bells of Christmas." Being a faithful Goodyear customer, my father also gave me a volume from the tire company's "Great Songs of Christmas" series, which included performances by Mary Martin, Mahalia Jackson, Mitch Miller — and Robert Goulet, who had starred with my favorite leading lady on Broadway in "Camelot."

If Robert Goulet was good enough to share the billing with Julie Andrews, I reasoned, he was good enough for me. I listened and began to appreciate the talents of stars who were not part of my constellation.

Thus began a family tradition.

Every year, I would receive the records as part of my birthday loot. Firestone released seven volumes, each sporting dust jackets resembling a wrapped Christmas gift with ribbon and bow. They emphasized sacred music that showcased Franco Corelli, Dorothy Kirsten, Leontyne Price, James McCracken and other renowned opera stars of the day. (Julie Andrews, Gordon MacRae, Vic Damone and Vikki Carr are a few of the notable exceptions.)

Goodyear's offerings included more than a dozen albums released well into the '70s. They changed with the times: Kate Smith, Bing Crosby, Johnny Mathis and Barbra Streisand made room for The Hillside Singers (who, when not wanting to "teach the world to sing in perfect harmony," were describing all that "Christmas Is") and the Carpenters.

Like the tires they produced, the records these companies released made the road between parent and offspring easier to

navigate.

My repertoire expanded to include cast recordings of the Broadway shows many of these holiday singers had headlined. And my father grudgingly conceded that Lennon and McCartney did, indeed, have talent (although, he was quick to add, Tony Bennett was the ultimate purveyor of the duo's songs).

Years passed. Vinyl gave way to 8-track, 8-track to cassette, cassette to compact disc.

But the Goodyear and Firestone albums endured. Today, each song brings back a moment in time, probably not much different from ones you, too, hold dear. I close my eyes and remember...

1966: The King Family sings "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" on Goodyear's "Great Songs of Christmas" Album Six, as my own family sits down to dinner. "Pass what's in front of you, and I'll bring the meat in," my aunt cheerfully commands from her kitchen. She's been gone for 23 years, but her voice reverberates through my mind like a beloved carol.

1967: Easy-listening sensation Jack Jones confirms on Firestone's Volume 6 (the one in baby-blue paper) that "This is that time of the year, a tinselly, glittery time," while I poke fun at my cousin's silvery aluminum fir, complete with whirling color wheel. (Today, replicas of these trees fetch a high price as sought-after collectibles, so it's clear who the joke's on now.)

1970: I receive a tape recorder for Christmas and proceed to drive everybody nuts by sticking it in their face and imploring them to say something. Goodyear's Album 10 plays in the background, with Petula Clark singing "The Happiest Christmas." At that time, in that year, it was.

Today, my voice is the only one on my homemade recording that hasn't yet been silenced.

As they do every holiday season, the waves of nostalgia ebb and flow. Some memories bring smiles. Others, a flood of tears.

But the records are a soothing reminder that the sights — and sounds — of the past are ours to hold on to forever.

Unlike the Beatles, the Firestone and Goodyear albums were never a worldwide phenomenon.

But they'll always be No. 1 on the Billboard chart of my heart.

Linda Feagler is senior editor of Ohio Magazine.

Making New Memories

West Chester's David Feinauer has learned first-hand how precious the Firestone and Goodyear promotional albums are to his customers.

Feinauer is the owner and president of DLF Music Transfer, specializing in copying the content of record albums that has become distorted with use onto compact discs that make it sound like new again. After receiving more than 50 requests for the music from these vintage holiday recordings, Feinauer collected a dozen of each volume, selected the most pristine cuts and compiled them in the order on which they originally appeared on the record. Dust-jacket art is also included.

"The emotional response when people hear these albums again is gratifying and at times overwhelming," Feinauer says. "As we all grow and evolve, we look for a snippet of memory. This music has the power to take us back."

For more information about DLF, call 513/274-1144 or visit www.firestoneyourfavoritechristmas.com or www.great-songs-of-christmas.com.

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