



JOHNCOWAN! Historically, Christmas albums give great singers an open invitation to fully flaunt their vocal chops. For that reason, fans of John Cowan may wonder why he's just now applying his famously big, expressive voice to traditional holiday tunes. Indeed, once fans and newcomers hear the glorious gift that is *Comfort and Joy*, Cowan's collection of Christmas chestnuts, they will ask what took him so long. !

But the roots-music veteran is glad he's waited until now, for he believes his interpretations of these songs-many of them age-old classics-gain power from life experience. "These songs mean something different after you've lived a while than they do when you're younger," Cowan says. "I've sung these lyrics for as long as I can remember. But I bring something different to them now: more memories, more emotions, more of the ups and downs of life. With each song, so many images come to mind, and that gives you something deep and real to attach to each lyric. It makes each song more personal."

The musical experience of Cowan and his collaborators also show in how these songs are played. From the nuanced arrangements of producer Walter Carter, through the subtly dynamic performances of Cowan's band and guests (including the fierce soul of mother-daughter harmony singers Bonnie and Bekka Bramlett, and the mighty Mike Farris) these well-known songs achieve a burnished glow and artistic depth that fill them with new meaning-while reminding everyone why they remain so popular year after year.

"We intentionally strayed from the original arrangements at different points," Cowan says. "Walter had a lot to do with that. We wanted to come at them somewhat fresh, from both an acoustic music perspective and from a soulful perspective. To me, because of that, I thought it was more important for me to stick with a traditional melodic approach to singing them. These

songs are just fine the way they are. That's why they strike a chord in us all." But fans of Cowan, who know what a magnificent and powerful voice he owns, will also notice how restrained he is at times. It makes those moments when he opens up and soars all the more impactful and memorable. "I've learned the power of holding back, of subtlety, over the years," Cowan says with a laugh. "It's better if you don't let it all go on every verse and every song. You learn that's not the best way to serve a song, despite the temptation to do that. That comes with aging and learning more about music as you do. Hopefully you get better at what you do."

Cowan first came to fame as the head-turning vocalist for one of the most important acoustic bands of his generation, the legendary New Grass Revival. As part of the band's most groundbreaking and famous lineup with mandolinist-fiddler Sam Bush, banjoist Bela Fleck and guitarist Pat Flynn-Cowan was the vocalist and bassist for NGR at a time when they broke barriers, mixed genres and pointed toward a new future for progressive acoustic music.

Along the way, Cowan took time to explore his diverse musical interests, taking on R&B, gospel, rock and bluegrass in a variety of side projects. After New Grass Revival ended in 1990, Cowan spent two years as bassist and vocalist for a veteran arena-rock band, the Doobie Brothers. Eventually, Cowan returned to his newgrass roots with the John Cowan Band, touring and recording with a strong lineup of outstanding acoustic music veterans and spirited newcomers. His band members ace flatpicker Jeff Autry, young fiddler extraordinaire Shad "Lightning" Cobb, rising mandolin star John Frazier and multidimensional percussionist Bryon Larrance all contribute significantly to *Comfort and Joy*.

As always, a potent list of guests eagerly lines up to share music with Cowan as well. Guitarist Tom Britt, bassist Charlie Chadwick, mandolinist Matt Flinner, saxophonist Jim Hoke, percussionist Kenny Malone and multi-instrumentalist John Mock all make indelible contributions. Bonnie and Bekka Bramlett wail alongside Cowan, as does soul-rocker Mike Farris and Cowan's step-daughter Jenny Anne Mannan, who wrote "Little Match Girl," a touching new song that appears on *Comfort and Joy*. "Bonnie Bramlett is someone I've listened to since I was very young, who helped form my identity as a musician and singer," Cowan says. "I loved rock, soul, gospel and acoustic music and that's what Delaney & Bonnie brought together so well. I was so into them. Now, to have her and her amazing daughter Bekka on record with me, that's a reward from this album that I will cherish forever. I think what they did on this album was magical."

Of course, a Christmas album gives Cowan a free-flowing opportunity to indulge his reputation for crisscrossing musical genres and ignoring stylistic boundaries. So there's the sweet soul of

his cover of Smokey Robinson's "Christmas Every Day," the gospel funk on a roof-raising version of Jesse Winchester's "Let's Make a Baby King," the Celtic touches on "Silent Night," the fiery newgrass picking of "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen," the funky acoustic reading of "Go Tell It on the Mountain" and the spare, acoustic backing Cowan's vocal splendor on "Ave Maria" and "O Holy Night."

Along the way, Cowan made a stunning discovery: That is, how much his father influenced him. A non-professional singer who performed at church and in barbershop quartets, Cowan's father ♦Richard Clement Cowan ♦always sang Christmas songs in the car as they'd travel down the highway to visit family for the holidays.

"He had this beautiful high baritone voice," Cowan recalls of a father who died in 1974, when his son was in high school. "During the making of the album, I kept hearing his voice and this real need to please him. I consciously tried to sing for, and like, my father. This realization was a real big deal to me. This whole project turned into an homage to my dad."

For all these reasons, Cowan came to an unexpected conclusion after finishing *Comfort and Joy*. "I think this is the best record I've ever made," Cowan says without reserve or hype. "I think I tapped into something in my heart, and with the great playing and arrangements, and these outstanding guest singers, and the emotions these songs stirred in me...I mean it when I say this is the best work I've done."

Releases **Comfort and Joy**



Release 10/13/2009 Tracklisting

1. Christmas Every Day
2. What Child Is This?
3. The Christmas Song
4. Little Match Girl
5. O Holy Night
6. Good News

7. Silent Night
8. God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen
9. I'll Be Home For Christmas
10. Let's Make A Baby King
11. Ave Maria
12. Go Tell It On The Mountain

Links & Resources

- [Fender Website](#)
- [Official MySpace](#)
- [Official Bryon Larrance Site](#)
- [Hit And Run Bluegrass](#)