

- 1) Why this album at this time? How does it differ from a traditional "holiday" album?

My touring partner and coproducer, Barry Walsh, and I both love Christmas music – some of the traditional stuff, especially very old choral works, and some of the pop stuff, especially Vince Guaraldi's classic "Charlie Brown Christmas" album – but most of it has been done to death. You can see people's eyes roll back when you mention making a Christmas album – they're thinking dear God, not another version of "Santa Baby" – so we were intrigued by the challenge of making a Christmas album with none of the hidebound, obligatory sentimentality which for me, ruins a lot of holiday records.

While we were on tour in the UK in January, we sat up in our hotel room with a guitar and an accordion and worked out "Christmas Time Is Here", the Vince Guaraldi/Lee Mendelson song. We recorded a demo of it there in the hotel room, and it really set the tone for everything that followed. We wanted to keep it very simple, a record that felt like it was recorded in a living room, which in fact, it was.

Another big inspiration for this album was an Over The Rhine Christmas show we went to in 2007. OTR has released not one, but two Christmas albums – and Barry and I were quite enchanted by the music, which was not the familiar carols and pop standards redone for the thousandth time, but a very original group of songs, most of which were unfamiliar to us. The impetus to do a Christmas album seemed to come more from their sense of wonder about the time of year – and that was something I could relate to. I love the true sense of mystery and beauty that surrounds Christmas and the deepest part of winter – but I don't like the forced sentiment that so often accompanies it. I just wondered if I could write some songs and collect some other ones that would convey this sense of mystery and beauty that I feel this time of year.

I also wondered if I could be honest, as a writer, about the sadness or melancholy that many people feel at Christmas. We all tend to reflect at the end of the year – and our reflections quite naturally include loss and regret as well as gratitude and happiness. It seems almost taboo to write a Christmas song that makes room for that sense of loss, but that's what I was going for in the song "Northern Lights", and on the record in general. I wanted to make a Christmas record that you could listen to at night when you're all alone and not come away feeling depressed but instead feeling moved by the whole of human experience, not just the happy parts.

- 2) A cut-by-cut on all the tracks. Anecdotes about writing the songs or why you chose to record certain songs

1. Song For A Winter's Night - I loved this old Gordon Lightfoot song and knew I wanted some songs that were about winter, not specifically Christmas. This one just seems to capture that melancholy feeling of a snowy winter night. It was one of the first songs we cut for the album and felt absolutely effortless. At that point I think we felt we were on to something.
2. Coventry Carol (prelude) – After we had recorded Coventry Carol, with its big, lush cathedral-like sound, it occurred to me that we could do a little prelude that was sonically the opposite. I was trying to get something that sounded like what you'd hear coming out of your radio late in December in the hinterlands of England just after Winston Churchill had given a wartime speech on the BBC. David Henry, who I am convinced can play anything, did all the horn parts.
3. Coventry Carol – This has always been one of my favorite carols. It's quintessentially English, of course – the title refers to Coventry, England, where it originated as part of a play depicting the Christmas story. The song centers on The Massacre of the Innocents by Herod – the killing of all young male children in Bethlehem. It was surprisingly easy to get "inside" the medieval lyrics because the tune is so mournful and sad. Barry came up with the beautiful, and very modern, interludes between verses.
4. I Wonder As I Wander – I changed, very slightly, the melody of this Appalachian folk carol to suite the more modal arrangement I had worked out on the guitar. As with so many of the traditional carols we recorded, I was more and more impressed with the lyrics as we went. The words to this song are lovely, very earthy and their Celtic roots show in places – "if Jesus had wanted for any wee thing,.. he surely could have it 'cause he was the king"... I started with a series of guitars and mandolins – very folky and mountain-y - but when Barry added the B3, the Wurlitzer and the clavietta, it added a sort of bluesy tone which I loved.
5. December Child – I was really interested in writing the story of Christmas from the very human point of view of Mary – how she must have felt as a mother, knowing her baby would not be hers for very long. Every mother feels a pang at this part of the story, I think – we all want to protect our babies from the world and we all know that we can't. Doug Lancio added beautiful guitars to this track.

6. (Charlie's) Angels – I had this crazy idea that I wanted to try doing the traditional carol “Angels We Have Heard On High”, only in 6/8 time and with a jazz feel. I don't know what got into my head but I was pretty sure about it. The only thing that didn't feel right was the “gloria's” – they just seemed superfluous. The feel was so close to the Vince Guaraldi song “Skating”, from our beloved “Charlie Brown Christmas”, that at some point we had the idea to put the lick from “Skating” in place of the “gloria's”. It worked. We knew we had to record this whole thing live, so we called Dave Francis up and he came over and played upright bass in our hallway. It took us awhile to get it right – the transitions are tricky – but once we got it we loved it. It's also the only track we put sleighbells on – and only at the very end, after much discussion! We called it (Charlie's) Angels as a little tip of the hat to Charles Schulz and his alter-ego Charlie Brown.
7. Waitin' On Mary – This is an old song of mine from 1993. I had an old, dated demo which I hated – full of synthesizers and devoid of space or vibe – but I still loved the song. I stripped it down to its basics and played a simple electric guitar part, which immediately took it to a new, better place. We just kept working on it – layering it, adding Doug Lancio's guitar and David Henry's cello. The lovely icing on the cake was having Matraca Berg and Suzy Bogguss come in and lend their angelic background vocals. We've been singing together for a couple of years now and I knew I wanted them on the album and this was the perfect song. I've always been struck by the link between the homeless of today and the Christmas story, which is really about two poor, destitute people trying to find their way in the world without much help. It's an old story, but it's still going on today.
8. In The Bleak Midwinter – Maybe my favorite cut on the record, and certainly one of my favorite lyrics. Based on a stunning poem by Christina Rossetti. We sort of considered this a bookend to “Coventry Carol”, and wanted to create a mysterious, cathedral-like sound. Barry's idea was to use organ rather than piano. Barry and I knew we had to capture this live as well, because there is no real strict sense of time in it. Since we were in separate rooms and couldn't see each other when we recorded it, we had to play off of each other's very subtle cues – my breathing and his grace notes. Once we had the right take, we sent it to Doug Lancio, who I think is in his finest hour here. Some of what he plays sounds like “angels and archangels”, and some of it sounds like a Grateful Dead jam. All of it sounds wonderful to me – I was ecstatic when I heard what he'd done.
9. Careful How You Go – I asked my songwriter friends to send me songs

that they might have that would be appropriate for this album, knowing that I wasn't going to have time to write more than a few myself, and also because I was curious to see what I'd get. I know some great songwriters. Kim sent me this song about a snowy night in London, which she wrote with Will Kimbrough. It charmed me immediately. It's got nothing to do with Christmas but everything to do with the magic in the air after a snowfall. Will was gracious enough to come over to the house and sing it with me, and put some bouzouki on it as well. I also played alto recorder on it, which gave the instrumental bridge a little English folk vibe.

10. Northern Lights – I felt this was the title song as soon as I wrote it. I've always been fascinated with the Northern Lights, though as many places as I've been where they're common I've still never seen them. But I think of them as one of the beautiful gifts nature gives us, seemingly for no other reason than to delight us. The end of the year is a reflective time, and fraught with stress and sadness for some people (maybe more than would admit it), and I was trying to get at this notion. I spent a very difficult Christmas the first year after my marriage broke up, but in some ways it was a beautiful experience, because I really had to examine what I wanted the holiday to mean. It was clearly not going to be a Hallmark/Norman Rockwell Christmas, so I had to really think about what was important to me. And it turned out that peace, and quiet, and reflection made for a lovely and meaningful, if at times melancholy Christmas Eve. Getting off the treadmill can be a huge relief. That's what I was getting at in the last verse: "we try to make up for mistakes that we've made/with presents and parties and Christmas parades".
11. Christmas Time Is Here – We worked out this song in a hotel room in Newcastle in the northeast of England. Newcastle has always been a pretty fertile place for us, creatively – I wrote "Jezebel" there from my last album. We both adored Vince Guaraldi's "Charlie Brown Christmas", and wanted to pay homage somehow. My guitar chords are quite a bit more naïve than Guaraldi's jazz chords, but they fit the arrangement, I think. We recorded this whole thing live with Barry in the living room, me in the office and Dave Francis in the hallway.
12. Silent Night – My grandmother, whose maiden name was Mohr, was fond of telling me that her ancestor, Joseph Mohr, wrote Silent Night. Mohr was an Austrian priest who presided over a small mountain church. The story goes that the organ broke on Christmas Eve, so this song, which he wrote with Franz Gruber, was first performed on the guitar. I had this idea that we could set the melody, which is very simple, to something resembling the Bach cello suite in G, which I love. It evolved and changed along the way, but the basic idea – recording it with just a voice and a solo cello,

sticks pretty closely to the way Joseph Mohr performed it that Christmas Eve in 1818. Barry came up with the instrumental passage in the middle. David Henry played it, beautifully.

3) An overview of the recording process of the project:

We had been talking about making a Christmas/winter/solstice album since the fall of 2007. We thought we would try doing it at home. We live in a very old house with very high ceilings, and we knew that it was a wonderful sounding house because Barry had recorded his solo piano album here. He'd just gotten a new Yamaha grand piano and we were anxious to try recording it. In order to get separation, I set up a sort of vocal booth in another room. I also had all the recording gear in there with me, so by default I was the engineer most of the time. For many of the tracks we just recorded piano and vocal, or sometimes piano, guitar and vocal, live. We never used any click tracks or anything to keep time, other than each other. We have played together so much and for such a long time that we can anticipate each other's sense of timing, and we both prefer music that breathes a little, quickening here and pausing there in the natural places.

We also brought in all of our "toys" – a Leslie speaker cabinet for the organ (I also played guitar through it on "December Child"), assorted electric and acoustic guitars, mandolins, my alto recorder, Turkish finger cymbals, a set of bamboo chimes Barry had given me for Christmas, various percussion instruments and anything else we could find. We found the best sounding cardboard box we had and used it for a drum. We had a couple of very good microphones and some pretty good ones. We experimented endlessly with where to put them, how to record things like Turkish finger cymbals (stereo, it turns out). It was like having a big sandbox to play in – tremendously fun, and we felt like the only rule was that there were no rules. We could really only record at night, because we live downtown and it can be noisy during the day. So after dinner most nights we'd have a glass of wine, light a few candles and sit down to try to "catch fireflies" as Barry says. People always ask us - we didn't put up any Christmas decorations. It wasn't necessary, the music put us both in the mood.

When we had done as much as we could at home, we gave a few tracks to Doug Lancio to put his guitar magic on, and then took it all to David Henry's studio so David could overdub his cello and horns and begin mixing. Being the chief engineer, I was tremendously relieved to hear the tracks we'd recorded at home in a "real" studio, sounding great and with no apparent operator error.

- 4) Anything else you think would be good for the press to know. Hopefully, we'll be telling them that there will be some proceeds going to Room At The Inn but we'll have more on that when we meet with them.

The idea for doing something involving a Christmas charity came from my assistant, Brian Horner. Brian felt that it would be a great way to connect people to both the music and the cause and maybe foster a sense of giving where it's really needed, which always feels good. I loved the idea, and I had known Fr. Charles Strobel and the Room In The Inn program for years. On Christmases past I had played benefits for RITI a couple of times. I was always struck by the very real, practical, roll-your-shirtsleeves-up work that Charlie does with the homeless, and by the grace and dignity that is always present with him. I would guess that grace and dignity are in short supply when you're homeless. I got more excited about the collaboration when I realized that the song "Waitin' On Mary" was really a perfect fit, the story of two homeless people from centuries ago. Charlie is a friend, a neighbor and one of Nashville's brightest lights, and I'm thrilled to be involved with Room In The Inn.