

Confessions of a Hell's Elf

John Leeder

I guess I have to stick to my threat to tell you about Hell's Elves [28:4, p. 27], and an issue devoted to grassroots musical happenings seems an appropriate spot for it. You can't get any more grassroots than Hell's Elves! Mind you, it seems odd to be writing about Christmas customs in May, but no more odd than recording Christmas songs in June, as we did last year.

The company I work for is a shirtsleeve sort of place, even though we sit at desks and bring professional skills to bear on our material. Maybe we have to be offbeat in order to preserve our sanity in the face of the desperately boring content of the stuff we work with, or maybe only offbeat people have the combination of rarely-called-for skills and ability to exist without substantial financial recompense required to survive in our particular industry. In any event, the company has often provided shelter for musicians in need of a day job. For some of us this day job has turned into a career, to use the term loosely.

The non-standard esthetic applies to our Christmas customs as well. One time we had a manager who dreamed of having a proper Christmas party, with dinner and dancing, so we dutifully rented a community hall, and got in taped music, and catered rubber turkey, and an artificial Christmas tree. Almost nobody went, and of those who went, almost nobody danced, and most people sat around trying to act less bored than they felt, and kept glancing at their watches to see if it was late enough to flee without antagonizing the manager whose dreams of a proper Christmas party were being shattered. In other words, it was what most companies would consider a normal Christmas party.

The next year the manager tacitly admitted defeat, and we went back to what we'd done in the past. Which was to party in our own way. And over the years, a big part of the way we mount a Christmas party has turned out to be—Hell's Elves.

I'm not sure whose idea it was in the first place, but I think the thought sprang from the fertile mind of Colin Braithwaite, a hell of a picker in his day, who has since moved to Toronto and lost his hair, and as a result has given up playing the guitar. One of the minor tragedies of our time. Whatever, it was (I think) Braithwaite's brainwave to put together a band from the numerous closet musicians in the office, and work up a set of Christmas carols. Which we did. I think the name "Hell's Elves" was of his coining as well. At that time our staff included a drummer, a rock lead guitarist and a country bassist, so we did a standup set with rehearsed arrangements and everything, and it was a lot of fun. First and only time I've worked with a drummer, and some of the arrangements arising from that set are still in use today. (The banjo intro on "Winter Wonderland," for one—a thing of beauty!)

What we discovered, though, was that after the formal set, people wanted to just sit around and sing Christmas

carols. Luckily, some of us could improvise on our instruments, and between us we mostly could put enough verses of a carol together that we could do justice to it in a singalong situation. So we had a great old sing, and decided to carry it on in subsequent years.

Next year our drummer and our lead guitarist got real jobs and were lost to us, beginning a trend of the character of the group being dictated by personnel changes from year to year, depending on who was still working for us. Another trend was that as the years went by our performances became less and less formal. This past year our group consisted of a bass player, a banjoist/octave mandolinist (both veterans of the original group), a couple of keyboard players, several acoustic guitarists (one of whom also dates back to the original lineup), and a bunch of people who just like to sing carols. We did a sitdown performance which mostly consisted of taking requests from the audience and leading singalongs. That seems to be what the people want most, and that's what we give them.

Being a publishing company, over the years we have developed our own carol book. It's amazing how many different versions of the same carol are floating around out there, especially of those which are translated from other languages. To begin with, an obliging member of the text processing department heroically keyed in the complete Readers' Digest Christmas Songbook, which turned out to be a major mistake, as it's about the worst for missing verses,



NEW IMPROVED CARSWELL CHRISTMAS SONGBOOK.

illogical phrasing, incomprehensible chords and banal translations. It also leaves out a lot of what Hell's Elves consider to be the best Christmas songs. Since then, new editions of the carol book have appeared most years, each taking further steps along the way to rectifying the damage that the Readers' Digest hath wrought upon the body of our Christmas lore. Our editions are often decorated with irreverent drawings as well.

The truly important thing about Hell's Elves is the "rehearsals." The actual Christmas party performance is an anticlimax. Starting usually in early October, the Elves get together once a week at somebody's house. Usually mine, as my wife and son are longtime Hell's Elves, and it's easier than trying to pick a different place every time, and my tiny living room makes for an intense experience, and some people like to play with my dog. A non-Elf manager provides his homemade beer, and we dutifully sample it before switching to a beverage which we don't have to open over the sink in case of froth explosion. (Just kidding, John—it's wonderful! He might be reading this...) Outsiders think we're rehearsing, and we get some mileage out of that on bulletin board memos, but actually we just sing everybody's favourite carols, until we've gone through the songbook enough times that the newcomers are confident and the veterans are satiated. Curiously enough, attempts to hold Hell's Elves "briefing" or "debriefing" sessions, singing songs other than Christmas carols, haven't really caught on. Ditto for attempts to teach new carols that people haven't heard before. Our members seem to enjoy the time-tested material most of all.

Christmas music is one of the largest bodies of shared song repertoire in our society, although most people don't stop and think of it in that way. Most people know at least the melody and a verse or two of most Christmas songs. Most people enjoy singing songs with which they have some familiarity, and singing them in a non-intimidating situation. Most instrumentalists, even folks who are just learning their instrument, enjoy playing tunes they know, especially if they have easy-to-follow chord sheets in keys pre-selected for singability, and some underpinning from other musicians with some experience. The hidden agenda in Hell's Elves is an opportunity for people to enjoy singing and playing familiar material in a forgiving situation, and to develop as singers and players in the course of providing enjoyment for others. People who wouldn't dream of performing in front of an audience find themselves perfectly comfortable in being part of a Hell's Elves set. Every year Hell's Elves are an integral part of our office Christmas party, and everybody compliments us afterwards, saying how it's the best performance ever, and we thank them gravely and wonder how they failed to notice all the glitches, such as last year when the synthesizer wasn't in concert pitch, and we spent half the set trying to get the other instruments in tune with it, when with one push of a button we could have put the synthesizer right instead. Then we go back to enjoying our other quaint company Christmas party customs, which space, time and potential embarrassment of people in authority preclude telling you about here.



Five original Hell's Elves; Jim Smith, Joe Wilderson, Colin Braithwaite, Gerry Murdry, and John Leeder

Walter White was one of the callers for the square dances. He knew dozens of dances and took great delight in watching when two unlikely to agree or people not on speaking terms were opposite each other. He called so they would have to be partners!

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