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The stories of the Christmas hits

By Liam Allen

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A handful of songs released at Christmas in years gone by have gone on to become perennial festive classics.

In previous years we asked Wizzard's Roy Wood about I Wish It Could Be Christmas, quizzed Pogue Jem Finer about Fairytale of New York, Slade's Noddy Holder about Merry Xmas Everybody and Jona Lewie about Stop The Cavalry.

This year, Greg Lake and Chris De Burgh reveal the stories behind their Christmas classics.

Greg Lake - I Believe In Father Christmas

How did the song come about?

I wrote the guitar riff first and I was trying to think what the song could be about.

I stumbled on the thought that the song Jingle Bells fitted over the guitar lick, so me and my co-writer Peter Sinfield thought maybe it could be a Christmas song.

If you whistle the song of Jingle Bells over it, you'll see that it fits.

As a child, Christmas was a lot to do with forgiveness - if people in the neighbourhood had

fallen out, well that was the time when they buried the hatchet.

There was always some consideration for the old granny across the road.

That seemed to have disappeared as I grew older.

It was a serious song lamenting the fact that Christmas had moved away from being a season of goodwill and peace on earth to all men to being about commerciality.

Were you trying to write a big Christmas hit?

No, all of a sudden I got this phone call and the record company decided to release it as a single.

That was quite a surprise, partly because it was done with a symphony orchestra and using symphony orchestras wasn't really done.

I think if I'd have sat down and set out to write a Christmas song, the last thing I would have done was to have a cold look at the realities of Christmas in that sense.

Do you get bored with it?

No, I'm proud that it's become a national institution.

When I hear the track out and about it gives me a warm feeling - I have become part of Christmas.

What are your memories of making the video?

I can't remember which bright spark came up with the idea but they thought, ah Christmas, religion, religion - lets film it in Israel.

We filmed with Bedouins who were very sweet people.

Afterwards, they asked me to join them for dinner and I said that would be fantastic.

But one of the military advisers we were with came up and said: "You're not going, they'll kill you for your Rolex."

He said they would be as nice as anything and then one of them would decide that was it and

stab you.

Has the song provided you with your pension?

I'm sure people have this vision that, every Christmas, I sit there and the royalties start pouring through the door, it's not like that.

I couldn't afford to buy a Caribbean island and beggar off forever, you know, but it's a nice earner.

Chris de Burgh - A Spaceman Came Travelling

How did the song come about?

I seem to recall it was 1974, I'd just signed my first recording contract with A&M records, I was staying at a friend's flat because I was broke.

It was a very hot August day and I'd been reading the book Chariots of the Gods? by Erich von Daniken.

It made me think, what if the star of Bethlehem was a space craft and what if there is a benevolent being or entity in the universe keeping an eye on the world and our foolish things that we do to each other?

Secondly, I'm a great fan of the Irish poet William Butler Yeats.

From his great poem The Second Coming came the idea that every 2,000 years or so there would be a major cataclysmic event happening.

And he felt that the birth of Christ was such an event and then 2,000 years later there would be a similar event.

So I had this in my fevered brain, all these ideas jumping about.

How did that chorus develop?

I wanted this extra-terrestrial music.

I write in a very filmic way - I could see the nativity scene, the thing hovering over and I could see the shepherds in the fields and this weird, ethereal music was drifting into the air and they were "what the heck is that"?

Were you trying to write a big Christmas hit?

Never, that's the weird thing - I was very naive and I had no ideas about trying to write a hit record - I was just pleased to be a songwriter.

I also had the idea that children would want to sing it and so it turned out.

Do you get bored of it?

I frequently perform it, usually around the run-up to Christmas and no, never get bored of it. And it's like people say to me, "Lady In Red, do you never get bored singing that?"

But the thing is it's nothing to do with me, I'm actually performing for other people's enjoyment.

Has it provided you with your pension?

No, I've written 250 songs, the annual PRS returns are always very substantial and it makes me smile when I look at songs that I'd completely forgotten about and I've earned one pound or three and sixpence.

But Spaceman is a part of it, that's for sure, but I wouldn't say it's the pension - no. I would point more at the bulk of the work rather than one particular song.

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