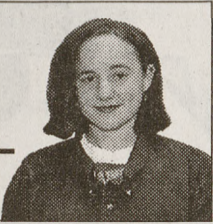


## New holiday compilations lack Christmas spirit

**T**is the Christmas season, a holiday that in the past was a time to celebrate the birth of Jesus and give gifts in memory of that birth but is now just another money-making opportunity.

LIBE GOAD

COLUMNIST



It is not a new story. As far back as I can remember, the nightmare before Christmas haunted shoppers in mid-October. Storekeepers remove pumpkins and witches that have been on display since August and fill the emptied spaces with jolly Santas, Christmas trees and mice wearing little red Santa hats. Old merchandise gets updated with red bows and more little red Santa hats.

There is something interesting about Christmas decor. No matter how ugly or impractical something may be, Christmas packaging makes it a hot commodity for the stressed-out holiday shopper.

I guess that is why people give fruitcakes to their friends. One look at the holiday scene on the tin container, and they are hooked. Food unfit for most palates suddenly makes a great gift. My mother once called this the fruitcake phenomenon.

The phenomenon applies to other Christmas merchandise, especially to the host of musical Christmas compilations that have flooded music stores over the last five years.

There are the usual John Denver albums, jazz albums and classic caroling songs.

But this year, things have gotten out of control. In the tradition of rock and Christmas combinations found on *A Very Special Christmas* and *A Very Special Christmas, Vol II*, this musical holiday season is filled with overrated rock-Christmas compilation albums.

Unfortunately, the new music does not do much more for Christmas than the *Very Special* albums. Maybe it has to do with the sound of thrashing guitars on "Silent Night." Or it's the combination of great musicians like Sinead O'Connor with the likes of Michael Bolton. Bad music stifles the Christmas spirit, and buying it is a definite symptom of the fruitcake phenomenon.

The albums can speak for themselves. From the alternative-rock vein comes *You Sleigh Me*, a compilation featuring the talent of Tori Amos and Juliana Hatfield. The album appears promising, but it's not. The other artists leave great holes that Amos and Hatfield cannot fill.

The same for *The Edge of Christmas*, an alternative Christmas compilation with an odd combination of artists such as Queen, the Ramones and Pat Benetar. It sounds like it would make a great album any other time of the year, but Queen singing Christmas songs? No sir.

My favorite of these was *Punk Rock Christmas*, an album that sports a cover of Santa carrying a bag with D.O.A. printed on it.

Funny, Christmas used to be a happy time of the year.

Speaking of laughter, the Most Creative New Album award goes to *Tales from the Crypt: Have Yourself a Scary Little Christmas*. The television show, a Twilight Zone take-off, joined in the spirit and released its unique collection of Christmas carols. On the cover, the corroding crypt keeper dons a Santa hat and John Lennon-esque sunglasses.

Is this what Christmas has become, a decaying skeleton instead of a pleasantly plump Santa?

The album features twisted versions of traditional Christmas songs like, "We Wish You Would Bury the Misses," "Should Old Cadavers be Forgotten," and the most grotesque of all, "Deck the Halls with Parts of Charlie."

Here are a few lyrics: "Stockings stuffed with ears and fingers / Chopped from all those caroling singers / Who needs mistletoe and holly, when we can just dismember Wally?"

Maybe people think this is funny, but when I picked the album, it reminded me what a consumer nightmare the holiday has become.

Don't be fooled. These albums aren't worth the money, and if you think so, you're probably experiencing the fruitcake phenomenon.

Instead, grab a cup of eggnog and a copy of Harry Connick Jr.'s Christmas album, and celebrate the season with spirit and style.

## Students gain global perspective through class's partnerships

By Rachel Barry  
THE BATTALION

**A** restaurant booth has proven to be a comfortable means of transportation for students to travel the world.

Kathleen Ferrara, an associate professor of linguistics, with several other professors on campus, has given her students the chance to visit with students from other countries as part of a class requirement. The Conversation Partner Project pairs a foreign student who speaks little or no English with an American student. Through weekly meetings, the partners discuss topics ranging from local food to customs in other countries. The most common meeting place for the students is area restaurants.

"It's kind of a way to armchair travel," Ferrara said.

Ashley Jensen, a senior Spanish major, had to take a linguistics class for her major and thought this one sounded like fun. Her partner, Teerawit Limtoongsakul, is from Thailand.

Jensen said she has made herself available to answer questions he has about the United States, since he has only been here for three months.

"The weather is the same in Thailand as here — sticky and humid," she said. "There's a lot of American influence over there, because he recognizes American movie stars."

The discussions often focus on a subject in the class the students are taking, making the lessons more tangible.

"They can ask questions they wouldn't get answered in a book," Ferrara said.

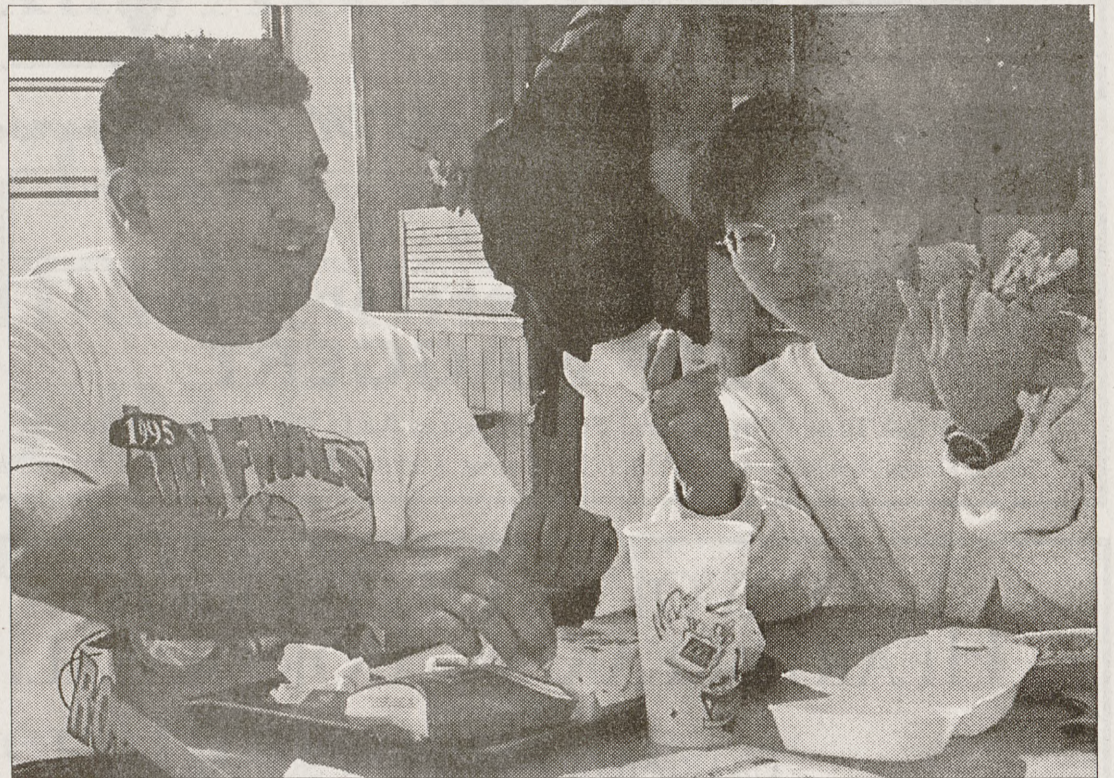
Jensen said communication has not been a problem, although she and her partner's languages are very different.

"Sometimes we both stare at each other blankly, but he speaks English well," she said.

Students are required to meet with their partners for at least for an hour a week for eight weeks. The students have to keep a journal during the two months and write a research paper on their experience. The focus of the paper is a topic the students choose from their discussions with the foreign student.

"It's a fun, open-ended topic," Ferrara said. "People can tailor it to their own interests."

Ferrara said the discovery of cultural differences often serves as a mirror for Ameri-



J.R. Guajardo and Ricky Chang meet in McDonald's for their bi-weekly visit to learn more about one another's culture.

can students to find surprising traits in their own culture.

"The foreign students get to learn our ways, and we get to put our ways into perspective," she said.

The English Language Institute is responsible for pairing foreign and American students for the class. The ELI is an institution on college campuses around the country and is where foreign students first go when they arrive at A&M. They are placed in intense English classes to help prepare them for classes they will be taking.

"Listening skills are taught, as well as reading, writing and translating," Ferrara said.

Jensen said the experience helped her understand what A&M students from other countries must feel like.

"I can see how it would be difficult for someone who's never been here to adjust to culture shock," she said.

Finding a place to fit in on campus can be difficult for a newcomer from another country. Ferrara said the program helps foreign students adjust.

"Breaking out of your own encampment is not an easy thing," she said.

She said that after spending eight hours with each other, the students are able to become closer friends.

"You become kind of a part of someone's life," she said. "You get to see them in a variety of different relations."

Ferrara said the importance of the project goes beyond leaning the technicalities of language and differences in cultures.

"This project is largely based with the recognition that language and culture cannot be extracted from each other," she said.

Ferrara taught at the Koryama campus in Japan and said it taught her how to learn about herself from other cultures.

"It strengthened my own beliefs by making me reexamine them," she said.

She said she wants to give that same opportunity to her students.

"This allows people instant access to a person from a different cultural background," she said.

Because the new marketplace is much more global, she said students can gain the ability to interact and better understand other cultures through the project.

"It builds confidence so they can relate across a cultural boundary," she said.

## Brooke sparks women's presence in rock

By Amy Uptmor  
THE BATTALION

There's not a lot of room in women's music right now for yet another dynamic songstress. Nevertheless, some room needs to be cleared for Jonatha Brooke, who has made her presence known with her debut album, *Plumb*.

What is so amazing about Brooke is that her style comes from almost every genre of music. Folk, blues, jazz and rock are all equally represented on *Plumb*. The album even finishes off with "Andrew Duffy's Jig," an Irish jig.

Brooke's voice is equally global in its sound. Her voice most strongly resembles Sarah McLachlan, but "Where Were You?" has the uncanny feel of a Bonnie Raitt song. Both sounds, as extremely different as they are, work nicely together. The end result is beautiful and full of sincere emotion.

This incredible voice delivers lyrics that are often nothing short of pure genius. Brooke has mastered the viewpoint of a heartbroken lover so many songwriters have attempted to por-

### ALBUM REVIEW

Jonatha Brooke and the Story  
**Plumb**  
GRP Records  
★★★★ (out of five)



tray in their music.

Many of Brooke's songs read like something Alanis Morissette would write after years of therapy. She often sings of lost love and emptiness, but the songs are written with a refreshing presence — inner strength. A perfect example of this is "Nothing Sacred," with lines like "I will turn my back to the wind in your wake, to the cold shards / Of the lives strewn behind you."

Even more powerful is "Inconsolable," the ultimate tale of mourning over the proverbial "one that got away." But this song is more cathartic than sad. Brooke sings "And I did think that you were the one / But now I see what you've become," and issues the warning that "There will be no prayers on your return / And there will be no party thrown." Such a viewpoint is a bit of a novelty in women's music, and

it's long overdue presence is more than welcomed.

By far, the high point of this album is "Paris," a chillingly beautiful memoir of a lover in Paris that took away almost everything — except her pride. Brooke sings, "I walk with my head held high and naked in the sun / Claiming these streets for myself, again."

Brooke's backup band, The Story, should receive equal credit for the power of this album. The band offers elegant violins, classical and folk guitar and a bluesy piano that adds to the mood Brooke is trying to evoke. The Story's music is so soulful that listening to some of the songs cannot help but bring forth the image of Brooke singing in a smoky piano bar tucked away somewhere deep in Manhattan. The mood is strong, but then again, so is the music.

Brooke may combine music from almost every end of the spectrum to create her sound and style, yet she has created something that is all her own. In the end, no comparisons can really be made. Brooke is a truly



Brooke

unique, talented singer who embodies the spirit of a classic, soulful artist. Although she may not be in a league of her own, she is a standout. It is only appropriate that the picture on the back cover of *Plumb* is one of Brooke standing alone in a spotlight, because that is exactly where she belongs.

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