WOO IN REVIEW: A Colbert Christmas: The Greatest Gift of All!
Soundtrack available on iTunes ($7.99), DVD available in stores everywhere ($11.99), and check listings on Comedy Central

This season, instead of waiting for *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* to come on network television, you

might try heading up to Barnes and Noble to purchase a copy of *A Colbert Christmas: The Greatest Gift of All*. That is, if you're one of the people who can stand Christmas sentiment (and if you aren't, I'll be getting to you momentarily). And yeah, I realize it's not Christmas anymore in many parts of the world. But for all I know, you're still flipping through the channels awaiting that part where the other reindeer make fun of Rudolph and he responds by letting out a phlegmy-sounding wail. Don't worry, *A Colbert Christmas* isn't your standard blaring *O Holy Night* type of Christmas special. It is edgy, controversial, and might even piss off skeptics.

Let me go ahead and throw this out there: I think that *The Colbert Report* is one of the best news sources in the entire universe. I'm not even kidding here. And according to this poll, viewers of *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* are some of the best informed individuals in the United States when it comes to current events. Sorry, Fox News, as much as I have come to love Shep Smith.

A Colbert Christmas meets the same fantastic standards, mostly because it isn't the mind-numbing fortune cookie wrapped in tinsel that, I'm sorry to say, I think *A Charlie Brown Christmas*

is. If I want the fact that we're supposed to be brotherly toward one another shoved down my throat, I will have a gorgeous twenty-two year old bodybuilder force-feed me pages of the New Testament
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Colbert's Christmas special is great because it's relevant. There are actual current event issues (the war on Christmas), philosophical questions (are skeptics and cynics sort of a-holes?), and Elvis Costello gets eaten by a bear (and it's awesome).

A Colbert Christmas follows the basic guidelines of any Christmas special – the titular character is in danger of missing Christmas, or losing sight of what Christmas is really about, and is visited by a host of celebrities who bring Christmas with them right to the doorstep and show its true meaning through song. Colbert's special features guest appearances by
Willie Nelson
, Jon Stewart,
Feist
,
Toby Keith
,
John Legend
, Elvis Costello, and
George Wendt
.

But an important thing to remember before I get to the real point of this review is that judging anything about Stephen Colbert's views on politics and belief systems is nearly impossible. The real Stephen Colbert is not the television Stephen Colbert, and it's hard to distinguish what's real and what isn't when watching his show.

Not only that, but the songs weren't written by Colbert. They were written by David Javerbaum and
Adam Schlesinger
who are, in my opinion, musical gods (seriously, I've listened to the soundtrack so many times now that I think iTunes is on the verge of an explosion). Javerbaum, who is the Executive Producer of
The Daily Show

, was quick to remind me, both before and after nearly everything he said when I spoke with him, that the show is a Christmas special – meaning that it's going to have all the cliché and all the tropes and what you're watching might be serious – or it might not.

But it's because of the potential seriousness and the very real edginess that the show makes me feel mildly uncomfortable – even though I enjoyed it. It reaches beyond a Hallmark greeting into territory usually reserved for drunken egg nog debate. Not to say that the show isn't peppered with saccharine. It is. But it doles out the Sweet n Low with a big fat dose of irony. The only unfortunate side is that the irony seemed to be utterly lost on whoever timed up the laugh track. You'll get pulled out of the show every five seconds as the fake audience laughs hysterically at what can only be called “absolutely nothing.” At first I believed the laugh track was intended to be ironic, and it could have even been funny the first nine thousand times. But after a while, it was so grating it took me straight out of the action. Javerbaum told me, though, that the DVD has the option of watching the special minus the laugh track.

Returning to the point, though.

One of the songs, toward the end of *A Colbert Christmas*, is the very catchy somewhat melancholy tune *There Are Much Worse Things to Believe In*, sung by Elvis Costello and Stephen Colbert. It features a lot of lyrics that the skeptical community will probably resent, and therefore I'd like to devote some time to it. A lot, actually. Let's take a look at all the lyrics, with a mix of me and Javerbaum as well. (And be sure to check out the video to the right.)

Elvis: There are cynics, there are skeptics,
There are legions of dispassionate dyspeptics
Who regard this time of year as a maudlin, insincere,
Cheesy, crass commercial travesty of all that we hold dear.

Stephen: When they think that,
Well, I can hear it,
But I pity them their lack of Christmas spirit,
For in a world like ours, take it from Stephen:
There are much worse things to believe in.

“That song, like every other song, is part of a Christmas special,” Javerbaum said.

Though Javerbaum wrote the song, he was a bit reticent to discuss his actual belief systems.

“I always feel like it's a mistake in general for people behind the scenes... to outright say what they believe about something,” he said.

But let's, for a moment, pretend that this song is about real beliefs. Because no matter how much I might want to write it off as some cute little melody from a Christmas special, there is some grain of truth in it somewhere that I cannot quite identify.

Something that I have never understood (that we can battle about in comments later) is the tendency of some people to insist that the rest of the world believe what they do. For instance, around once every four months a group of teenage Baptists comes to my door and 'saves' me (this does not require a belief in Christ, only saying a prayer that they've actually typed out on a card). Whether or not I believe in Jesus (or want to) is irrelevant because they're going to come a-knocking anyway armed with their pamphlets about how much God loves me. So, they want me to believe what they do. I don't understand why they want that, but alright.

Of course, if I said it should be illegal or unethical or that I should be allowed to pull a shotgun on them for coming to my door, then I would be doing the same thing – because they believe that they are supposed to spread God around like mayonnaise on wheat. If I make it impossible for them to come to my door, then I am insisting that they believe as I do.

By the way, every time the Baptists come to my door, I wind up getting saved by Jesus. Not because I feel Jesus stirring within my toenails or wherever it is I'm supposed to feel that, but because I know those teenagers think they are doing something kind and good, and who am I to slam the door in their faces for that? If they brought me a cherry pie instead of Jesus, hell, I'd eat it. The only way I wouldn't eat a pie someone brought me is if it was pecan, since I am allergic. But see, I'm not allergic to someone's belief in Jesus.

And the first part of the song seems kind of relevant in that way. I have heard people insist that it is better to say “Happy Holidays” than “Merry Christmas.” Why is it better? Because Christmas is associated with Christians? So are hard-boiled eggs with paint and The Spanish Inquisition . That doesn't mean I'm going to stop putting people on the rack.

Moving right along with the song...

There's another part that I think the skeptical community might take issue with, and that's the following.

Elvis: A redeemer and a savior.
An obese man giving toys for good behavior

Stephen: The faith in what might be and the hope that we might see
The answer to all sorrow in a box beneath the tree...
Find them foolish?
Sentimental?

Stephen: Well you're clearly none too bright,

Both: So we'll be gentle.

Stephen: Don't even try to start vaguely conceivin'

Both: Of all much worse things to believe in.

Stephen: Believe in the judgment, believe in Jihad.
Believe in a thousand variations on a dark and spiteful god.

Elvis: You've got your money, you've got your power,
You've got your science sayin' the planet's going to end within the hour.

I asked Javerbaum what he meant by that last lyric. We all know that science definitely has a place. But does it have a place in things like Christmas?

"Science... well, is scientific. And can also be horribly depressing." Javerbaum said.

And that brings me to another thing that irritates me during the holiday season. There are some people who go out of their way to say "Happy Winter Solstice " or whatever. If you want to celebrate a freakin' holiday, do me a favor: Celebrate the holiday. Don't keep twisting and twisting until it's unrecognizable. Celebrating Christmas does not mean that you love Jesus. It means that you love presents. And go ahead and tell me the history of Christmas and how it actually has something to do with the winter solstice. Don't care. No one goes around saying "Happy Lunar Eclipse ."

Now, none of this means that I'm blind to how wonderful science is. And I disagree with the 'You're clearly none too bright' line. It is unnecessarily antagonistic. But then again, so much of what we do is as well.

I think that a lot of my feelings toward this song are based around my perception that many individuals who do not believe in God seem to find other people who do stupid. That really drives me crazy. But moving on.

Stephen: You've got your dreams that don't come true.

Elvis: You've got the ones that do.

Stephen: And then you've got your nothin'.

Both: Some folks believe in nothin'.
But if you believe in nothin',
Then what's to keep the nothing from coming for you?

"The standpoint would be..." Javerbaum said, "The clarification is: If you don't believe in God... there is nothing to keep the abyss from getting you."

This part of the song sounds a whole lot like Nietzsche . You know, the whole 'When you look into the abyss; the abyss also looks into you,' thing. And here I'll give points back to the non-believers in this made-up boxing match in my mind. Nothing can't come for you because nothing can't think and isn't a physical being. An abyss of nothingness can't get you – that's all just a personification. It's the type of thing a believer would think of non-believers – that their non-existent hound of hell was going to rear its non-existent head and bite you on your all-too-existent ass.

It's not that I agree with the concept of nihilism . I think nihilism is about as rewarding as a diet based solely upon saltine crackers . It's just that the lyrics here aren't necessarily the best way to represent that. Of course, an argument against a belief in nothing wouldn't be a couple lines of a song. It would be the collected works of Martin Heidegger . But Javerbaum (and I'm sure many of you will agree with him) seems to think there's some comfort in nihilism; or at least finds it understandable.

"If I were an atheist – and I may or may not be — I would take far more comfort in thinking the woes of this world are happening for no reason whatsoever, nothing personal, than that some omnipotent God is being a dick to us." Javerbaum said.

But for me, that's not what it's about. It isn't so much that I'm willing to use a god as a giant celestial shoulder to cry on as it is that I would prefer it if, when I thought of something funny whilst alone, I would feel that someone else was in on the joke. Do I believe there is? I haven't the foggiest. If there is a god, he probably doesn't find me funny at all.

I Am America (And so can you!) by Stephen Colbert