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## Christmas hits: are Slade, Boney M and the Pogues made for life?

Every December records sell, kerching kerching, but do the artists live happily ever after?



**Simon Hattenstone**  
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Noddy Holder, Don Powell, Dave Hill and Jim Lea of Slade perform on a Christmas TV show in December 1973. Photograph: Getty Images. Click on the picture to see those boots...

In [Nick Hornby's](#) novel *About A Boy*, Will Freeman never has to work again after his dad wrote a huge [Christmas](#) hit. Every December records sell, kerching kerching, radios blast, kerching kerching, adverts carry the song, kerching kerching, and he lives happily ever after. But is it true? Are those lucky enough to have written a classic Christmas hit living in clover?

The biggest non-charity Christmas hit in the UK is [Mary's Boy Child](#) by Boney M. It's easy to forget how successful Boney M were in the 70s. No other artist has two songs in the UK's all-time top 10 singles chart – [Rivers Of Babylon/Brown Girl In The Ring](#) at No 5 and [Mary's Boy Child](#) at 10.

[Liz Mitchell](#), who sang both songs, now performs as "the voice of Boney M". "You must be loaded," I say when we meet. Mitchell, who has been smiling and laughing, looks as if she's about to break into tears when I mention royalties. Has she worked out how much she makes every year from the Christmas single? "If I was to spend time working out what the record company got – and those in that team of people around us – I would lose my mind." It's not only the Christmas single, she says, there's also a [Boney M Christmas album](#). "Every Christmas we make platinum with it." They must make lots from that, then? "We don't. Our royalty statement has been minimal and menial. Really. We don't collect more than a per cent of a per cent of a per cent of a per cent of a per cent of a per cent. We get maybe the seventh of 1%." No wonder she's upset. In the unlikely event that Boney M sold £1m-worth of Christmas records a year, the four band members would receive £357.14 each.



Boney M:

Photograph: Getty Images

*Mary's Boy Child* was unusual for Boney M. They usually spent an age making singles, then tested them on the prospective audience before returning to the studio to polish them. But this song, originally a hit for [Harry Belafonte](#), was recorded in three days and

rushed out. "I remember Frank [Farian, their producer] asking me to sing the first verse a cappella. He got goose bumps, and went, 'Yes, we're going into the studio' and Mary's Boy Child went out as we recorded it."

In the late 60s and early 70s, novelty songs dominated the charts at Christmas (Rolf Harris's [Two Little Boys](#), Benny Hill's [Ernie](#)). Then the true Christmas songs took over. Pop stars were often self-conscious about Christmas singles. They were considered cheesy, but the short-term rewards could be huge. What most artists didn't realise was that the gain would also be long-term – classics would become annual earners.

In 1973, Slade were the biggest band in the land. No record had gone straight in at No 1 since the Beatles' [Get Back](#) in 1969, then Slade did it three times in the one year, culminating in [Merry Christmas Everybody](#).

"Is that the legendary [Jim Lea](#)?" I say when he picks up the phone.

"I don't feel much like a legend, I must admit," he says quietly. Lea has had a tough few years with family sickness. He was Slade's baby-faced bass guitarist, violinist and songwriter – Merry Christmas Everybody is his tune, and chorus. The rest of the words came from band leader [Noddy Holder](#). Lea says he owes the song to his mother-in-law. "She said to me, 'Why don't you write a Christmas song, Jim?' I got a bit annoyed. I was young and full of testosterone, and, 'Don't tell me what to do, we're top of the tree.' Then one day I cooked it up in the shower. I took it to Nodd, said it's a Christmas song, got the, 'So here it is, merry Christmas' bit, and he went off and did probably the best lyrics he ever wrote, about the old grannies having a twist and a stout, and sitting with their stockings round their ankles, legs apart."

The band recorded it in summer in New York. "John Lennon was doing his [Mind Games](#) album, and the volume knob had got 'John' on it, so we had that taken off and a new knob with 'Slade' put on. It was very humid and to do our vocals we needed an echoey place, so we used the lobby of the record plant."

Lea added lots of instrumentation (Lennon had left the harmonium in the studio) and he says it initially sounded a mess. At which point he left it to producer [Chas Chandler](#). "When I heard the mix, I was chuffed. There's not a kid singing or a sleigh bell or anything jingling or jangling, it's just a rock band playing a song. And it's brilliant. I really love it."

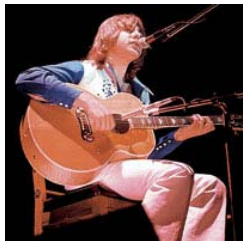
Merry Christmas was Slade's last No 1. Three years later they were obliterated by punk. Then in 1980 [Ozzy Osbourne](#) pulled out of Reading Festival and Slade were invited as last-minute jokey replacements. "We blew the whole thing to pieces. If you think we could barely get a gig at the time. It was our second encore and Nodd said, 'Is there anything you want to hear?' and the crowd just started singing Merry Christmas. We'd never played it live, and there was this ridiculous situation of 100,000 people singing a Christmas song in August. We just stood watching them. It was bizarre."

Why is it still so popular? Lea laughs. "It looks as if it's never going to go away. It could be here in 200 years' time. I think it's because of the way the melody lilts around and it's got a happy-sad feel. It sounds nostalgic." It's weird, he says, how he hears the song at strange times. "My brother is extremely ill and I was talking to a woman trying to work out what we were going to do about it, and there's this radio on, and Merry Christmas comes on. I'm talking about things of such gravity, and I couldn't keep my mind on what the woman was saying. I was thinking, 'This is probably the most important thing I've done in my life and Merry Christmas is stopping me from dealing with it.'"

Lea has not had to work since Slade. Is Merry Christmas their biggest earner? He says he's not done the sums, but it must be. "The [Performing Right Society](#) put out a statement saying Slade's Merry Christmas is the most heard song in the world because royalties come in from more countries than for any other song. The estimate is that it's been heard by 42% of the planet, more than 3 billion people, whether they wanted to hear it or not."

Shouldn't he be a billionaire? He laughs, and talks about the astronomical tax rate in the 70s. "I'm comfortable, that's the best way to put it."

Greg Lake of progressive rock band [Emerson, Lake & Palmer](#) stresses that he didn't set out to write a hit. "We didn't want to be a singles-chasing band," he says. They were more of a triple album-chasing band? "Yes, we were. I can feel a concept coming on." He giggles.



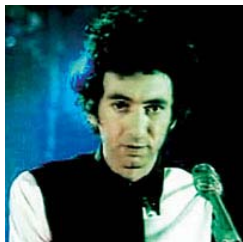
Greg Lake. Photograph: Rex Features

I Believe In Father Christmas was an attack on commercialisation, he says. "When I was a young boy, I remember Christmas being about goodwill on Earth: how did it ever get corrupted into this horrible, present-buying orgy? So we decided to write a serious song about Christmas." Pete Sinfield, a former fellow band member of prog rock group King Crimson, wrote the lyrics. "When the record company said, 'Greg, we're going to release this as a single', my reaction was, 'You can do whatever you want, but I can't see it working. It's got a 100-piece orchestra.' At the time, Christmas hits were Slade or Roy Wood, knees-up types of songs. I Believe In Father Christmas was cynical and a bit melancholic."

The song went to No 2. "The record that beat it was Queen's Bohemian Rhapsody, and if ever there was a single I wouldn't mind being beaten by, that was the one."

Was the cheque for the Christmas song the biggest he's received? "No. We sold over 26m albums, we've got a big catalogue and our stuff gets used in films. I'll be honest with you, I've not checked the income for years, but people do have this fascination with the earning power of it. It's like, 'Oh, you wrote a Christmas song – you never need to work again.'" Is that wrong then? "Yes. When the record was initially in the charts there was a lot of money coming off it, but now it's just radio play really." He pauses. "Well, I tell a lie, because the record's been covered by everybody – Sarah Brightman, U2 – and all those are royalties."

Jona Lewie is waiting for the plumber at home in London. Lewie was a two-hit wonder with You'll Always Find Me In The Kitchen At Parties followed by Stop The Cavalry. He didn't think of it as a Christmas song. As far as he was concerned, it was an antiwar song that happened to mention Christmas. Lewie had spent many years struggling. Was he surprised by the success of Stop The Cavalry? "You're always hoping something might happen, and you can't believe it when it does."



Jona Lewie.

Lewie has rarely played live in the intervening 30 years, and has spent the past 10 working on his latest album. How on earth has he managed to make a living? "Stop The Cavalry constitutes 50% of my real income. The thing is, I do everything on the track. I write the lyrics and the melody, so that's all of the publishing. And because I'm a musician I can do all the backing track, so that's all the recording royalty. I was a one-man show. And if you can get a track associated with Christmas, you get annual regurgitation, and potential for earning every year."

So it is possible to live a life of luxury from one Christmas hit? Hardly, he says. "I'm more thrifty than spend, spend, spend. But I'll spend £3 on a coffee, then a cake, then another coffee and before you know it you hardly have change out of £20."

Shakin' Stevens is preparing for a gig at Wolverhampton's Civic Hall, part of a UK tour. Last year he didn't expect to be on the road again. He had a heart attack, stopped breathing, and was pummelled back to life by his manager and partner, Sue Davies, who pumped his heart so hard that she broke one of his ribs.

Today he has a pacemaker and is in remarkably good nick. The white shoes and pink jacket have gone, but he still looks suitably rock'n'roll – blue shades indoors, hair tinted reddish-black.



Shakin' Stevens. Photograph: Alan Ballard/Scopefeatures.com

Stevens, who was born Michael Barratt, started his working life as a milkman. He released 18 singles between 1970 and 1979 without success. Then, in the 80s, Shaky, in his 30s, became the top-selling male UK singles artist of the decade.

He actually finished Merry Christmas Everyone 18 months before it was released. "We recorded it in summer 1984, then heard Band Aid were putting their Christmas song out. So we thought, this is a great cause and you can't compete with charity, so it would be a waste. We didn't want it at No 2, 3, 4, we wanted it at No 1, so we held it back. Band Aid went to No 1, and the following year we released Merry Christmas and it went to No 1 and the Band Aid song was rereleased and was No 2, so we were proved right."

By 1985, it looked as if his career was on the decline – he'd had three No 1s in 1981/82, but none since. "Three years is a long time in pop music," I say. He grins. "Yeah, I remember that at William Hill it was an outsider. It was a nice price, so we had a little bet. I can't remember the odds, but I came away with £300. I wish I'd put more on it."

Unlike Jim Lea and Greg Lake, Shaky insists his song conforms to every Christmas cliché. "It talks about children, the season, snow, all the records we used to hear. It's uplifting."

When he performs these days, he doesn't just do the famous songs. Does that frustrate the crowd? Not really, he says – many of them are between 20 and 25 and don't even remember the hits from first time round. But surely there comes a time of year when he has to play the Christmas song? He looks at Sue. Well, he says coyly, it's only November and they've already had the chat. "The band are keen. We were saying only the other day, 'Oh, what the hell – when it gets to December, why not? Let's slip it in there.'"

Even if it's a chore singing Merry Christmas Everyone, at least there's the annual cheque, I say. "Well, the guy who gets the cheque is the guy who wrote it, Bob Heatlie. I get royalties for radio plays and it gets its fair share." In a typical year what does he make from it? Enough for a decent holiday? He stops to think. "I wouldn't like to say... it buys Christmas presents." Are we talking hundreds or thousands? "Oh no, thousands. It could be £5,000, it could be £10,000. I don't know."

Stevens is expecting to do well out of the song this Christmas. There is a six-week TV advertising campaign with an Australian supermarket, and a radio campaign with Volkswagen. In recent years, thanks to downloads, the song has started reappearing in the lower reaches of the charts at Christmas. "In 2007, it went to 22 with no promotion," Sue says. "We said to Sony, 'Are you going to do something?' and they said, 'Oh, we're busy with the X Factor.' So it wasn't bad." The X Factor effectively saw off the Christmas single – for the past six years an X Factor song (or X Factor protest song) has topped the charts. Perhaps Merry Christmas will break into the top 20 this year. Stevens beams. "That would be nice."

Shane MacGowan doesn't attempt to hide the boredom in his voice. "I've answered that question a million times," he whines. "I don't really want to talk about it, but what d'you want to know?"

I've just asked how the Pogues' brilliant Fairytale Of New York came about. "Elvis Costello was producing us at the time," MacGowan says, "and he bet me and Jem [co-writer Jem Finer] we couldn't turn up with a Christmas record that wouldn't be slushy."

The Pogues didn't record the song until two years later, in 1987, by which time Cait O'Riordan had left the group and married Costello, who was no longer producing them. O'Riordan was initially going to duet with MacGowan, so they needed a female singer. "Steve Lillywhite was producing, so we'd known Kirsty MacColl for a while and she was married to him. She was hanging round the studio and said, 'Why don't I have a go at

doing the woman's part?' Cait had a brilliant voice, but as it turned out Kirsty was much better for that song."



Shane MacGowan of

the Pogues with Kirsty MacColl. Photograph: Rex Features

MacGowan says he's not only bored talking about it, he gets bored singing it. "I like hearing other people singing it – young couples, old couples, when they do it properly. Just singing it in a pub. I don't get much kick out of doing it live any more. I don't do it unless the Pogues are doing Christmas gigs, and we're not doing any this year."

In 2000, MacColl was killed in a boating accident. Is that why he doesn't like singing it now – because Kirsty is not around to sing it with? "That's one reason, yes."

We get to the million-quid question, but MacGowan isn't playing. "I'm not going there."

Fairytale has often been voted the greatest Christmas record ever. Does MacGowan think it is? "No, it's not," he says, before reeling off his favourites. "I love [The Christmas Song by Nat King Cole](#)." And suddenly he croaks into life. "Chestnuts roasting on an open fire... dudududududu. And I like I Believe In Father Christmas, by Greg Lake." Now he's not talking about Fairytale Of New York, he's unstoppable. "There's the Phil Spector version of [Santa Claus Is Coming to Town](#), [Rockin' Around The Christmas Tree](#), by [Brenda Lee](#)..." And one final thing, he says. Yes? "Happy Christmas to you, and all your readers."

• For more information on the artists featured in this article, visit their websites: go to [Liz Mitchell](#), [Jim Lea](#), [Greg Lake](#), [Shakin' Stevens](#), [Jona Lewie](#) and [Shane McGowan](#)

• This article was amended on 23 December 2011. The original said in the novel *About A Boy*, Will Freeman never has to work again after writing a huge Christmas hit. The original also said the Beatles' single *Get Back* was number one in 1968. Both of these points have been corrected.


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