Mark Lanegan – Dark Mark Does Christmas (2012)

01 – The Cherry Tree Carol 02 – Down In Yon Forest 03 – O Holy Night 04 – We Three Kings 05 – Coventry Carol 06 – Burn The Flames

Christmas records are usually a good chance for artists to drain some of their listeners' money on the season. The few, classic albums, however, remain mostly the same (such as Elvis' Christmas Album, Bing Crosby's Merry Christmas, Nat King Cole's Magic Of Christmas or even Phil Spector's offering) and along with a couple of more recent ones, are listened to this very day, a lot of people ignoring or dismissing a large portion of the holiday themed efforts out there.

Released with next to no publicity, Mark Lanegan's latest EP, Dark Mark Does Christmas, marks his first tenure into the Christmas carols realm. Of all the artists, he surely is one who can give a different feel to these songs. While his take won't become a Christmas classic any time soon, Lanegan successfully takes some of the well known tunes and twists them into a dark, melancholic affair. As imagined, spending the holidays with Mr. Lanegan will definitely end up really somber and nostalgic, no matter how hard he'd try to joyfully praise Jesus' birth.

Choosing a lo-fi production instead of a proper studio recording, Dark Mark Does Christmas evokes a more personal atmosphere through its unprocessed sound and a vintage feel, resembling a pick-up playing a really old vinyl. For the first half of the EP, Mark uses higher tuned instruments such as the banjo on the beautiful "The Cherry Tree Carol" or the ukulele, heard on "Down In The Yon Forest", thus adopting a higher tone too. It's great to see his wide vocal range still intact at his age, especially singing all those high notes on the lovely "O Holy Night".

A great aspect is his vocals, echoed this time, giving a dreamy tone on the first three tracks. On the opposite, his trademark gravelly voice bears a haunting beauty rarely matched by other artists. This way, the a cappella "Coventry Carol" and the acoustic guitar assisted "We Three Kings" turn into what's arguably the darkest take on these carols. Also, included on Dark Mark Does Christmas is the grim "Burn The Flames", originally recorded by Roky Erickson, further attesting Lanegan's gift by giving another dimension to an already sinister song.

So, for those who enjoy listening to Christmas records and even those who shun the whole idea of Christmas, Mark Lanegan's Dark Mark Does Christmas is a short, interesting at least release, that's worth purchasing just for the dark, twisted touch given on the tunes here. It would have been even better if Lanegan recorded an album's worth of carols to have an even bigger impact on the listener. Nevertheless, the EP offers something different from the usual for the season, regardless of its length. Unfortunately, Dark Mark Does Christmas is available so far only on his live tour merch stand, so go see him perform and get this. Hopefully, Lanegan will give this a proper release in the near future. --- Raul Stanciu, sputnikmusic.com

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