

Kurt Elling – The Beautiful Day: Kurt Elling Sings Christmas (2016)

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1 *Sing A Christmas Carol* 2 *Wenceslaus (Image I)* 3 *Star Of Wonder* 4 *We Three Kings* 5 *Christmas Children* 6 *Wenceslaus (Image II)* 7 *Some Children See Him* 8 *Little Drummer Boy* 9 *Wenceslaus (Image III)* 10 *The Michigan Farm (Cradle Song, Op. 41/1)* 11 *The Snow Is Deep On The Ground / Snowfall* 12 *Same Old Lang Syne* 13 *This Christmas* 14 *The Beautiful Day* Kurt Elling - vocals, percussion John McLean - acoustic guitars, electric guitars Stuart Mindeman - piano, electric keyboards, Hammond B-3 Clark Sommers - bass Jill Kaeding - cello Jim Gailloro - soprano saxophone Tito Carrillo - trumpet Kendrick Scott - drums Kalyan Pathak - percussion Luiza Elling - vocals

A poetic and lyrical holiday-themed album, vocalist Kurt Elling's *The Beautiful Day* is much more than a seasonal production. The album follows up his eclectic 2015 album, *Passion World*, and arrives on the heels of his collaboration with saxophonist Branford Marsalis, 2016's *Upward Spiral*. Here, Elling applies his urbane sensibilities and warm baritone to a set of thoughtfully curated traditional songs reworked in his own sophisticated, harmonically rich fashion. However, as his first ever holiday-themed effort, Elling chose to sidestep the usual cull of Christmas songs and instead picked pieces that are lesser known, or more subtle in tone. The result is a production that is as literate and full of new discoveries as his previous studio albums. Helping Elling achieve this is an adept ensemble of longtime and more recent associates including guitarist John McLean, pianist Stuart Mindeman, bassist Clark Sommers, and drummer Kendrick Scott, as well as saxophonist Jim Gailloro, trumpeter Tito Carrillo, cellist Jill Kaeding, and percussionist Kalyan Pathak. Working as statement of purpose, Elling kicks things off with a soaring version of Leslie Bricusse's "Sing a Christmas Carol," from the 1970 musical film *Scrooge*. Elling transforms the classical-leaning choral number into a flowing, contemporary jazz anthem, coyly amending the intro with a quick medley of well-known holiday themes. He then shifts gears, offering the first of three recurring interludes based on the classic "Good King Wenceslas" carol. Atmospheric and centered on Elling's wordless vocalizations, the "Wenceslaus" interludes ground the album in a palette of winter-toned calm. Elsewhere, Elling offers a haunting, crystalline reading of the traditional "We Three Kings," smiles his way through a New Orleans second-line take of "Little Drummer Boy," and applies his longstanding knack for setting spoken word to music with "The Michigan Farm," which features his evocative lyrics

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framed by composer Edvard Grieg's "Cradle Song, Op. 41/1." While artful complexity is one of Elling's distinctive traits, he is also an adroit crooner, as evidenced here by his soulfully buoyant take on Donny Hathaway's "This Christmas" and his heartfelt performance of Dan Fogelberg's "Same Old Lang Syne." Also adding to the tender emotion of the album is Elling's daughter, Luiza Elling, who duets with her father on the title track. Ultimately, with *The Beautiful Day*, Elling has crafted an album that evokes the holiday spirit in all of its wondrous complexity.

---Matt Collar, AllMusic Review

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