

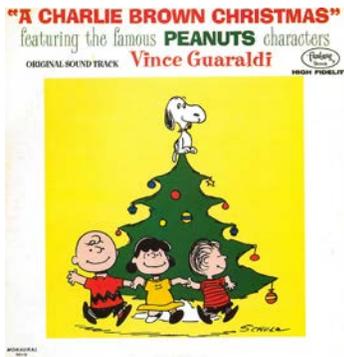
“A Charlie Brown Christmas”—Vince Guaraldi (1965)

Added to the National Registry: 2012

Essay by Derrick Bang (guest post) *



Charles M. Schulz



Original album



Vince Guaraldi

Church hymns such as “Silent Night” and “O Come, All Ye Faithful” aside, post-WWII Americans marked the annual holiday season by listening to newer, secular Christmas carols recorded by popular film and music superstars: Bing Crosby’s lilting delivery on Irving Berlin’s “White Christmas”; Nat King Cole’s soulful cover of Mel Tormé’s “The Christmas Song”; and even Gene Autry’s enormously popular rendition of Johnny Marks’ “Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer.”

These were songs with lyrics, of course: tunes whose poignant (or amusing) Yuletide spirit was conveyed, in great part, by the delivery of the singers who made them famous.

Not until 1965 would an essentially *instrumental* holiday album capture the American public to the same degree ... and we can thank Charlie Brown and the rest of Charles M. Schulz’s “Peanuts” gang for that.

Along with a popular Northern California jazz pianist known both for his distinctive mustache and droll sobriquets such as Dr. Funk and The Italian Leprechaun.

But San Francisco-born Vince Guaraldi’s association with “Peanuts”—and the holiday season—didn’t start with his album soundtrack for “A Charlie Brown Christmas.”

Indeed, it all began with Willie Mays, a drive across San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge, and a phone call.

Particularly the phone call.

On October 6, 1963, television director/producer Lee Mendelson watched happily as the debut documentary from his new company—a valentine to the beloved San Francisco Giants center fielder, titled “A Man Named Mays”—delivered strong ratings for NBC. Casting about for a sophomore project, Mendelson decided on a “day in the life”-type

documentary about “Peanuts” creator Charles M. Schulz. The proposed feature would include some animated segments: an assignment he handed to Bill Melendez, who had collaborated with Schulz on a series of enormously successful (but now largely forgotten) early 1960s “Peanuts” TV commercials for Ford automobiles.

The filmmaker also knew that he wanted a jazz score, but finding somebody to write and perform one proved difficult. Both Dave Brubeck and Cal Tjader declined; not sure who to try next, Mendelson was driving over the Golden Gate Bridge one day, listening to a KSFO show hosted by Al “Jazzbo” Collins.

“He’d play Vince’s stuff a lot,” Mendelson recalled, “and right then he played ‘Cast Your Fate to the Wind.’ It was melodic and open, and came in like a breeze off the bay. And it struck me that this might be the kind of music I was looking for.”

“Cast Your Fate to the Wind,” which Guaraldi had written and recorded with his trio, had put both him and his label, Fantasy Records, on the map in 1963. Guaraldi came home with a Grammy Award for Best Original Jazz Composition; Fantasy owners Max and Sol Weiss quite famously spoofed their label’s less than impressive track record—up to that point—with a full-page ad in “Billboard,” headlined “13½ years without a hit!”

“Fate” *was* a hit, and it was all over the radio in 1963; no surprise, then, that Mendelson heard it during that drive across the Golden Gate. He and Guaraldi met for lunch at the popular San Francisco restaurant Original Joe’s and a partnership was born.

Guaraldi returned home, went into the tank, and emerged a few weeks later. On the phone.

“Vince called me,” Mendelson laughs. “He told me, ‘I gotta play something for you; it just came into my head.’ I said, ‘I don’t want to hear it on the phone; let me come down to the studio.’ And he said, ‘I *gotta* play it for you, before I forget it, so at least *you’ll* remember it.’ So I said, ‘Okay, fine; play it.’

“And that was the first time I heard ‘Linus and Lucy.’

“It just blew me away. It was so right—so *perfect*—for Charlie Brown and the other characters. Vince’s music was the one missing ingredient that would make everything happen.”

Alas, not *quite* everything. Mendelson ran into an unexpected snag once he completed the documentary that had been titled “A Boy Named Charlie Brown”: Nobody wanted it. All three networks—NBC, CBS and ABC—turned it down. Although impossible to imagine today, nobody had the slightest desire to bring Charlie Brown to television.

However...

A few months later, Mendelson got a call from John Allen, who worked at New York's McCann Erickson Agency. Allen had liked Mendelson's film, and he remembered it after learning that one of his clients—Coca-Cola—wanted to get involved with a new animated Christmas special. Could Mendelson and Schulz deliver one? Mendelson rashly said yes, certain of no such thing; fortunately, Schulz proved willing, and they hastily sketched out a script. Melendez and Guaraldi were summoned back to the team, and production began on "A Charlie Brown Christmas."

Guaraldi recycled a bit of the music from the never-aired documentary, notably "Linus and Lucy," having decided it would serve as a Peanuts "main theme." That aside, Guaraldi knew he needed at least two more original compositions: something for an ice-skating sequence, and a vibrant number for a party that breaks out on stage, when the kids fail to heed instructions from Charlie Brown, the newly assigned director of the school Christmas play. The former became "Skating," a lyrical jazz waltz highlighted by sparkling keyboard runs that sound *precisely* like children ice skating joyously on a frozen pond. The latter emerged as "Christmas Is Coming," a bright bossa nova anthem with strong overtones of rock 'n' roll.

"The cascading notes to Guaraldi's Vivaldi-like 'Skating' are the most vivid representation of falling snowflakes in music," a newspaper columnist wrote, decades later.

Aside from a solo piano turn on Beethoven's "Für Elise"—inserted for a scene with Schroeder—the rest of the score featured Guaraldi's arrangements of Christmas standards. He resurrected "Menino Pequeno da Bateria" from a recent album with frequent colleague Bola Sete, discarded the guitar portion and let the tune stand, with no other changes, as "My Little Drum," a mid-tempo handling of "The Little Drummer Boy." And since the show was devoted to Charlie Brown's search for the perfect Christmas tree, a fresh arrangement of "O Tannenbaum" was essential.

Guaraldi also wrote a languid waltz, intended as the special's title theme; he called it "Christmas Time Is Here," and it was selected for the opening scene.

"The opening song was an instrumental," Mendelson recalled years later, "but I felt we should get some lyrics, and some voices. We couldn't find anybody to write the lyrics, so I sat down, and in about 10 minutes wrote the words to 'Christmas Time Is Here' on an envelope. And I sure wish I still had that envelope!"

"A Charlie Brown Christmas" was a smash success during its debut airing on December 9, 1965. It was the second most popular show on television that week, trailing only "Bonanza," and its 45 percent ratings share was even more significant: that meant 45 percent of the people watching television during that half hour had tuned in to see Charlie Brown. Fantasy released Guaraldi's soundtrack recording that same month, to coincide with the show's arrival on CBS-TV.

It has remained available ever since: as an LP, then a CD and now as digital downloads. Though on its initial release, it fell short of the sales of “Cast Your Fate,” quietly, steadily, it has become one of the most popular Christmas LPs ever produced ... posting well almost every season against fresh releases from much newer artists.

Certainly the album’s warmth and easy accessibility had much to do with its success, but Guaraldi (and Fantasy) had additional help. Just as repeated television exposure each holiday season turned Frank Capra’s “It’s a Wonderful Life” into part of the American Christmas experience—despite that film having been a flop during its initial release, back in 1946—CBS achieved the same result with “A Charlie Brown Christmas.” By airing Charles M. Schulz’s gently subversive holiday parable every year, the network helped American families anticipate and embrace the show with the warmth of a visit from a beloved relative. At the same time, those same viewers got “turned on” to jazz without even realizing it was happening.

Guaraldi’s music from “A Charlie Brown Christmas” has become as essential to American holiday traditions as mistletoe, twinkling Christmas lights and carol sing-alongs. Three generations of families decorate their trees—pausing as each ornament is unwrapped from its storage box, to reflect on the moment it was purchased—with Guaraldi’s album playing in the background.

And we don’t merely cherish Guaraldi’s original compositions on that album; he also permanently branded his arrangements of the established carols used within the show. To this day, many fans compare *any* cover of “O Christmas Tree” to Guaraldi’s cover, which opens the album. Invariably, all other versions are found wanting.

“He added much more ‘Vince’ and much more ‘Peanuts’ to his arrangement of ‘O Christmas Tree,’” explains Toby Gleason, son of former “San Francisco Chronicle” jazz columnist Ralph Gleason, one of Guaraldi’s early champions and best friends. “You know how Ray Charles never wrote a song, but if you heard him do a song, it *became* a Ray Charles song? That version of ‘O Christmas Tree’ has *become* a Vince Guaraldi song. It evokes the season, Vince, ‘Peanuts’ and family, and no other version evokes all those things.”

“That’s the sign of an actual original voice,” agrees Jerry Granelli, who plays drums on many of these tracks. “Vince’s arrangements of anything he touched became *his*.”

As we move further into the 21st century, it truly can be said that Guaraldi got the eerily prophetic wish he expressed during an interview conducted with Ralph Gleason all the way back in 1958: “I don’t think I’m a great piano player, but I would like to be able to have people like me, to play pretty tunes and to reach the audience.”

Guaraldi achieved that wish: he reached an audience far larger than he ever could have imagined.

Despite that Grammy Award and several popular covers during the 1960s and '70s, "Cast Your Fate to the Wind" never quite became a standard. But that honor unquestionably belongs to "Christmas Time Is Here," the gentle holiday anthem that debuted when sung—deliberately off-key, as children would do—by the young members of St. Paul's Episcopal Church choir, driven to the Fantasy Studios recording session from their usual haunt in San Rafael, California. At the risk of stretching the point, the entire album arguably has become a standard.

True ubiquity arrives not just when music becomes popular with listeners, but when it also becomes popular with other musicians. Jazz guitarist Ron Eschete deserves credit for being the first to cover "Christmas Time Is Here" on his 1982 Yuletide album, "Christmas Impressions." More recently, "Christmas Time Is Here" has been covered by Ellis Marsalis, Toni Braxton, Nancy Wilson, Dianne Reeves, Beegie Adair, Ricky Skaggs, Anita Baker, MercyMe, Sarah McLachlan, the Manhattan Transfer, Barry Manilow, Jars of Clay, Tony Bennett, Al Jarreau, Spyro Gyra, Harry Connick, Jr., the Radio City Rockettes, Sixpence None the Richer, Shelby Lynne, Christopher Cross, Mariah Carey and Kidz Bop Kids ... along with scores and scores of others.

Perhaps more impressively, Guaraldi's entire album also has been covered several times. People simply can't get enough of his music for "A Charlie Brown Christmas."

"Vince Guaraldi is one of the most influential musicians to lay hands on a piano," insisted Barry Gordon, writing for "The Scotsman." "Guaraldi introduced millions more children like me to jazz than Miles Davis' 'Kind of Blue' ever did for our parents. Guaraldi was the first jazz musician to have a gold record; one of the first to win a Grammy; one of the first musicians to play a stadium; and one of, if not *the*, first artists to have their music played in space."

All this action, all this *resonance*, from a quiet little holiday jazz album that debuted as the soundtrack for what Schulz, Mendelson and Melendez undoubtedly expected would be a one-off Christmas "Peanuts" special.

Funny how things work out.

Derrick Bang, a veteran Northern California journalist, is author of the biography "Vince Guaraldi at the Piano," available from McFarland Press. Bang has also written several books about the "Peanuts" phenomenon, including the Eisner-nominated "50 Years of Happiness: A Tribute to Charles M. Schulz" (2000), "Charles M. Schulz: Li'l Beginnings" (2004), "It's Only a Game" (2004) and "Security Blankets: How Peanuts Touched Our Lives" (2009), the latter in collaboration with longtime "Peanuts" licensee Don Fraser.

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.