



Holiday harmonies

A sampling of this year's Christmas CDs

Thursday, December 09, 2004

THERE ARE NOW 107 Grammy categories, as we learned on Tuesday, when this year's batch of nominees was announced. And not one for Christmas albums!

You laugh, but think about it. Every year, dozens, maybe scores of new Christmas albums come out. Superstars put them out, as do obscure local artists. And they come in every genre, from surf-rock to reggae. That should count for something, shouldn't it? Especially now that there are Grammys for everything from Hawaiian Music to Surround Sound Album. (You don't believe us? Check it out on www.grammy.com).

Anyway, here are reviews by The Star-Ledger's music critics of some of this year's most notable holiday releases. And if anyone is inspired to lobby the Recording Academy (which presents the Grammy), the organization's mailing address is 3402 Pico Boulevard, Santa Monica, CA 90405.

Ray Charles Celebrates a Gospel Christmas with the Voices of Jubilation

Ray Charles, with the Voices of Jubilation

(DVD/CD, UrbanWorks Entertainment)

This is the feel-good release of the holiday season, featuring an ebullient late-life performance by Ray Charles, who died in June. The DVD documents a December 2002 gospel holiday concert the towering soul singer presented with the 70-member, Jersey-based Voices of Jubilation choir at the Resch Center, an arena in Green Bay. Its accompanying CD features 10 of the numbers, including an appropriately intimate "Christmas Song (Chestnuts Roasting On An Open Fire)," a good-natured "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," rousing versions of the gospel tunes "Oh Happy Day" and "What Kind of Man Is This," and a sentimental, show-closing "America The Beautiful." Choir co-founder Stefanie Minatee sings lead on "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," and Charles graciously plays piano as choir member Harold Dudley sings "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas." This is Charles' last concert recording. Fittingly, it brings him back, full circle, to the gospel music he heard and sang in his youth.

-- Jay Lustig

Christmas Time Is Here

Dianne Reeves

(Blue Note)

The lustrous-voiced singer, who embraces a wide range of styles, breathes life into a gang of