



Eighteen sad Christmas songs that will help you ease the festive blues

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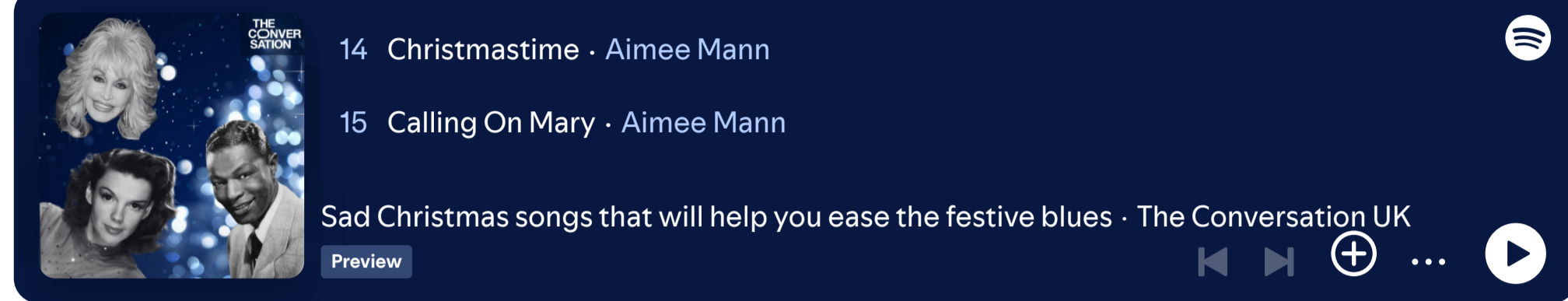
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Studies suggest that sad music may alleviate the impact of seasonal stress. It can offer solace, mitigate loneliness and promote good mental health by providing an outlet for processing negative emotions.

Sombre Christmas tunes may therefore resonate with those who cannot see their holiday experience reflected in the escapist fantasies of *glühwein* and holly. Researchers identify loneliness or “being without a family” as key contributing factors to low mood at Christmas – findings which guide my musical suggestions here.

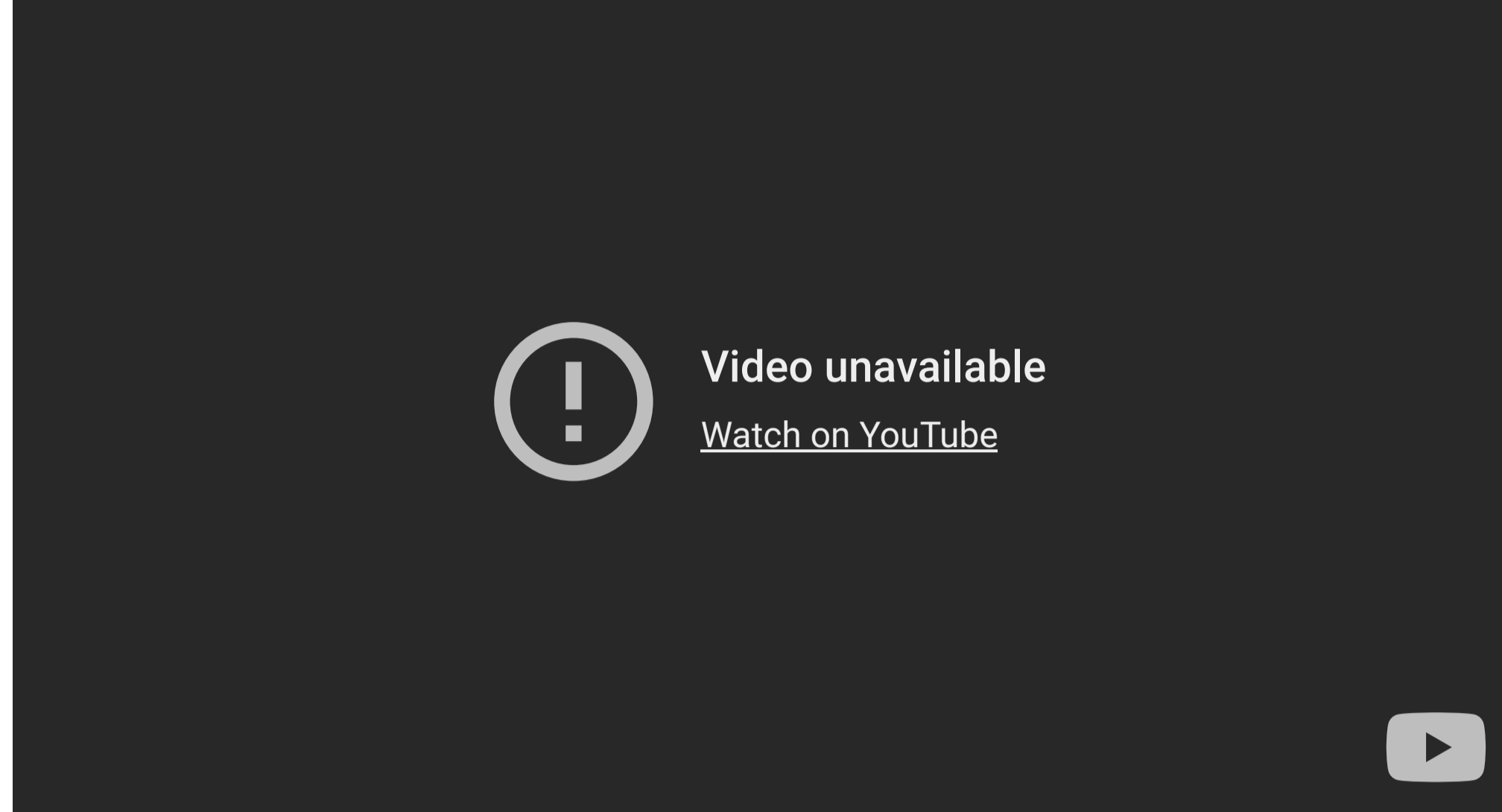
If you're prone to the winter blues, including these alternative songs in your playlist might help to boost your spirits.



As Britain recovered from the Great Depression (1929-1939), composers Michael Carr, Jimmy Leach and Tommie Connor wrote The Little Boy That Santa Claus Forgot (1937). The song tells the disheartening tale of a fatherless “laddie” who awakes on Christmas morning to find he has received no presents.

Canadian filmmaker Mitchell Kezin found the song so troubling as a child that he asked his mother to play Nat King Cole's rendition multiple times, hoping the story would change. Kezin grew up to become a collector of Christmas music, and the disturbing song anchors his 2013 documentary on underappreciated Christmas tunes.

Kezin describes the song as “cathartic”, emphasising sad music's role in retrieving memories and aiding mood regulation.



The Little Boy That Santa Claus Forgot as sung by Nat King Cole.

The boyhood wish for a Santa that never comes reappears in Eddy Arnold's Will Santa Come to Shanty Town (1949) and acquires fatal contours in Red Sovine's spoken-word Billy's Christmas Wish (1978).

Carol Hall offers her take on hardship in Hard Candy Christmas (1978), written for the musical The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas and popularised by Dolly Parton in the 1982 film adaptation. “Hard candy” refers to harsh times when families couldn't afford more expensive presents and would gift their children hard sweets for Christmas.

The lyrics intersperse present sorrows (“barely getting through tomorrow”) with a wishlist for the future, ending on a reassuring “I'll be fine”.



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Longing for togetherness

Less hopeful is the classic Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas, which Esther (Judy Garland) sings to her little sister Tootie (Margaret O'Brien) in Vincente Minnelli's musical Meet Me in St. Louis (1944).

Introduced by the nostalgic chords of a music box, Esther tearfully explains that the family will “have to muddle through somehow” until they can be together again – “if the fates allow” (this is a more palatable version of Hugh Martin's original poem).

Tellingly, this mournful number concludes with Tootie's metaphorical murder of her family, represented by the snow people she violently destroys.



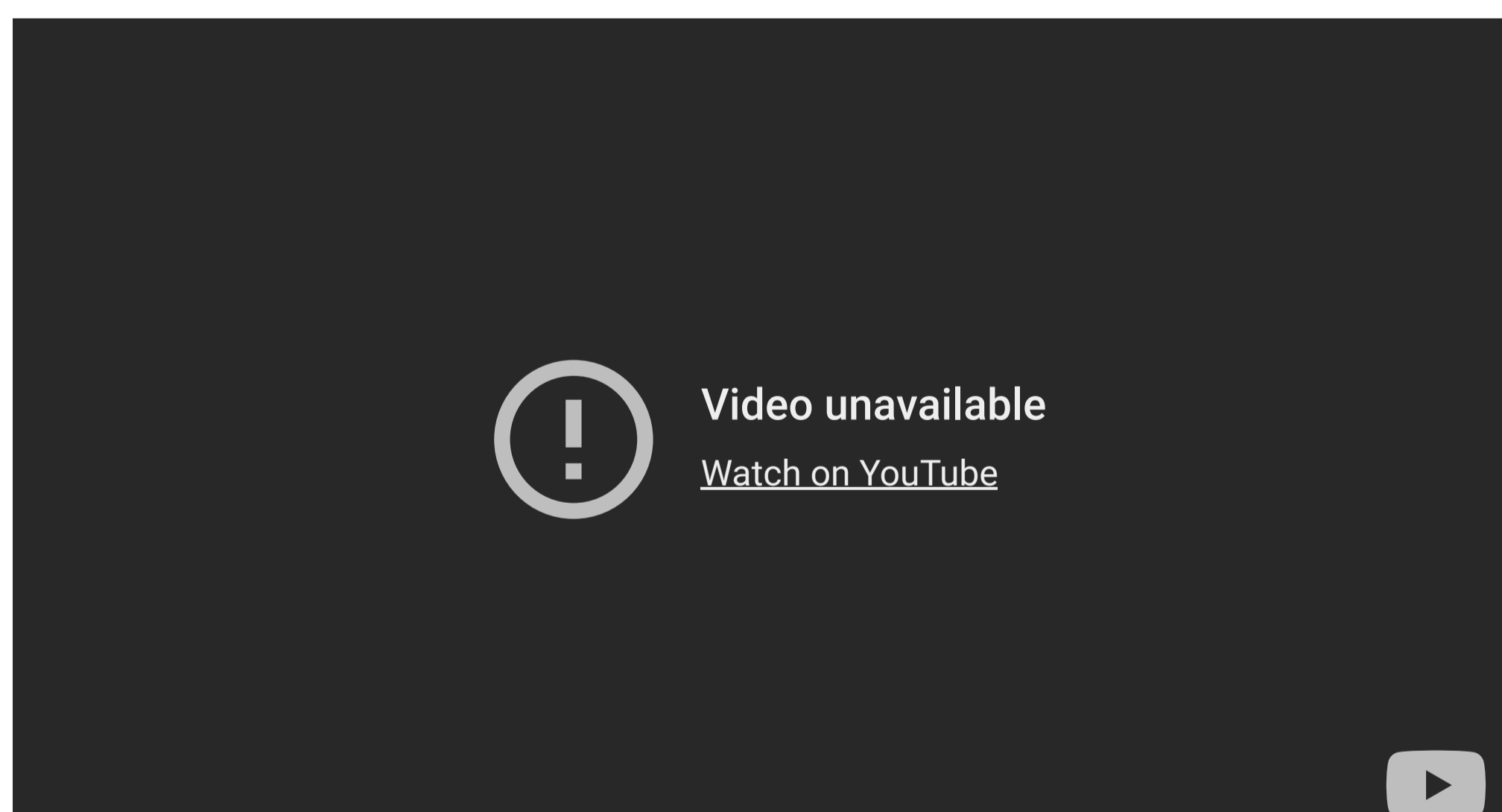
Tootie destroys the snow family at the end of Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas from Meet Me in St. Louis.

The yearning for hearth and home features in another wartime classic, I'll Be Home for Christmas (1943), which was banned as demoralising by the BBC. In 1946, this melancholy song letter inspired young songwriter Frank Pooler to pen what would become The Carpenters' Merry Christmas Darling (1970).

Richard Carpenter was one of Pooler's students. He set to music the lyrics Pooler had written for a lost love over two decades prior. Morphine's Sexy Christmas Baby Mine (1993) mirrors The Carpenters' song in its epistolary format and opening reference to Christmas cards, but is far bleaker.

Blues singer Charles Brown captures the loneliness of the season in Please Come Home for Christmas (1960) – a possible reference for The Beatles' 1950s pastiche Oh! Darling (1969) – and in the obscure My Most Miserable Christmas (1961) and Christmas Finds Me Oh So Sad (1961).

Inspired by a real man he knew named Frankie Bierton, who was disabled due to spinal meningitis, Willie Nelson's Pretty Paper (1963) takes the loneliness from the home to the street. First recorded by Roy Orbison, the ballad contrasts a forlorn vendor selling gift wrap with the laughter of “downtown shoppers”. The following year, Nelson released another ballad, What A Merry Christmas This Could Be – a regretful reminiscence about a failed relationship.



Pretty Paper by Willie Nelson, sung by Roy Orbison.

Aimee Mann's 2006 songs Christmastime and Calling on Mary tap into that same feeling of spending the holidays alone, while not entirely giving up on a Christmas miracle. Meanwhile Nellie McKay kept wistfulness alive with the equal parts sorrowful and satirical A Christie Derge (2007) – an eco-loving, mellifluous anthem to kindness. It's signed-off with a chirpy, and rather unsettling “Merry Christmas, everybody!”

One of the most heart-wrenching Yuletide songs is perhaps Jimmy Webb's Whatever Happened to Christmas (1968). Through Frank Sinatra's poignant vocals, it tells of loss and the empty seats at the table (“Whatever happened to the faces all aglow”).

Goth metal quartet Type O Negative return to this sentiment in Red Water (Christmas Mourning) (1996). Reminiscing, even when painful or bittersweet, may elicit feelings of empathy and communion and help keep past joys alive.

If the white Christmases of yore, the mistletoe kisses or the 12-day capitalist shopping spree do not resonate with you, the melancholy songs that escape the high-street coffee shop or department store might. Perhaps those who struggle during the “season to be jolly” might benefit from indulging in a little bit of doom and gloom.

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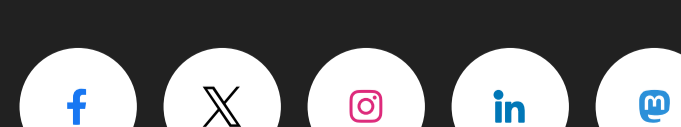
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