

'You're My Christmas'

Lareau's challenge: Write a Christmas song in less than a month. The band's caveat: It couldn't be cheesy.

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Published: November 22, 2007 6:00AM

The list of classic, original Christmas songs by pop-rock artists seems immutable at this point, as if frozen in time.

Every year radio stations haul out, like ornaments from the attic, their Brenda Lee ("Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree"), Elvis Presley ("Blue Christmas"), Bobby Helms ("Jingle Bell Rock"), Paul McCartney ("Wonderful Christmastime"), John and Yoko ("Happy Xmas"), Kinks ("Father Christmas"), Jethro Tull ("A Christmas Song), Beach Boys ("Little Saint Nick"), Pretenders ("2,000 Miles"), and Band Aid ("Do They Know It's Christmas Time?").

Can a new one ever join that vaulted list? Lareau isn't presumptuous enough to hope so, but has thrown its Santa hat into the ring with "You're My Christmas."

The Warren-based band -- which includes Erie's Pete Gool on guitar, and drummer and multi-instrumentalist Darrin Payne, an Erie native who now lives in Jamestown, N.Y. -- made huge inroads on adult-contemporary radio earlier this year with "Changes."

That sweeping, melodic song was the title cut of their debut CD, released first on Rust Records and later Warrior. It reached No. 10 on Friday Morning Quarterback (FMQB), a trade magazine that tracks radio airplay. It also hit the Top 25 AC charts on both Billboard and Radio and Records.

To Lareau's surprise, some radio programmers clamored for a new Lareau single -- specifically, a Christmas song.

"We got a call from our manager, and he said the radio promoters and the record label were asking us to write a Christmas song in the style of Lareau," Payne said. "Of course, we had a real quick deadline -- less than a month. We said, 'What the heck.'"

Payne had just one caveat.

"It can't be cheesy" he told his manager, Jim Quinn. Gool agreed, adding the time is right for a fresh holiday song.

"The thing is, we've been entrenched now with the same Christmas songs the last 40 years, and we're used to hearing them," Gool said.

"But this is such a departure. It's new and fresh, and what I like about it is it doesn't have the jingle bells. But it has a very heartfelt mix with the keys, and the way the bass is mixed in there. It almost feels nationalistic, in a sense, like an anthem."

"You're My Christmas" has a full, nearly Phil Spector-like Wall of Sound, with strings and chimes that give it a sweeping power. Lareau keyboard player Anthony Brown developed the song's big, robust sound, while Milan Bogdan -- a seven-time Grammy winner -- mixed and mastered it.

"We're at a point where everyone's true talents are shining through, and Anthony is great at orchestration," Payne said. "You're hearing all these strings and horns, and it's even Trans-Siberian Orchestra-like with the big guitar leads and chimes and all that. One of Anthony's abilities is orchestration, and he's good at it. He's spent a lot of time at it."

Band leader and vocalist Larry Lareau wrote the lyrics with his wife, Sofia. They recently celebrated their first year anniversary, and you can tell that in the heartfelt directness of the lyrics -- which were also inspired by his late father -- and feel it in his impassioned performance

"This is one for sure where he was totally invested in it. He did a great job," Payne said.

Early signs say radio agrees. FMQB included "You're My Christmas" among its Christmas picks and reviewed it favorably: "From the amazing production to Larry Lareau's passionate vocals to the stellar musicality, this record just feels big."

Most radio stations start adding holiday songs after Thanksgiving, but 20 adult-contemporary broadcasters were already playing "You're My Christmas" by last Friday. More are sure to follow, including Erie's WXKC/Classy 100.

"It's a beautiful song," said Ron Arlen, Classy 100's program director, who also supported "Changes."

"One of the things about holiday music is we all have our favorites, and we keep going back to those traditional things we remember from so long ago. There's not a lot of good

new Christmas music written. So I was glad to get something new from Larry and the band. Definitely, I'm going to put it in rotation."

The single is available as a digital download only, with proceeds going to Ronald McDonald House Charities.

"We all agreed it should be for kids," Payne said.

Warrior Records will try to keep Lareau's momentum rolling by issuing "Change My World" as the next single from "Changes" in January. In the meantime, Lareau is recording its follow-up CD for release sometime in 2008, followed by a extensive tour, perhaps as a warm-up to a national act.

No Lareau dates are planned for now, but the band hopes to play an Erie club sometime in December.

Lareau's Christmas Single, 'You're My Christmas,' is available for downloading at www.lareau.net and also through iTunes. All proceeds benefit the Ronald McDonald House Charities. Cost is 99 cents.

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