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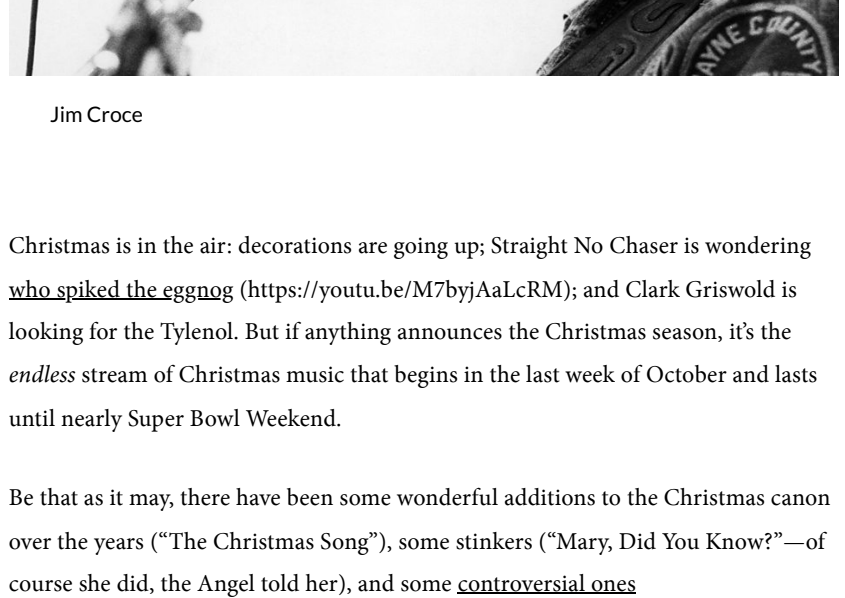
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Dec 19 MUSIC / Unwrapping Jim Croce's Christmas Song, "It Doesn't Have to Be That Way" / Sean Woodard

Music (/2017-posts/category/Music)



Jim Croce

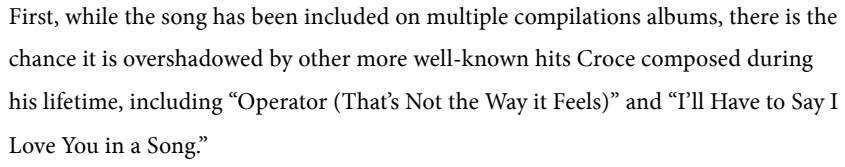
Christmas is in the air: decorations are going up; Straight No Chaser is wondering [who spiked the eggnog](https://youtu.be/M7byjAaLcRM) (https://youtu.be/M7byjAaLcRM); and Clark Griswold is looking for the Tylenol. But if anything announces the Christmas season, it's the *endless* stream of Christmas music that begins in the last week of October and lasts until nearly Super Bowl Weekend.

Be that as it may, there have been some wonderful additions to the Christmas canon over the years ("The Christmas Song"), some stinkers ("Mary, Did You Know?"—of course she did, the Angel told her), and some [controversial ones](https://www.bustle.com/p/a-tumblet-post-about-baby-its-cold-outside-historical-context-explains-that-the-song-may-have-entirely-different-meaning-6617625) (https://www.bustle.com/p/a-tumblet-post-about-baby-its-cold-outside-historical-context-explains-that-the-song-may-have-entirely-different-meaning-6617625) ("Baby, It's Cold Outside"—cue the awkward scene from *Elf*).

But amid all the covers of classics your mother should know, there are a few musical gifts hidden deep within the Christmas tree boughs if anyone wishes to search for them.

One of those songs is Jim Croce's "It Doesn't Have to Be That Way." It remains one of my favorite songs he composed. Recorded in 1973, the song serves as the closing track of Croce's *Life and Times* album. The record, which also contained the No. 1 U.S. *Billboard* Hot 100 hit "Bad, Bad Leroy Brown," proved to be one of the singer-songwriter's most commercially successful.

Croce's "It Doesn't Have to Be That Way" was released as a B-side to the lead single, "One Lousy Set of Footsteps" in February of that year. Following Croce's sudden death in an airplane crash seven months later, to coincide with the December release of his posthumous album, *I've Got a Name*, the record label re-released "It Doesn't Have to Be That Way" as the third single from the *Life and Times* LP given the Christmas setting of the lyrics. While the song climbed to the No. 76 spot on the charts, it is a wonder why it is not often heard in the usual Christmas playlist rotation year after year.

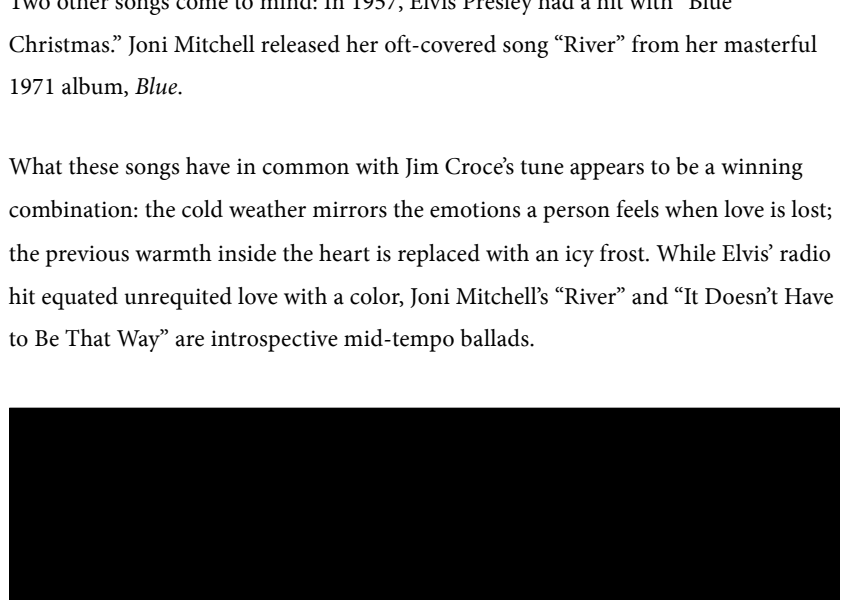


There can be many possible reasons why the song may be overlooked or not receive regular airplay.

First, while the song has been included on multiple compilations albums, there is the chance it is overshadowed by other more well-known hits Croce composed during his lifetime, including "Operator (That's Not the Way it Feels)" and "I'll Have to Say I Love You in a Song."

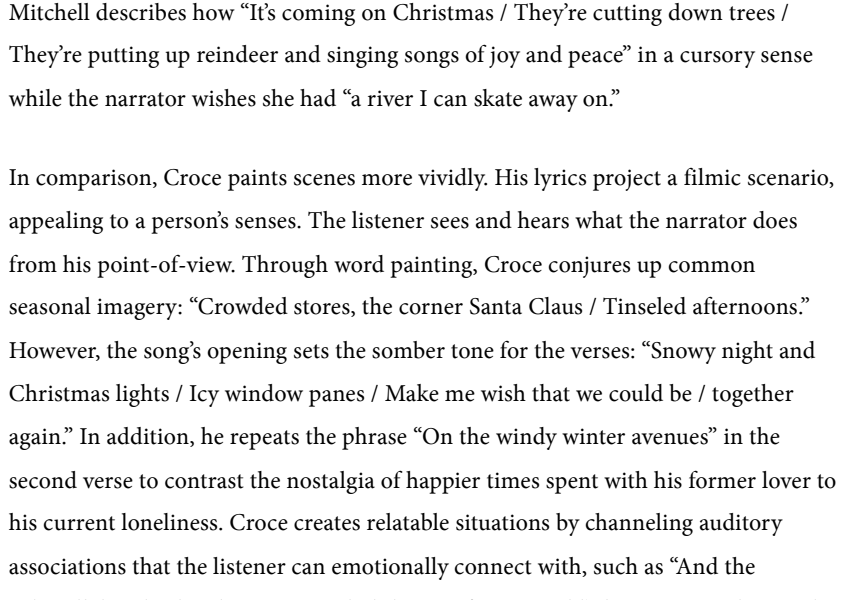
Secondly, while the song's Christmas season setting is clearly implied through the imagery in Croce's lyrics, the narrator is removed from the festivities. He is more observational, noting how the season doesn't seem the same without his former lover. Since the season merely serves as a backdrop to the narrator's emotional dilemma, the song can be seen as one that is not a kindred spirit of other Christmas standards that celebrate interpersonal connection.

Thirdly, Jim Croce penned a melancholy song. Here is where "It Doesn't Have to Be that Way" thematically resembles more popular songs. Christmastime is full of sad songs. For example, hearing Judy Garland sing the line "[Until then we'll have to muddle through somehow](https://www.ew.com/article/2007/01/08/history-popular-holiday-song/)" (https://www.ew.com/article/2007/01/08/history-popular-holiday-song/) in *Meet Me in St. Louis* makes me weep.



Two other songs come to mind. In 1957, Elvis Presley had a hit with "Blue Christmas." Joni Mitchell released her oft-covered song "River" from her masterful 1971 album, *Blue*.

What these songs have in common with Jim Croce's tune appears to be a winning combination: the cold weather mirrors the emotions a person feels when love is lost; the previous warmth inside the heart is replaced with an icy frost. While Elvis' radio hit equated unrequited love with a color, Joni Mitchell's "River" and "It Doesn't Have to Be That Way" are introspective mid-tempo ballads.



Mitchell's narrator tears her heart out over the guilt she feels over an ended relationship. She wallows in her perceived flaws and wishes to get away from the surrounding Christmas reverie in order to be left alone with her sorrow. The piano accompaniment even quotes the melody of "Jingle Bells" and transforms it to not only set the scene, but also to mirror the depressing lyrics.

Mitchell describes how "It's coming on Christmas / They're cutting down trees / They're putting up reindeer and singing songs of joy and peace" in a cursory sense while the narrator wishes she had "a river I can skate away on."

In comparison, Croce paints scenes more vividly. His lyrics project a filmic scenario, appealing to a person's senses. The listener sees and hears what the narrator does from his point-of-view. Through word painting, Croce conjures up common seasonal imagery: "Crowded stores, the corner Santa Claus / Tinselled afternoons." However, the song's opening sets the somber tone for the verses: "Snowy night and Christmas lights / Icy window panes / Make me wish that we could be / together again." In addition, he repeats the phrase "On the windy winter avenues" in the second verse to contrast the nostalgia of happier times spent with his former lover to his current loneliness. Croce creates relatable situations by channeling auditory associations that the listener can emotionally connect with, such as "And the sidewalk bands play their songs / slightly out of tune" and "Christmas carols sound like blues / But the choir is not to blame." As the song progresses, a piano and arpeggiated guitar chords underscore the drama.

While the melancholy nature of the two songs may be a reason why they don't fit in with more joyful holiday standards, Croce's song contains something that Mitchell's song doesn't: a tonal shift in the chorus that presents an optimistic outlook to the narrator's predicament.

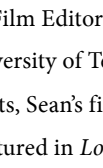
As the chorus is repeated, bells and a harpsichord enter the mix. Lyrically, the narrator believes that whatever happened between him and his significant other can be resolved: "But it doesn't have to be that way / What we had should never have ended / I'll be dropping by today / 'Cause we can easily get it together tonight / It's only right." The narrator's resolution may come across as sentimental, but the lyrics strike the heartstrings in the right manner, marrying melancholy and optimism into a bittersweet emotional experience.

As the Christmas season rolls on, consider listening to Jim Croce's "It Doesn't Have to Be That Way" and some of the other songs I mentioned. Maybe they'll speak to you in a similar manner that they have to me.

Sean Woodard is a graduate of Point Loma Nazarene University and Chapman University. Focusing on a wide variety of interests, Sean's fiction, film criticism, and other writing have been featured in Los Angeles Review of Books, Found Polaroids, and Los Angeles Magazine, among other publications. He serves on the Film Department for Drunk Monkeys. A native of Visalia, CA, he now resides in Orange County.

Music (/2017-posts/tag/Music), Jim Croce (/2017-posts/tag/Jim+Croce), Christmas (/2017-posts/tag/Christmas)

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