

By **Stephanie King**

I am genuinely amazed when people try and tell me that Bob Dylan's reworking of the American Christmas classic [Must Be Santa](#) is a bad song. But while I've willingly embraced this frenetic, infectious cover, others have recoiled in horror at the mere suggestion of any fun and frivolity seeping into Dylan's music.

If the reception to 1990's *Under The Red Sky* featuring such gems as [Wiggle Wiggle](#) is anything to go by, *Must Be Santa* will probably be dismissed as just another example of one of Bob's off-days. This, however, would be a crying shame, as I think *Must Be Santa* deserves a place alongside [Christmas Wrapping](#) (for which an official video was never made), [Merry Christmas \(I Don't Want To Fight\)](#) and [Fairytale of New York](#) as one of the best Christmas songs, like, ever.

Must Be Santa is built on a series of questions for which Santa is the inevitable answer:

Who's got a beard that's long and white?/Santa's got a beard that's long and white

Who comes around on a special night?/Santa comes around on a special night

Each description is then repeated:

Special night/Beard that's white/Must be Santa/Must Be Santa/Must Be Santa/Santa Claus

As the verses progress the list of descriptions gradually builds up, with the challenge being to try and remember them all, in the right order, after too much sugar and mulled wine. Silly but clean fun for all the family.

However, where earlier versions, such as this [1961 offering from Mitch Miller](#), are rather calm, stately and controlled, Bob Dylan bulldozes his way through with a mania which makes you feel drunk and giddy before you've begun.

A springy accordion and chaotic drums rapidly introduce an especially gravelly, phlegmy Dylan, echoed by a straggly boisterous chorus. The arrangement [borrows heavily from The Pogues](#) to provide an all-round sense of rosy-cheeked inebriation. Ever since

Fairytale of New York

, Christmas appears to be Official Pogues Season, and here the happy accordion and frantic pacing injects this tired standard with a much-needed joie de vivre. The result is a Christmas party track that, while ostensibly a children's song, sounds like it was brewed somewhere in a dingy London back street by a groggy Irish band brawling with a gang of rambunctious elves. Such raucous inebriation makes the whole thing feel rather more adult and hedonistic, to the extent that it borders on the vaguely sinister; check Dylan's "HO, HO, HO" at 1.01. I wouldn't advise anyone to sit on that man's lap.

At the climax of the Must Be Santa list - Reindeer sleigh, come our way/HO HO HO, cherry nose/Cap on head, suit that's red/Special night, beard that's white -

Mitch Miller takes a sluggish 10 seconds to stomp through them. Bob Dylan whistles through at a speedy 6 seconds, ushering in the Big Red Man's arrival with barely concealed hysteria. Likewise, in the 1960s version all eight names of the approaching reindeer are enunciated beautifully. With Uncle Bob, they slide into one big drunken slur which morphs into a ramshackle list of American presidents.

All this bad behaviour and tipsy energy creates a rush of excitement that the 60s version totally loses. If Mitch Miller evokes images of freshly scrubbed anodyne children with perfect ringlets and cheesy smiles then Bob Dylan breeds naughty, bad-behaved brats, high on Cadbury's Mini-heroes and stolen swigs from the brandy bottle.

The video invites you to a decadent house party, full of gorgeous girls and boys in chic pre-WW2 party wear, lit by soft, rosy candlelight. Yet, amongst all this beauty and glamour, there's trouble afoot when a punch-up starts, not to mention Bob Dylan's creepy wig and Bill Oddie on the accordion. Lovely, naughty and just a little bit unsavoury, Bob Dylan's *Must Be Santa* is one big breathless knees-up where everyone gets over-excited, drinks too much and then a fight breaks out. The perfect Christmas, surely?

The United Nations' World Food Programme and Crisis receive all royalties from Bob Dylan's Christmas album, *Christmas in the Heart*, so if you're still moaning about Bob selling out, well bah humbug. At least it's not Starbucks.

More from Stephanie King at [Missing Dust Jacket](#)