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Jingle dead, jingle dead, jingle all the way

Christmas. High time for re-releasing classic recordings from household artists from the past. It's that time of year when TV, radio, newspapers and websites advertise music from well-known artists such as Sinatra, Elvis, and the like. The music industry is well aware of three things: this is the season when consumers' appetite for any old song that will feed that nostalgic mood peaks; artists and repertoire from the remote 1950s and 1960s are more suitable for romanticise family gatherings; and everyone has a hard time deciding which Christmas present they should buy for those very particular uncles whose musical curiosity has given up on them thirty years ago.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J94EWJ_sT2o

This year there's a "new" album by Ella Fitzgerald "with" the London Symphony Orchestra featuring a "duet" with contemporary jazz singer Gregory Porter. The reason I've just put some words between quotation marks is simple – they're not true. Ella died in 1996 and Porter started his career in 2004 doubling as chef and singer at the now defunct Bread-Stuy restaurant, in Brooklyn. However, [Someone to Watch Over Me](#) is being advertised as new. And, to some extent, it is. Using a couple of albums made in the early 1950s where Ella sings Gershwin and various songs from the Great American Songbook, technicians were able to isolate her voice, record the Orchestra separately and then blend it all together. A remarkable new product only made possible by state-of-the-art audio technology, without a doubt.

But is this ethically acceptable? Is it okay to manipulate the recorded work from dead artists to our likings? Should we draw the line between paying tribute to popular artists and exploiting their legacy? One thing is certain: no one asked Ella.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hD1XuOiLCpc>

Every Christmas, artists seem blindly drawn to sing a duet with dead people they admire. Susan Boyle's 2013 Christmas holiday album features her rendition of [O Come, All Ye Faithful](#) in a posthumous duet with Elvis Presley; Rod Stewart's 2012 Merry Christmas, Baby album includes a duet with Ella Fitzgerald on [What Are You Doing New Year's Eve?](#); and the promotional single for Dean Martin's 2011 retrospective collection of Christmas songs, My Kind of Christmas, was a duet with Hollywood star Scarlett Johansson on [I'll be Home for Christmas](#).

Although this is more common in Christmas, it happens all year round. The music world was clearly divided when Natalie Cole decided to make a record with the voice of her dead father, Nat King Cole. [Unforgettable With Love](#) became a huge commercial success and went on to win a Grammy for Best Album the Year in 1991. Less divided was the audience at the 1997

tribute concert that marked the 20th anniversary of Elvis Presley's death, when his daughter Lisa Marie Presley sang a duet with a video of her father on [*Don't Cry Baby*](#).

However, in most cases, what might have started as a very sincere way of paying tribute to past artists, ends up being seen as a pathetic attempt to rub shoulders with timeless music icons. In 2000, Kenny G got a taste of how such attempts can backlash in a rather bitter way. When he overdubbed his saxophone on Louis Armstrong's [*What a Wonderful World*](#), the jazz world didn't show any kind of sympathy – on the contrary, jazz guitarist Pat Metheny called it “[musical necrophilia](#)”. And, despite receiving his 15th Grammy nomination with the album *My Dream Duets* in 2015, featuring duets exclusively with dead artists, Barry Manilow was quite criticized and included in the Guardian's list of “[the creepiest duets with dead singers](#)”.

However controversial they may be, holograms of dead artists are taking prime time television and may soon be accepted as natural. [Martina McBride and Elvis](#), [Celine Dion and Elvis](#), or [Christina Aguilera and Whitney Huston](#) are good examples of that.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KK6sMo8NBY>

So what's wrong with Ella's “new” album?

In one of the original recordings used to rip Ella's voice, [Ella Sings Gershwin \(1950\)](#), she is responding to a pianist (the discrete but amazing Ellis Larkins, who was utterly obliterated from the [2017 version](#)). Ella was known for being able to interpret the same song in an absolutely new and exciting way every time she sang it. It is fair to assume that she would most likely respond differently to an orchestra. And that response is the actual voice of the artists. Records are more than sound – they document a moment in time of a unique interaction between musicians, producer, technicians, and even the recording room. Technology is very useful when it comes to restoring priceless recordings and enable them to be enjoyed today. That is respecting our past and heritage. Using that to sell a Christmas album is a completely different agenda.