

Ayiesha Woods

Christmas Like This

There are so many things vying for one's attention around the holidays — last-minute Christmas giving, decorating, cooking, gift-wrapping, the annual Christmas pageant at church — that sometimes the sounds of the season are the last thing on people's minds.

Merely a year after the release of her critically acclaimed *Love Like This*, Ayiesha Woods is bound to change that with her first-ever yuletide collection, appropriately titled *Christmas Like This*.

"Recording a Christmas record in the middle of the summer was a lot of fun," Woods says. "When it comes to Christmas and the spirit of Christmas, if it's good music, you can pretty much put it on in February if you want and make it enjoyable."

For Woods — who in her short span as a recording artist has amassed a wealth of accolades, including a GRAMMY® nomination and a nod for New Artist of the Year at the GMA Dove Awards — *Christmas Like This* is yet another opportunity to show that music, especially that which is played during the most wonderful time of the year, doesn't have to settle for the middle of the road.

"You have to watch it when recording a Christmas project because you always run the risk that it could be borderline cheesy," Woods says. "We were very cognizant of that. When we said we were going to do a Christmas record, we were going to make sure that we'd make it timeless and that people would enjoy it 50 years from now."

Indeed, *Christmas Like This*, produced by Jamie Moore (tobyMac, CeCe Winans), finds Ayiesha at her very best. From the infectious Caribbean strains of "Joy to the World" to her sweeping, reverent arrangement of "O Holy Night" and "O Come All Ye Faithful," she knows how to adapt her style from festive to thoughtful, depending on the mood.

Channeling the throwback neo-soul style of Amy Winehouse and Duffy, Woods also offers terrific takes on "Walking In A Winter Wonderland" and "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," as well as a cooler-than-cool version of the R&B standard, "Merry Christmas, Baby," originally made popular by the incomparable Otis Redding.

But whether she is doing her best torch-singer impression on "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" or showing her sassy side in her soulful reading of Donny Hathaway's "This Christmas," ultimately, Woods knows her ultimate purpose is to shed light on the real reason for the season.

The singer shared with us some of the heart, spirit, and soul behind *Christmas Like This* and some of the things that make the season bright for her:

What's your favorite song on *Christmas Like This* and why?

Ayiesha: Most of the songs! Oh my word... you don't understand. I'm excited about this entire project. But if I have to have a favorite — and it's not because of the context or the premise, but because of how it came out sonically — it would be Rudolph. I just love it — it's just funk. It feels so good. It's Christmas party all the way.

What's your favorite carol on the album?

Ayiesha: "O Come All Ye Faithful." In a traditional sense, those songs were written at a time where writers wrote with depth and the lyrics were just beautiful and amazing. The reason "O Come" is one of my favorites is because, even though it's a carol, it's a worship song. It's a song that celebrates not only the birth of Christ, but it also celebrates his death and his resurrection and the life to come in Christ Jesus. It's straight worship — it could be sung all year round.

Why did you decide to do a new rendition of the R&B classic "Merry Christmas, Baby"?

Ayiesha: “Merry Christmas, Baby” is a song that — it’s not Christmas in our house unless you hear that song playing, the Otis Redding version. My dad turned us on to that song many, many years ago. I had to do that one just for him. And he loves it. We’ve swung it. It’s got my dad’s approval. He’s going to put down the Otis Redding version and start playing the Ayiesha Woods version.

You’ve lived in different places over the years — New York, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Texas, Bermuda. What’s your favorite spot to spend Christmas in?

Ayiesha: Wow. That’s a good question. Early on in Bermuda, we had tropical Christmases, and it was nice, but Christmas in my mind needs to be freezing cold — and if we get snow, that would just top it off. As much as I love Bermuda, it’s not my favorite place to be for Christmas. Hawaii was an interesting place to spend Christmas because it was also a tropical spot. In Orlando, Florida, we spent some great Christmases. But Dallas, Texas, was the best, because although we’re in the South, it gets cold in Dallas, and we actually get some snow and ice — just enough to really appreciate Christmas.

What’s your favorite Christmas food?

Ayiesha: Definitely baked turkey. My family recently started trying this deep-fried turkey business and I don’t go for it. You might as well eat fried chicken. Give me **the** traditional turkey that’s been sitting in the oven for hours. The kind that you make turkey sandwiches with even after Christmas.

Is there a big family tradition you continue to follow year after year?

Ayiesha: There’s not one Christmas where I wake up and the house is not my family’s. After we eat on Christmas day, everyone ends up at my folks’ house. It’s usually 2 or 3 in the afternoon and everyone, including people from our church family, gets together, we exchange gifts and then just dance. It’s all about family, giving, and celebrating Christ. I’ll just jump on the keyboard and maybe have a little worship.

What’s your favorite Christmas gift ever received? How old were you?

Ayiesha: Here’s the thing: It wasn’t really my gift, but I remember being so very excited about it. It was something for my sister. We got up Christmas morning, back in like 1986, and we went into the family room and here’s this little albino guinea pig in a cage that my folks had put under the tree for my sister. I thought it was for both of us, but it was really for her. But she let me share in the excitement and let me think it was for me also. I was 5 or 6 years old. I think she named it Gersha.

Do you have a least favorite Christmas gift?

Ayiesha: Absolutely. I was just telling someone about this recently. I think that hard times have come to us all, and there was a time when we were struggling. Our family was out on the mission field and things weren’t that great. I remember I got a yellow Frisbee — I think I would’ve done better without ever getting it. But it was yellow Frisbee that had “Vote for so and so” written on it. It was the absolute worst I ever received in my entire life. It was humbling. But thanks be to God for those times, because things like that helped to shape us and mold us that Christmas is about so much more than gifts.

Why is Christmas the most wonderful time of the year?

Ayiesha: Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year because what we are celebrating is beautiful. Although it’s been commercialized in so many ways, Christmas is certainly something that’s universally acknowledged. I wouldn’t say *accepted*, but it’s certainly universally acknowledged. And for the fact that the world knows that it’s the day that we celebrate the Savior, it’s amazing. It’s an opportunity for us as the Lord’s creatures to spread the love of Christ and reach those that do not know the real meaning of Christmas.

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