

“I’m the first one in mid-to-late October to be pulling out my holiday records,” Chely Wright says with a chuckle, before naming Christmas albums by Nat King Cole, the Carpenters, Trisha Yearwood and Alan Jackson as favorites. Now the acclaimed singer-songwriter, activist and author has made her own contribution to the holiday shelf with *Santa Will Find You*, a new six-track EP available from the Painted Red Music Group.

Rather than delve into the classic Christmas songbook, Wright decided to showcase her original holiday songs, most of them shaped with friends and collaborators including Richard Marx, Jeremy Lister and Mindy Smith. With powerful but tasteful production by Lister, a fast-rising Nashville renaissance man, and the fantastic young multi-instrumentalist Dustin Ransom, *Santa Will Find You* is just the sort of warm-and-cozy collection fans will want as the soundtrack to their ornament-hanging, giftwrapping and cookie-baking adventures.

But it’s also much more. Befitting an artist whose story is among the most compelling in country music history—from a hit-making Nashville starlet to a trailblazing LGBT advocate and thoughtful musical storyteller—Wright’s Christmas music reflects the fuller sense of humanity behind the holiday season. Here you’ll find the joy of being surrounded by kith and kin in the present, as well as the melancholy that comes with reflection. It’s a celebration of the pals we look forward to seeing each December, and an expression of yearning for the friends we’re missing. Finally, it’s a bittersweet homage to love—whether it’s been found, lost or is just sort of waiting to come around again.

Actually, *Santa Will Find You* finds Wright engaging with the holiday season in an honest and personal way before the first note is heard. When she began to think about possible cover art for the project, Wright saw that she needed to take a step back and process the mission at hand. “What *is* this music?” she asked herself. “What do I hope it does for people?”

Her answer—to help inspire her fans’ future memories—called for a detour down memory lane. “I hope this music becomes part of a new emotional landscape for listeners,” she says. “And that made me revisit why I wanted to make this record, and I was contemplative about my holiday memories. So I started digging through old photos.”

She eventually came across some family Polaroids, one of which immediately caught her eye. Captured on Christmas Morning of 1973, it features Wright, age 3, her two siblings and two of her cousins—an “aggregate of children,” as she puts it, that were pretty much raised together. All these years later, the image quickly brings to mind the sweetest remembrances. “I grew up in a small town in Kansas,” Wright begins, “and we either spent Christmas morning at our house or at my Aunt Char’s house or in Arizona at my grandparents’ house. We would wake up on Christmas morning and it was as magical as you would hope it is. We would all be in one bedroom, in one bed or a couple of beds, trying to sleep on Christmas Eve, swearing to God that we heard Santa and the reindeer on the roof.”

Tragically, one of the children in the photo, Wright’s cousin David, died in 1981 of complications from diabetes. He would have turned 50 this year. “It’s hard in some ways to look

at the photo, and really kind of comforting in other ways,” Wright says. “We all miss David very much, and it’s pretty painful to have him gone.” When she called David’s mother, her Aunt Char, to ask if it’d be OK to use the image, the response was instantaneous and effusive. “She said, ‘Oh, I love it, I love it. He was a star,’” Wright recalls brightly. “It’s a neat way to honor the history of our family.”

With the title track, “Santa Will Find You,” Wright honors the family she’s built with wife Lauren Blitzer and their twin boys, George and Everett, while also nodding to her experiences as a uniquely gifted tunesmith. Co-written with the singer-songwriter Mindy Smith, who introduced “Santa Will Find You” on her 2007 album *My Holiday*, the song can be read as both a wistful paean to our servicemen and women deployed overseas, and a window into a child’s mind on Christmas Eve. By way of illustration, Wright tells a story of Christmas 2017: “My wife and I and our two little boys were in Pennsylvania, at her grandfather’s house for Christmas. In the weeks leading up to Christmas Day, our boys were totally, 1,000-percent freaked out that Santa would not know where to bring their presents. It’s a real thing that kids are concerned about!”

Another Wright original that the singer reclaims on this EP is the leadoff cut, “It Really Is (A Wonderful Life).” She wrote it alone, on a quiet, post-breakup Christmas Eve in 2005, and initially sent a demo version out to her fan club via email, as a holiday gift. But the tune eventually “took on a life of its own in a really beautiful way,” Wright says, and became part of Smith’s holiday album and the Indigo Girls’ 2010 disc *Holly Happy Days*. So Wright found herself in a sort of fortunate predicament: It was her song, but it’d already been covered gorgeously by her dear friends. Enter producers Lister and Ransom, who construct a delightful treatment that manages to conjure up the period quirks of ’60s pop while sounding wholly modern. “The fact that they carved not a new path but an entirely new interstate for my song,” Wright says, “it just blew my mind and made me so grateful.”

In the late 90’s, Wright and Richard Marx began collaborating as co-writers and co-producers and their decades-long friendship has deepened as they continue to write together and are “creative sounding boards” for one another’s works-in-progress. On *Santa Will Find You* they team up on two co-written gems. “Happy New Year, Old Friend” is a torchy, after-hours rumination on that time of year that’s “both the end of something and the beginning of something, which is a really interesting handoff,” Wright says. Perhaps even more interesting is the versatility of the song’s intent, with a message equally applicable to platonic pals or a deeply romantic pair. Marx’s iconic voice sidles up to Wright’s on “Christmas Isn’t Christmas Time,” which, with its “Be My Baby” beat and uplifting orchestral backing, is state-of-the-art pop craftsmanship that simply demands repeat listens. (If the Phil Spector-inspired touches aren’t obvious enough, a “Spector Version” of the song is included as a bonus cut—and rock history buffs should prepare to grin from ear to ear.) Longtime fans will find comfort in “Can’t Believe It’s Christmas,” a Wright/Lister effort whose contemporary Nashville vibe evokes the singer’s hits of the late ’90s and early 2000s.

Wright’s résumé reads like the fulfillment of every dream a wide-eyed Nashville hopeful could muster up: her first major-label deal in 1993; the Academy of Country Music’s Top New Female

Vocalist Award in '95; her first Top 40 country hit, "Shut Up and Drive," in '97. Two years later, the title track to her first Gold album, "Single White Female," topped *Billboard's* Hot Country Songs chart. While still in her mid-twenties, Wright had become an undeniable country music star, renowned for her strong, adaptable singing and precocious songwriting talent. At the Grand Ole Opry's 75th anniversary gala, in 2000, she and Brad Paisley performed a song they co-wrote, "Hard to Be a Husband, Hard to Be a Wife." More triumphs followed. Her 2004 single "The Bumper of My S.U.V." was a pensive statement of patriotism that became a country radio staple even without major-label support. With Clay Walker, she wrote his Top 10 hit "I Can't Sleep," released early in 2004.

In 2010 Wright released her Random House memoir, *Like Me: Confessions of a Heartland Country Singer*, and forever altered the social landscape of Nashville. She recognized that the book, a fearless account of her struggles as a secretly gay country artist, was an all-or-nothing proposition. "I knew there would be no ticker tape parade thrown on Music Row for me," she admits. "There's a reason why people hide." But the worry she felt throughout her life, even prior to moving to Nashville, and the pain that accompanied that anxiety, eventually left her no choice. "Nothing grows in a closet," Wright says. "I was dying spiritually, physically, emotionally."

Since coming out and essentially building a second career as an LGBT advocate, Wright has seen her public image and reputation in the industry change in fascinating (but not necessarily surprising) ways. Fans who shunned her have come back into the fold, the result of both self-discovery and shifts within the larger culture. The same goes for her colleagues, many of whom supported Wright privately at first but not publicly. In the end, her identity as both an artist who embodies country music's core values—a dedicated person of faith and patriot, Wright began playing for the troops "way before it was even cool," she says—and a strong gay woman made her an ideal catalyst for changing hearts and minds.

Meanwhile, Wright's family life has flourished, and her creative output has never been more captivating. While working on 2010's *Lifted Off the Ground*, musician and producer Rodney Crowell helped Wright to define her future. "He said, 'What do you want to do? What's the big picture look like for you?,'" she recalls. "And I said, 'I want to be 60 years old, sitting on a stool, telling stories and singing old songs and new.' He said, 'Well, then you've gotta get on this path and you've gotta not get off it—as uncomfortable as it might be, or as unrewarding as it might be. If you want to be a sustaining artist, a storyteller, then you've got to commit to it.'" Wright continued in the spirit she established on *Lifted*, somehow at once introspective and cathartic, on 2016's *I Am the Rain*, produced by multiple Grammy winner Joe Henry. *Revival*, an EP slated for release in the first quarter of 2019, finds Wright furthering her work as an emotionally brazen songwriter.

But for now there's *Santa Will Find You*, a smart, charming stocking-stuffer of a holiday record. As Wright explains, these different facets are what make her happy, healthy life possible. "I'm a mom and a wife. I'm a sister. I'm a friend. I'm a voting American. I'm an openly gay artist who is known to be a country music artist," she says. "We have a lot of stories to tell as humans. Advocacy is part of my story, and singing about Christmas is part of my story as well."