

# DIAMOND RIO

## CHRISTMAS

THE STAR STILL SHINES

The mere mention of Christmas immediately brings to mind the sounds of the season. Music always plays such an integral part in the celebration and everyone has their favorite songs. The members of award-winning country band Diamond Rio are no exception. That's why their new album, *A Diamond Rio Christmas: The Star Still Shines* is such a labor of love.

For years the guys in Diamond Rio had wanted to record a Christmas album, but supplying country radio with such hits as "Meet in the Middle," "One More Day," "Beautiful Mess," "Unbelievable," and "How Your Love Makes Me Feel" kept the group extremely busy and it was hard to find time to record a Christmas collection. That's why when Diamond Rio signed a new deal with Word Records, that long-awaited Christmas project was at the top of the band's to do list.

The result is a project that showcases each member's musical talent in a way the band has never been able to explore. Of course, there are straight ahead country tracks, but listeners will also hear the bluegrass sound of "Christmas Time's A Comin'," which gives bluegrass aficionados Gene Johnson and Dana Williams a chance to shine as well as pop classics such as "The Christmas Song (Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire)," which find lead vocalist Marty Roe crooning like a modern day Bing Crosby.

"We decided to put our mark on each one of the songs, so every song is different than what you would expect to hear," says keyboardist Dan Truman. "There are a bunch of surprises as far as the arrangements and the little things we did to them which made it an absolute blast for us, just sitting around in the studio coming up with new ideas for the same old songs."

"It's still distinctively Diamond Rio," adds drummer Brian Prout.

Diamond Rio has long been one of country music's most successful groups. The band released its platinum-selling debut disc in 1991. The following year, Diamond Rio won the Country Music Association's Vocal Group of the Year award for the first time. They've scored nine No. 1 hits and placed 15 singles in the Top Five. Six-time Vocal Group of the year collectively from the Country Music Association and Academy of Country Music, Diamond Rio was inducted into the Grand Ole Opry in 1998. The band has sold more than 10 million records and received the Minnie Pearl Humanitarian Award in recognition of their many charitable endeavors, including their longtime relationship as National Spokespersons for Big Brothers Big Sisters.

But it's not the industry accolades that spring to mind when fans think of Diamond Rio. It is the songs that have touched so many lives. Though they are a successful country band, the group has always been known for songs that convey hope and celebrate faith such as the No. 1 hit "I Believe," "Mama Don't Forget to Pray for Me" and the poignant "God Only Cries."

*A Diamond Rio Christmas: The Star Still Shines*, continues that tradition with a wonderful new seasonal song, "The Star Still Shines." "It's a great song and it has a great message to it," says Roe. "It's about the Christmas story, the birth of Christ. I love the sentiment that the star is still shining. He is still here with us and that good news is still here today. I think we came out with something really, really special."

Working with their longtime producer, Michael Clute, Diamond Rio recorded the album at guitarist Jimmy Olander's studio, Casa de Twang. Instead of being separated into different booths in a large studio, Olander's home studio offered a chance to record in an intimate studio setting and the chemistry can be felt in the music. "It was close quarters, but I truly think that's the beauty of it," says bassist Dana Williams. "The magic was felt when we were all right there and able to create together."

“All of us jamming in a room together made it much more like a little jam session and a little more free and I think it shows on the record too,” says Johnson, Rio’s acclaimed mandolin player who is known for his high tenor vocals.

The band couldn’t have asked for a better setting. In addition to the cool studio vibe, they also had a chance to experience the Olander family hospitality, as Jimmy and his wife, Claudia, cooked for the band and decorated the studio to foster that Christmas spirit. “I did have lights and little snowballs and stuff in the studio, but once you start playing these songs, you get in the mood,” Olander says. “This is probably some of my most favorite music. I have this huge collection of Christmas music with all kinds of things from the Venture’s Christmas CD to Charlie Brown stuff and to the classics like Nat King Cole. I love this material and know it really well, so to actually get a chance to do this was awesome.”

Olander says he really enjoyed getting a chance to put the Diamond Rio stamp on some of his favorite Christmas tunes. “We just literally took each song on a song by song basis and tried to come up with a little something special and it was really fun,” Olander says. “‘Winter Wonderland’ has this kind of retro 70’s groove thing. On ‘Christmas Time’s a Comin’ we decided to go really bluegrass and to have the acoustic slap bass on there and banjo. Then we definitely went for high drama on ‘Oh Come Oh Come Emmanuelle.’”

Recording *A Diamond Rio Christmas: The Star Still Shines* gave the members a chance to record their favorite holiday classics, among them “Walking in a Winter Wonderland,” “Let It Snow,” and “Christmas Time is Here,” which became a holiday favorite courtesy of “A Charlie Brown Christmas.” The album also features a stunning a cappella version of “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.”

Johnson says they deliberately opted to record mostly classic Christmas songs instead of new material. “We took a poll amongst ourselves and some of our loved ones and it seems like everybody likes to hear the standards,” he explains. “Christmas is a time for memories and I think that’s why people listen to standards, and it’s why we chose to record the classics.”

Diamond Rio experienced a sense of freedom in recording the Christmas collection. The result is an album that allows the members of the band to really express themselves musically in a way they never have before. “We went to great lengths to come up with some great arrangements,” says Truman. “Jimmy, Gene, and I are soloing on seven of the eleven tracks. When we do a regular country album, I might solo on two or three songs, but on this record, I’m doing jazz solos, R&B solos, just a lot of different stuff that I don’t normally do, not to mention the fun vocal things that we did with “Hark The Herald Angels Sing” and “Oh Come, Oh Come Emmanuelle.”

Williams and Johnson also had an opportunity to step out vocally on the Christmas project. Though Roe’s distinctive voice has always been the cornerstone of the Diamond Rio sound, on “Christmas Time’s A Comin’” he shares the mic with Williams and Johnson. Williams sings the second verse and Johnson takes the third. “Dana and Gene did a great job,” says Truman. “It’s a bluegrass Christmas song and that’s how both of those guys grew up, so it worked out real well.”

For more than two decades, the members of Diamond Rio have been making music together. In a competitive industry where band members come and go, there have been no personnel changes. To what do they attribute that stability? “We’re friends, even away from the stage,” says Prout. “I’ve been a part of this band for 21 years. I feel fortunate because you hear horror stories about groups that don’t get along, but the bottom line is we came up together.”

Williams agrees. “We like what we’re doing and most of us don’t know how to do anything else,” he says with a laugh. “We like one another and respect one another. I can’t even imagine doing this with anybody else. This is my music family. This is what I do and who I want to do it with.”



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