



Fourth Sunday of Advent – December 24, 2023

The Music Man Behind the Charlie Brown Christmas

“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3)

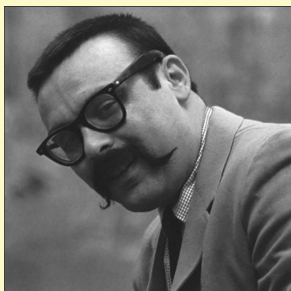
Dear Thomas,

Of course **the Christ Child is the center of Christmas**; without Him the holiday would have no meaning at all. Yet there’s another boy, one named Charlie Brown, who has become almost a symbol of Christmas to many Americans. Every year, there’s a sense that if you miss the Charlie Brown Christmas special, your Christmas won’t be as bright!

But it wasn’t just cartoonist Charles Schulz’s wonderful animations that have **tugged on the heartstrings of generations**. The musical accompaniment also played an enormous role, making the scenes and characters come alive in a way that is unique and meaningful.

And the man behind that music was **a jazz pianist** from San Francisco named Vince Guaraldi (1928-76).

At the end of this newsletter I will include links to two of the **most beloved scenes** from the full length cartoon and one audio tune, but let’s first look at the incredible combination of factors that went into making “*A Charlie Brown Christmas*” the classic that it is.



A Hipster In Every Sense

As far as I can tell from the biographies, Guaraldi was what we would call today a “hipster” in every way. One look at his handlebar mustache should cement the impression that **he must have been an incredibly vibrant personality**.

(Some claim that the iconic character of Snoopy’s older brother “Spike”, who had a droopy whiskers that looked like a mustache, was modeled on Guaraldi, but Schulz never clarified that.)

Early in his career, he played in the San Francisco beatnik club scene and honed his significant talents as a jazz musician. He got his break in the Big Band era of the 1950s, **touring with the Woody Herman**

band and appearing on stage with many of the jazz greats of the day including Stan Getz.

He achieved much wider fame after a 1963 Stanford/Oregon football game when the college band went on strike, and he and his jazz trio were called in to do the halftime show from the 50-yard line! Furthering the hipster image, he was heavily into **Brazilian Bossa Nova, boogie woogie, and fusion** and adapted his style seamlessly to new types of instruments and styles when the electronic music era dawned.

In all, he produced over **two dozen of his own jazz albums** while maintaining a vibrant career as a performing artist. Guaraldi was prolific, if anything.

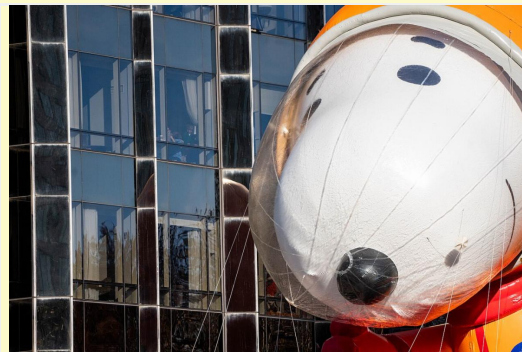
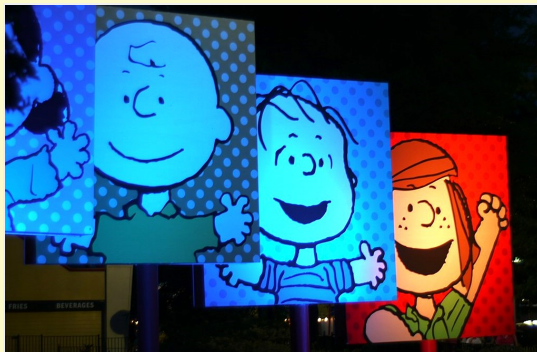


These may not be noteworthy credentials for anyone outside the jazz world, but they meant that Guaraldi was **on the cutting edge of jazz in the fifties and sixties**. He was a recognized talent who influenced later jazz artists like Wynton Marsalis, Harry Connick, Jr., and George Winston whose names may be known to our generation.

Grammy-Level Talent

Perhaps the greatest tribute to his rising talent was the Grammy Award he won in 1963 for Best Instrumental Jazz Composition. You may not know the name of **his award-winning song** ("[Cast Your Fate to the Wind](#)") but you would probably recognize the tune as the familiar jazzy background music you might hear in a mall when doing your Christmas shopping.

Which of course leads us to the thing for which Guaraldi is MOST famous: **Charlie Brown!**



If Charles Schulz is the genius creator of the visuals and story lines of the Peanuts series, Vince Guaraldi must be rightfully considered **the creator of the emotional culture** surrounding the lovable characters. His music in a sense binds us to those beloved images in a way that nothing else can.

The Christmas special, in particular, is the story of **a boy who has a kind of negative attitude** toward life and gets depressed at the approach of Christmas. Charlie Brown eventually finds contentment in the true meaning of Christmas, which, as you may recall, is the recitation of the Nativity story from Luke's Gospel.

In other words, the Gospel message is the very center of the Christmas special, which **makes Charlie Brown a sort of evangelist** in his own way for generations of kids and adults. It is said that Charles Schulz insisted on keeping that recitation of the Nativity in the show when the producers and promoters wanted to cut it out because they thought it was too preachy.

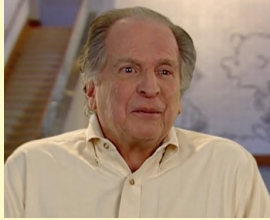


The Lord has told us that we can **only enter the Kingdom of God by way of childhood**, and Charlie Brown certainly helps us do that.

When we watch a Charlie Brown special, we must **enter the world of innocence**. Every sentiment, image, and thought speaks of that pure approach to life and faith that is rapidly being drained out of our society today. I think that's why people tend to get so nostalgic about those wonderful Peanuts specials (see list at the end).

A Combination of Talents

But the Charlie Brown Christmas special didn't come about on its own. **Three incredibly talented men** pooled their skills to bring to life one of the most touching stories in modern history: the cartoonist, the musician, and the producer.



Lee Mendelson was a San Francisco television producer who contracted with Charles Schulz to produce the first Peanuts Christmas special. As the story goes, one day Mendelson was **driving across the Golden Gate Bridge** and heard Guaraldi's "Cast Your Fate to the Wind" on the radio. He immediately thought jazzy music like that would be a good fit for the full-length cartoon, and as it turns out, that was an understatement.

Shortly after that, the two men talked on the phone and Guaraldi went to work. Within two weeks, he called Mendelson in **a burst of excitement**. He was working on a song he thought would be perfect for the show, and he wanted to play it for Mendelson while it was fresh in his mind. He hadn't even written it down yet!

Mendelson preferred to hear it in a studio but Guaraldi was insistent: he had to play it over the phone right then and there for his producer. When he heard it, **Mendelson was immediately hooked**. Guaraldi had just created *the signature song* for the whole Peanuts series, called "Linus and Lucy" (see video below).

Incredibly, Guaraldi wrote the entire score of the Charlie Brown Christmas special in [three hours](#). **Wow**. And the rest is history.



An Untimely Demise...

There is so much of interest in Guaraldi's story that I can't do justice to it in a short article (If you'd like to read an unexpectedly good piece from CNN on the Charlie Brown Christmas special, check it out [here](#)), but he was **a truly fascinating guy** who left an indelible impression of beauty and goodness on a whole nation.

Like so many creative geniuses in history, Guaraldi was **not long for this world**. It seems he had a work to finish, and when it was done, he was done.

On February 6, 1976, the evening of the very day he finished recording the last of his Peanuts sound tracks, Guaraldi was doing what he loved best, performing on stage. Between sets that night, he was with a friend in a hotel room when he keeled over and **died instantly from a massive heart attack**. Guaraldi was only 47.

The world lost an irreplaceable talent that day. **Guaraldi's mother, Carmella**, insisted that several of her son's Peanuts music pieces be played at the funeral, and, of course, there was not a dry eye in the house.

Charles Schulz outlived Guaraldi by almost a quarter century and also died of a heart attack at the age of 77 (in the year 2000). And, in an incredible irony, Lee Mendelson, the producer of the beloved Christmas show, **died in 2019 at the age of 86 ... on Christmas Day**.

...But An Unforgettable Legacy

The average American would probably never have heard of Vince Guaraldi were it not for his Charlie Brown creations, but our culture is richer because he shared his gifts with the world in an extraordinary way. In addition to his own jazz albums, Guaraldi recorded **sixteen Charlie Brown soundtracks including the Christmas special**.



Many more Peanuts specials were produced after Guaraldi's passing, but **they were never the same.** His biographer Derrick Bang said that no one who came after Guaraldi ever "produced a song or theme anywhere near as catchy as the Master." How true.

My favorite reference to **Guaraldi's impact**, however, comes from a comment I saw on the YouTube channel of "A Charlie Brown Christmas":

I know that Mr. Guaraldi is no longer with us. But if I could tell him one thing, it would be, "Thank you for making my childhood Christmases, magical." I still get that warm and fuzzy feeling even now, in my 60's. Very grateful for that.

The person who made the comment was undoubtedly **speaking the sentiments of millions.**

Charlie Brown Christmas Features

Due to a tight production timeline for the Christmas special, Lee Mendelson couldn't find an artist to write the lyrics for the beloved song, "Christmastime is Here" (first clip below), so he wrote the lyrics himself. It was **recorded by the children's choir** from St. Paul's Episcopal Church in San Rafael, CA.

Enjoy these blessed classics and Merry Christmas to you and yours from Sacred Windows!

(Click on the pictures to go to the videos.)

Opening of "A Charlie Brown Christmas" (1:30)



Signature Song: "Linus and Lucy" (3:02)



And my favorite: "Skating" (Audio only, 2:22)



1964 [A Boy Named Charlie Brown \(documentary\)](#)
1965 [A Charlie Brown Christmas](#)
1966 [Charlie Brown's All Stars!](#)
1966 [It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown](#)
1967 [You're in Love, Charlie Brown](#)
1968 [He's Your Dog, Charlie Brown](#)
1969 [Charlie Brown and Charles Schulz](#)
1969 [It Was a Short Summer, Charlie Brown](#)

1971 [Play It Again, Charlie Brown](#)
1972 [You're Not Elected, Charlie Brown](#)
1973 [There's No Time for Love, Charlie Brown](#)
1974 [It's a Mystery, Charlie Brown](#)
1974 [It's the Easter Beagle, Charlie Brown](#)
1975 [Be My Valentine, Charlie Brown](#)
1975 [You're a Good Sport, Charlie Brown](#)
1976 [It's Arbor Day, Charlie Brown](#)

[Visit the Sacred Windows Vignettes Page](#)

Peter Darcy

[Visit our Newsletter Archives](#)

Photo Credits: Peanuts Soundtrack List ([Wikipedia](#)); Snoopy Macy's Day Balloon ([Jazz Guy from New Jersey](#)); [Lee Mendelson](#) (It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown DVD, [Warner Home Video](#)); Peanuts Characters ([mliu92 from San Mateo](#)); Snoopy Museum Tokyo ([Syced](#)); Schulz Hollywood Star ([Neelix](#), Public domain); Guaraldi ([YouTube screenshot](#)); Snoopy-Woodstock ([Wagner Paintings Gallery](#)).

TO CONTACT PETER:

Email: peterdarcy@sacredwindows.com

Author's Website: <https://peterdarcywriting.com>

SW Vignettes: www.sacredwindows.substack.com



Peter Darcy / Sacred Windows | PO Box 346, Port Salerno, FL 34992

[Unsubscribe tilma1961@gmail.com](mailto:tilma1961@gmail.com)

[Update Profile](#) | [Constant Contact Data Notice](#)

Sent by peterdarcy@sacredwindows.com powered by



Try email marketing for free today!