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Chuck Leavell is scary good. A world-class piano player and keyboardist, he has gotten in his licks with rock 'n roll legends like George Harrison, the Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton, the Allman Brothers, and the list goes on and on. Even as I write this review, Leavell is on the road with the Stones as they finish their world tour. Leavell's internationally-recognized professionalism is put to good use on *What's in That Bag*, an entertaining and sweetly-crafted, classic rock release that's a keeper.

What attracts me to *What's in That Bag*? Everything! Let's start with the album cover, which features a small boy whose face radiates uncontained surprise and joy as he peers into Santa's sack, apparently overstuffed with music-related booty. The kid's expression is priceless, and Leavell's music is priceless, too. The lucky 13 tracks include originals and some intensely creative arrangements of holiday standards, as well as a nice blend of instrumentals and vocals. Leavell also seamlessly mixes the contemporary with ancient carols, and the execution is excellent. It's all great here, beginning with the wah-wah opener "It's Just Not Christmas", an addictive ode to love that grabbed my interest in the first few bars (great horn section). I adored the fantastic instrumental "Joy Boogie"; here, Leavell's frenetic keyboard action fuses a stately "Joy to the World" with an explosive boogie-woogie bounce. Leavell is a talented songwriter; his "Hey Santa" is especially fired up and had the immediate feel of fun familiarity. And the artist's solo moments are breathtaking (on piano in "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" and "O Holy Night", and on acoustic guitar in "Away in a Manger"). Every track offers something very special.

As for the vocals, Leavell has impressive rock pipes, slightly rough and textured with plenty of rich emotion and a bluesy edge. The artist gets plenty of superb support from other musicians and backing vocalists on *What's in That Bag*?; the entire package is first rate. Of special note is Lisa Fischer's classy, sassy vocal on "Please Come Home for Christmas." This time of year, I always find myself yearning for a better developed selection of rock holiday offerings. Although Chuck Leavell's *What's in That Bag* is a bit of a combo platter blending diverse genres, its bluesy, rock soul lifts me up, puts a smile on my face, and makes me applaud. Exceptionally nice!--Carol Swanson 2006