

Vince Guaraldi: It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown

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Astonishingly, the *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown* soundtrack is only just now being made available in physical form thanks to Universal Music's film-score imprint Varèse Sarabande. But this isn't a lost gem to stand alongside the music from *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, some of the most haunting ever to grace a family TV special. There are no ancient voices of children here, and the dominant mood is light-hearted kiddie mischief rather than aching nostalgia. And it's inseparable from its source material, racing through 17 songs in 20 minutes at the same rate and in the same order as the special. (If *A Charlie Brown Christmas* received the same treatment, half its runtime would just be "Christmas Time Is Here.")

But it's a fun and affectionate album, and there's enough stuff going on here that even at its brisk runtime it feels like a pretty substantial jazz record. For instance, we get not one but *four* World War I ballads, played diegetically on piano by the character Schroeder, crammed into under two minutes. Full-fledged songs like "The Great Pumpkin Waltz," previously only available on an expanded version of the Christmas album, rub elbows with interstitial themes that play for a few seconds when, say, we see Linus licking a lollipop. The endless short reprises of themes like "Linus & Lucy," which God knows we've heard enough times, get annoying pretty quickly, but at least they give the record a sense of internal logic.

This album, which Guaraldi recorded with a sextet rather than his usual trio, might actually hang better front-to-back than the Christmas album. That album inevitably derails on the second side with trifles like "Für Elise" or "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing." The *Great Pumpkin* album's pretty much all trifles. Only "The Great Pumpkin Waltz" really towers above its surroundings. That's one of Vince Guaraldi's most poignant *Peanuts* compositions, its forlorn flute and spidery, descending piano motif suggesting a breeze blowing through the center of the piece – like the fall weather in which Linus waits all night for the Great Pumpkin to come. It's the centerpiece of the album, the jack-o-lantern in the Halloween display.

Another curious quirk that keeps this album hanging together is its use of soundbites from the cartoon, which were absent from the Christmas album. There's no dialogue, luckily, but we hear just about everything else. In the middle of the medley of World War I songs, we hear the self-styled Sopwith Camel pilot Snoopy burst into tears; it's a weird and inhuman sound that's actually the voice of animator Bill

Melédez sped up, Chipmunk-style. Indeed, there are so many strange sound effects on this thing, like the canned thunderclaps during "Graveyard Scene" and the distant boom of Snoopy's imagined battlefields on "Breathless," that the album has some of the same foley weirdness as a Joe Meek or Lee Perry record.

Someone who hasn't seen the special can be forgiven for being a little confused. But perhaps the record's better enjoyed blind so that these sketches don't just evoke the scene they're meant to accompany. I'm in the minority in that I don't recommend the *Peanuts* holiday specials; I find them hard to watch, with all those kids being so cruel to one another, though if you're curious *It's The Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown* airs October 26 on ABC. But Vince Guaraldi's contributions are rarely anything less than magical. Even if *Great Pumpkin* never stirs the soul the way *A Charlie Brown Christmas* can, it's still a spirited romp through the Halloween of Guaraldi's mind, and one of the year's most delightful reissues.