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April 2007

Tom Chapin

Passing the Music On

Kids & Stress

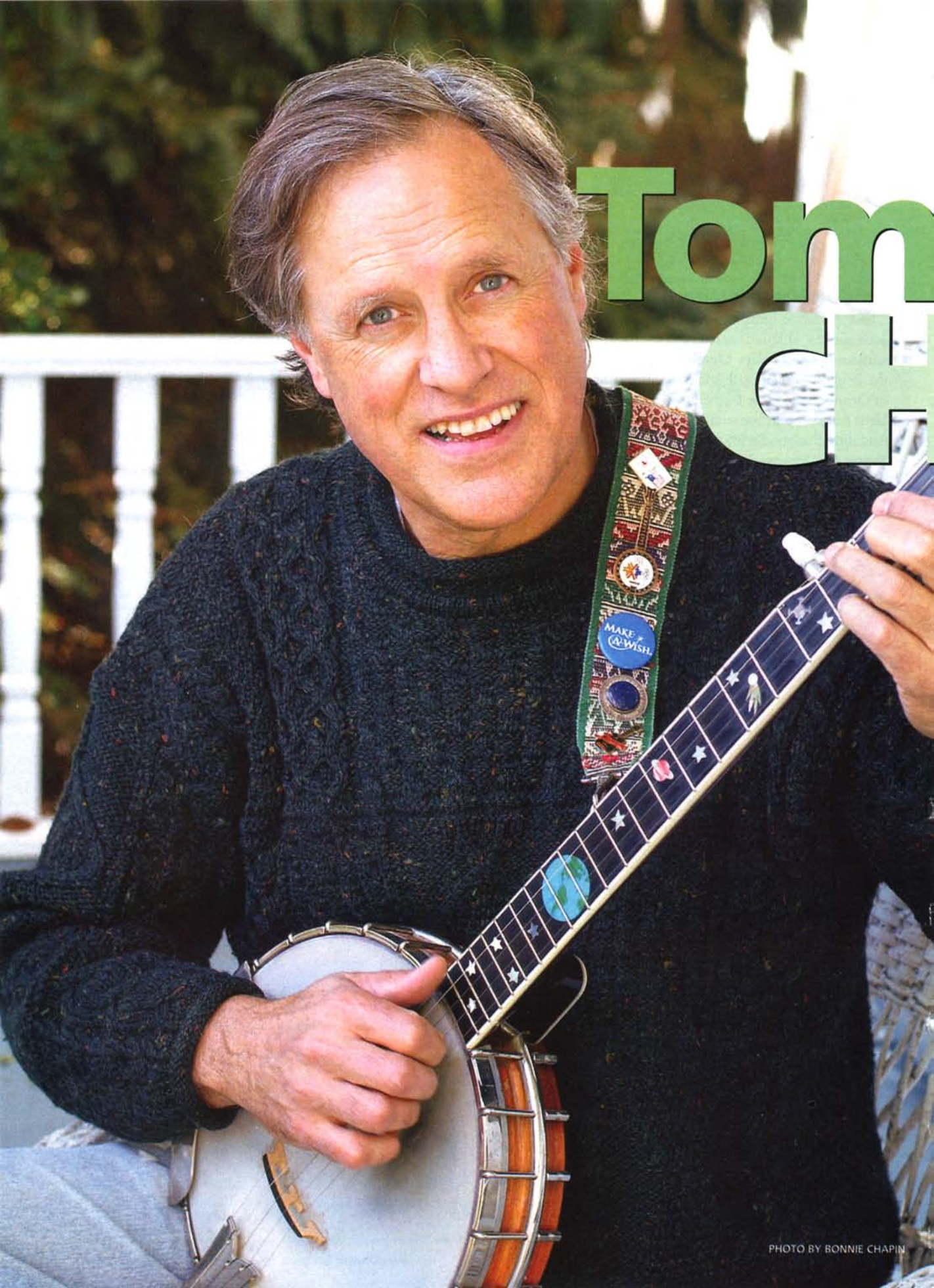
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Tom CH

On one of the first frigid nights of winter, a relaxed and dressed-down crowd gathered at Connecticut's Ridgefield Playhouse for Movies and Performing Arts to hear Tom Chapin, a grand master of contemporary folk music. It was Saturday evening, and a date-night buzz circulated throughout the cozy, 500-seat auditorium.

Chapin's ability to appeal to a diverse audience was more than apparent. A good portion of the audience was between 35 and 65. Yet, there was a large group of 20-somethings, one sporting blonde dreadlocks. Children were also present, eager and happy to hear their hero live and in person.

The friendly Playhouse staff settles the audience in. After an opening performance by The Wood Brothers, Chapin and his band, featuring Jon Cobert and Michael Mark, take the stage. Chapin, somewhat of a graceful giant at six feet, five inches, strolls up to the microphone in blue jeans, vest and a button-down work shirt with rolled-up sleeves. A shock of handsomely graying hair, piercing blue eyes and an easy manner makes this proud Rockland County grandfather seem a decade younger than his 62 years.

What follows is an evening of delightful music and social commentary. The appreciative audience listens attentively, nods in agreement and claps spontaneously to the upbeat tunes like "Puppy at the Pound." Chapin chats with the audience and explains that his music is not traditional but comes from a long line of tradition. "There's a song of generations singing in my veins as I play my story songs," he says. Refreshingly bereft of an oversized ego, Chapin claims he's there simply to "pass the music on."

Chapin never talks down to his audience, and even when playing what would be called a children's concert, he

watches and talks to the parents in the audience as much as the kids. One day during the last football season, Chapin was set to perform a family concert. It just so happened that it was the same day the Jets were playing the New England Patriots. Chapin knew it was a big game and suspected that many fathers would be glued to the TV, so he was surprised

to see so many dads in the audience. No doubt, Chapin thought at least some of those dads were there under duress.

"After the show, one of the dads came up to me and said, 'You know, I really wanted to see the game today, so I wasn't looking forward to coming here, but I really enjoyed myself, thank you.'" Chapin says the sincerity meant a lot to him. And although his modesty would not permit him to say it, it's also an example of his formidable talent.

CHAPIN

Passing the Music On

By Jean Sheff

Jean Strom of Darien, Conn., was there with her husband, a self-professed Led Zepplin man, and two daughters Haley and Caroline. "We listen to Tom's CDs all the time," says Strom. Haley, who is 4 1/2, was hoping that Chapin would sing "This Pretty Planet," her favorite tune, and the same ode to the Earth that one morning served as the wake-up call for astronaut John Glenn aboard space shuttle Discovery in 1998. "Tonight's a big night, the girls are getting to stay up extra late to see the show," Strom says.

Timeless Appeal

What is it about Chapin's music that has appealed to so many for so long? It's as simple as it is complex. Largely, it's his engaging vocals, melodic guitar, thought-provoking and witty lyrics and his warm persona – in short, the entire package.

Chapin has been performing and recording for some 30 years, releasing eight adult and 11 children's recordings as well as 11 other items from performance videos and recorded books to a Christmas collection and a baseball cap. But what he really likes doing is live concerts. "The chance to get together in the same room, on the same page, and explore emotionally and joyfully together is great," says Chapin. "I love that feeling when we are all rocking together." And performing for parents and kids, he says, brings him in touch with the best of humanity.



Children love Tom Chapin, and it's no wonder. With his easy style, funny wit and warm tunes, he makes the kid in everyone come alive, adults included. PHOTO BY IRENE YOUNG

For the Love of Children

Chapin never set out to be an acclaimed children's performer. He simply started writing for children once his own kids (he has two stepchildren, Jonathan and Jessica, and two daughters Abigail and Lily) had outgrown Raffi. He was playing them the Beatles and Bob Marley but was looking for other music that they could listen to together. At the time, he found few tunes geared to 4- to 11-year-olds that also appealed to parents. "When the girls were about 8 and 6, I sat down to write a record that parents and kids could

enjoy together, something that could be a car experience. I never expected this to become a life's work," he says.

Perhaps Chapin has been successful as a children's performer because he actually has a purpose and something to say. "I wanted to hit a nerve because when kids are in this middle age, it's a fertile time for parents, it's the last time they will listen to music with their kids," says Chapin. Once kids enter middle school, parents and kids begin fighting over the radio stations. "The middle age also allows you to write interesting songs, you can use irony, humor and word games. The songs can be more intricate and still be clear but not simplistic," he says.

One wonders where his inspiration comes from. "I look for things in the wind a lot, ideas that are not being articulated, and I'm informed by the collaborative process," explains Chapin who writes with John Forster, Jon Cobert and Michael Mark, all professional musicians and dads.

Teacher Power

As much as Chapin likes children, he is also a big fan of teachers, and they reciprocate the ardor. Teachers love his music because it's idea-driven. Many teachers use his material as an introduction to a topic like environmental awareness.

Chapin has a Teacher's Page on his Web site (<http://members.aol.com/chapinfo/tc/>) where he directs teachers to songs appropriate for subject matters including environment, reading, relationships and family story songs, holiday songs and musical instruments. He's also offering free cassettes for the asking (shipping and handling costs apply, see site for details).

Most teachers and principals can relate to his newest song, "Not On the Test," which he wrote with John Forster. In this sweet lullaby, Chapin pokes fun at what he (and others) see as the absurdity of over-testing that has come to govern our schools. "Schools today are run like corporations, it's ludicrous," says Chapin. "Running schools like this is one of the reasons we lose good teachers."

Chapin believes it is a school's job to get kids invested in some part of their education. "It's shortsighted to make school a job for kids. The economy today doesn't ask for automatons, people have to be more agile. There are no more jobs for factory workers," he says. To the contrary,

Not On The Test

This song on school testing helped usher in the New Year on National Public Radio's "Morning Edition," Jan. 1, 2007.

Not On The Test

by John Forster & Tom Chapin

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Go on to sleep now, third grader of mine.
The test is tomorrow but you'll do just fine.
It's reading and math. Forget all the rest.
You don't need to know what is not on the test.

Each box that you mark on each test that you take,
Remember your teachers. Their jobs are at stake.
Your score is their score, but don't get all stressed.
They'd never teach anything not on the test.

The School Board is faced with no child left behind
With rules but no funding, they're caught in a bind.
So music and art and the things you love best
Are not in your school 'cause they're not on the test.

Sleep, sleep, and as you progress
You'll learn there's a lot that is not on the test.

Debate is a skill that is useful to know,
Unless you're in Congress or talk radio,
Where shouting and spouting and spewing are blessed
'Cause rational discourse was not on the test.

Thinking's important. It's good to know how.
And someday you'll learn to, but someday's not now.
Go on to sleep, now. You need your rest.
Don't think about thinking. It's not on the test.

Chapin believes kids today need a sense of how to create, how to think. "Rote learning is easy for the administration, but this type of schooling doesn't create good students or citizens."

As much as Chapin is concerned with children's academic learning, he also is concerned with their exposure to the arts. "Kids today often experience pre-staged shows at venues like Madison Square Garden with characters walking around with big heads," he says. The experience Chapin offers is quite different.

One teacher he knows in Lowell, Mass., speaks seriously to the students before she introduces Chapin. She explains to the children what it takes to be a live audience. She informs the kids that this isn't like a video or television show. "I've heard her say, 'What you do changes the show here today, what you do is important,'" says Chapin. He believes a live performance generates interaction and part of it is pure magic. "There's nothing like a live performance for kids."

Roots

It's hard to talk about Tom Chapin without mentioning his famous singer-songwriter brother, Harry, whose hit songs include "Taxi" and "Cat's in the Cradle." Harry died tragically at age 38 in a car accident on the Long Island Expressway. "Harry was a remarkable talent, he was two years older, and we were very close," says Chapin.

Bringing up his brother's name doesn't upset him. He does admit that the relationship was harder when Harry was alive. "There was a fair amount of competition," Chapin says. At one time Tom, Harry and brother Steve played in the same band. These days, Chapin is more concerned that his children never got to know their wonderful uncle. He continues Harry's humanitarian works by serving on the Board of Directors of World Hunger Year, a hunger organization founded by Harry in 1975.

Chapin's father, Jim Chapin, 87, is also a musician. He is a well-regarded jazz drummer and author of two important texts on jazz drumming. Chapin's parents divorced when he was 3, and his dad for the most part was "like an absentee landlord."

But Chapin says he was always hungry for a family. "I was a stepfather first, so I guess my wife and stepchildren really taught me how to be a dad," he says. "I basically learned what not to do, it was a lot of learning on the job." He credits his wife Bonnie, who owns a clothing shop, as the real hero.

Even though Chapin worked three out of four weekends and was often on the road, when his kids were growing up, he was a real hands-on dad. "I was home during the week days, so I did things like walk the kids to the bus stop." Now that Jonathan has a son, Miles, Chapin's a pretty cool grandfather who's known affectionately as Papa Tom. "It's just amazing to see your children become parents and share their children with you," he says.

The musical beat goes on in the Chapin family. His three daughters now live in Los Angeles and have formed a band called The Chapin Sisters. Brother Jonathan is their manager. In March, they returned east to perform at several local venues including The Turning Point in Piermont, N.Y.

Going Strong

For all his notoriety, Chapin is a modest man. He says his career is "no way to get rich, but I make a living and have put my kids through school." Check the facts, and his accomplishments are very real. He's won three Grammys, acted on Broadway, been musical director for two off-Broadway productions and hosted a television show and a documentary series. He has received awards from the

Catch Him Live!

Chapin's CDs and videos are great, but seeing him live is something altogether wonderful. This month, Tom Chapin & His Band, featuring Jon Cobert & Michael Mark, perform at the White Plains Performing Arts Center in White Plains. Hear them strum their way through old and new tunes as they warm the audience with their family-friendly program full of rich harmonies and good humor in this brand-new, 400-seat theater. 1 and 4 p.m. April 22. \$20 adults, \$18 children, students and seniors. Reservations requested. White Plains Performing Arts Center, City Center, 11 City Place (next to the movie theaters), White Plains. 328-1600. www.WPPAC.com.



Tom Chapin and the newest member of his family, grandson Miles, experience the ageless wonder of music. PHOTO BY BONNIE CHAPIN

American Library Association, Parents' Choice, The New York Music Awards, National Parenting Publications Awards (NAPPA) and *Parents* magazine.

His latest children's recording, *Some Assembly Required* (2005), was greeted with rave reviews and a Grammy nomination. Chapin made the CD with his long-time collaborators Forster, Mark and Cobert and some surprise guests. Listen for the sounds of other great children's music talent like Westchester resident Vanessa Williams ("Only One Shoe"), Laurie Berkner ("This is the Happiest Song I Know") and Dan Zanes ("Walk the World Now Children).

In his latest adult recording, *The Turning of the Tide* (2006), Chapin explores many of his personal relationships including songs about his mother, father, brothers and new grandson. For those who want to experience Chapin up close and personal, this month he is appearing at the White Plains Performing Arts Center in White Plains (see sidebar for information) and Symphony Space in New York City on April 21.

Like many artists, Chapin's vision is to go to his grave working. "I can't see myself retiring to Florida," he says. He claims work keeps him young. And he has plenty of work lined up and new ideas yet to explore. "I'm just getting started," he says.

What's the secret to success? Chapin pauses thoughtfully, "I've had a blessed life. I guess the only thing I can say is look for something to do that makes you want to get up in the morning, it's basic but it works." ♦

Jean Sheff is editor of *Westchester Family* and a Tom Chapin fan.