

Arts & Entertainment

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MARK LAMHUT

Tom Chapin (left) has brought three generations of the family together for a tour to celebrate Harry Chapin's (below) life and passions.

Celebrating

HARRY

Chapin family preserves his legacy with and evening of political activism and song

By **VICTORIA SHOULDIS**
For the Monitor

When singer/ songwriter Harry Chapin died in a car crash on the Long Island Expressway in 1981, he left behind a legacy not just of quintessential American storytelling music but a tradition of family activism and optimism.

This fall, three generations of the Chapin family — led by Harry's brother Tom, a noted singer and children's songwriter in his own right — are touring together to celebrate Harry Chapin's life and passions. "Harry Chapin: A Celebration in Song" comes to the Capitol Center for the Arts Saturday night.

The show features Harry Chapin's 85-year-old father, Jim, as well as brothers Tom and Steve, Harry's daughter, Jen Chapin, and Tom's daughters Abigail and Lily Chapin, and Jessica Craven. Members of Harry Chapin's original band are also part of the lineup.

"We've all been immersed in Harry's music for years, and it felt like the time was here to get this out to the people again," said Tom Chapin. "The songs and the political activism are important. We can remind people that there are still positive possibilities out here in old America."

Harry Chapin made his mark in the early 1970s

with his stories-in-song such as "Taxi," "Circle" and "Cat's in the Cradle," the deceptively lullaby-like story of the insidious disconnect between a father and his son. His song "Circle," — actually written as the theme song to his brother Tom's educational television show "Make A Wish" — offered Chapin's gentle take on the passage of time. Harry Chapin was just 38 when he died.

"Early on, somebody said to us that we can't fill Harry's shoes," said Tom Chapin from his home in New York this week. "But we can make our own shoes a little fuller by honoring the paths we've chosen and by continuing the important work that Harry had started."

As Tom Chapin notes, he and his brothers were raised in a family that embraced and even expected social consciousness, and Harry Chapin was almost as well known for his activism as he was for his music. Chapin founded the World Hunger Year organization in 1975; his family has kept the charity going strong since his death. The brothers have continued to perform their own works and Harry's over the years, but it was only recently that they realized that had the beginnings of a multi-generational legacy.

"We were doing a couple benefits for the (hunger) foundation, and we were joined by my own daughters and Harry's daughter, Jen, and it was just a delight to dig into the old songs with the different members of the family," said Tom Chapin. "And it became clear that the kids were suddenly all grown up and we had a whole new generation on stage that the audience went nuts

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- ▲ **What:** "Harry Chapin: A Celebration in Song"
- ▲ **When:** Saturday at 8
- ▲ **Where:** Capitol Center for the Arts
- ▲ **Tickets:** \$34.50 and \$24.50
- ▲ **Info:** 225-1111 or ccanh.com

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for. It seemed like time to bring everybody together to celebrate Harry."

Eighty-five-year-old patriarch Jim Chapin is a lifelong jazz drummer who passed along dual passions for music and justice to his children, even though he may not have excelled in the traditional parental role.

"In some ways he wasn't the best of dads for a time, his life was all about music and chasing the women, so in a sense he wasn't always there for us," said Tom Chapin, who remains close to his father. "But he gave us a joy and delight in music and an education in what was right and wrong and just - he put us all on the right path. And when we scheduled this tour, dad was the happiest of all - this is the jackpot for him."

True epiphany for the Chapins came in the summer of 1957 or 1958, when the brothers stayed with an uncle at the Jersey shore and discovered records by the Weavers and Pete Seeger.

"Those songs were nothing like what we were hearing on the radio - everything was all Patti Page and very sort of white bread," said Tom Chapin, who was raised unabashedly left wing. "But the Weavers - those songs spoke to us and to our lives. Folk music is all about having that kernel of truth and when you hear it, it changes your sensibility. By the end of that summer, Harry was saying 'Hey, we could do that.' And we could."

The brothers switched from more classical instruments to guitars and banjos, and for the next decade they honed their craft performing at hootenannies throughout the New York area. And while Harry gained the most mainstream recognition for songs like "Taxi" - he recorded a sequel to the song called, appropriately enough, "Sequel," a few years before his death - his music was very much a family business.

"We all worked on Harry's 11 albums that he put out over 10 years, and we always felt it was

all the brothers together," said Tom Chapin. "There was shared spirit and passion there."

Although he thinks the family's music is more about the personal than the political, Tom Chapin sees a need for that Chapin form of storytelling to make a comeback.

"I've got a new song and it's about peace and it's pretty benign, and there have been people who have booed," said Chapin. "I never expected to live in a time when it would be a loaded thing to sing a song about peace. It's an odd time were in now."

Ultimately, though, Tom Chapin hopes that the family's sense of optimism and spirit can serve to inspire and not divide.

"This evening we've planned - it's an evening Harry would have loved. It's an evening of songs and stories and memories that I think everyone will appreciate," said Chapin. "This is a chance to revisit Harry's energy, legacy and his exuberance. And to pass it along."