

Life's a circle for the Chapin family

Harry's stories, songs live on in brothers' show

BY DAVE TIANEN

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His songs were much too long for radio play.

His own brothers once kicked him out of their band. Critics didn't particularly like him.

He wasn't entirely sure music was what he wanted to do.

And he died at 38.

None of that would seem to add up to a lasting musical legacy, but nearly a quarter-century after his death, Harry Chapin remains very much alive in the hearts and memories of his fans.

And, of course, his family. Chapin, who died in a car-

truck accident in New York in 1981, came from a strongly musical family. His brothers Tom and Steve have enjoyed long and successful careers, and his daughter, Jen, has embarked on what looks to be a promising career as well.

On Saturday, Tom and Steve, along with Tom's daughters Abigail, Lily and Jessica and Steve's son, Jonathan, plus members of Harry's old band, will join together at the Cedarburg Performing Arts Center for "Harry Chapin: A Celebration in Song With the Chapin Family." The show is sold out.

As befits any project that strives to keep Harry's memory alive, this one has its roots in his philanthropy.

The Chapin family started doing occasional benefits on behalf of World Hunger Year and, with practice, they started to get good at it.

IF YOU GO

What: "Harry Chapin: A Celebration in Song With the Chapin Family"

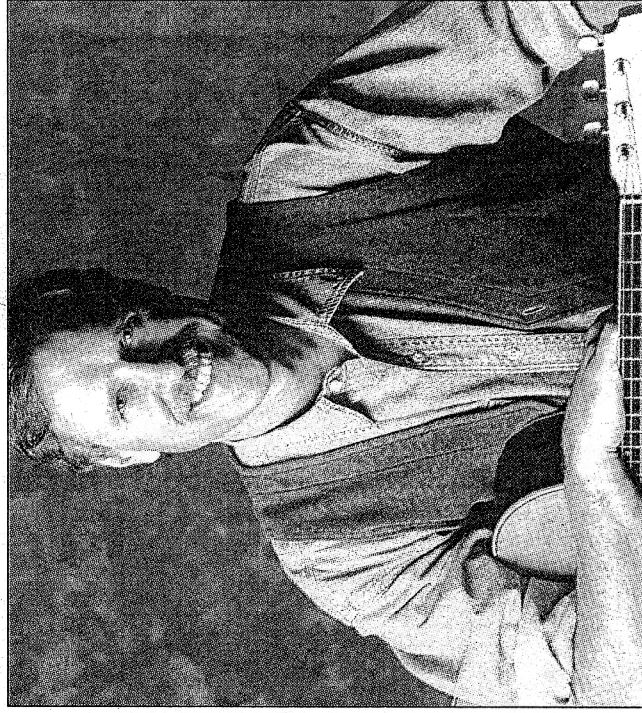
When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Cedarburg Performing Arts Center, W68-N611 Evergreen Blvd., Cedarburg

Tickets: sold out

"It really came about because of the years of doing the Harry benefits," Tom Chapin said. "Harry, of course, started World Hunger Year, and volunteers and the family have kept it alive. Part of that has been doing some concerts over the years, which was the time frankly when we mostly sang Harry's material. The reason we started doing this on a more regular basis was that the girls got so good. My three

Please see **CHAPIN, 4E**



Singer-songwriter Tom Chapin continues his brother's legacy with "Harry Chapin: A Celebration in Song With the Chapin Family."

All their life's a circle, and they can tell you why

CHAPIN, From 1E

daughters and Jen grew up and were these incredible musicians."

Harry Chapin had a handful of actual hits such as "Taxi," "Cat's in the Cradle" and "W.O.L.D.," but there was a second tier of songs that became fan favorites, including "Circle," "Mr. Tanner" and "Mail Order Annie." Tom says people at Saturday's show should expect the hits with some occasional retouching.

"It's primarily Harry," Tom said. "We do the greatest hits. We do 'Cats in the Cradle' and 'Taxi' and 'W.O.L.D.' and 'Mr. Tanner.' The girls sing a couple of Harry's early tunes. They also sing a couple of my early tunes. I sing a song called 'Pass the Music On,' which really connects to what we're doing. Steve sings a song or two. We do stuff that pertains to Harry and the Chapin family."

Roots in other arts

It sometimes felt like music alone was not enough to occupy or consume Harry Chapin.

He was a successful folk singer who also had attended the Air Force Academy and directed an Oscar-nominated documentary on the Jack Johnson-to-Jack Dempsey era of boxing called "The Legendary Champions."

"You have to understand the family," Tom said. "The family's not a musical family. The family's an artistic family. Literally. My one grandfather was (poet and philosopher) Kenneth Burke, the other grandfather was James Chapin, the portrait painter.

"When Harry dropped out of school, one of his uncles got



Harry Chapin may be gone, but his family and band members still gather to celebrate his life and legacy. The next family reunion will be in Cedarburg.

him a job with (fight manager and film collector) Jimmy Jacobs.

Eventually, Harry expanded his assignment to do five-minute greatest-fight clips into a full documentary.

"He wrote, directed and edited it. Let us do the music, which isn't much. There's a couple tunes in it. And it was nominated for an Academy Award. It still stands up. It's a very good documentary."

Music lives on

Although he was not exactly a critical favorite, parts of Chapin's songbook have aged very well.

"Cat's in the Cradle" is going to outlive all of us," Tom Chapin said. "... I remember being in an airport about three or four years after Harry died. I saw this guy and he said, 'Hey, Tom Chapin! I'm Doc Watson's roadie. Come back. Doc wants to say hello.'

'Almost like he knew'

Even his own brother doesn't pretend to know where life and talent might have taken Harry Chapin.

"One of the great shames is that he died before video," Tom said. "He would have loved doing videos of his stuff. Can you imagine? Just after he died is when MTV and the whole idea of doing videos took off, so he missed that.

"The thing about Harry is he could have gone in so many different ways. I'm assuming if he'd survived he'd have said, 'OK. Let me make some qualitative choices here.' He could have gone very much into public policy. He could have gotten out of music totally. He also could have gotten into film. I don't know. He was one of those characters who ran so hard it was almost like he knew he didn't have time."

It's been a long time since

Harry Chapin stopped running, but his brother, Tom, sounds like he's still trying to keep up.

"Listen. I was 36 when Harry died; my daughter was 2-weeks-old. She's now 23 — it's been that long. It's our whole generation," Tom said. "For me, I still miss him enormously. On the other hand, in terms of my own life, it forced me to grow up, in a way, at a time when I really was ready to do it. ...

"The last three years of his life, I was doing benefit concerts. I was his benefit band. He'd call me up and say, 'Listen. I'm going to Sudbury, Ontario, to do a world hunger benefit. Are you working in plane together and spend time talking.' I relish those times now."

"The bottom line to me was, he was really talented and all that other stuff, but he was a genuinely nice guy."