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WITH THE KIDS

Tom Chapin is proud to be a teachers' pet

His educational songs earn him many fans among educators.

By Brenda Rees
Special to The Times

The report card is in: Tom Chapin gets an A-plus.

Performing first for adults in the 1960s as part of the Chapin Brothers with brother Harry, then jumping into the children's arena in the 1980s, singer-songwriter Chapin has an unusually loyal fan base of teachers who routinely use the East Coast folkie's songs in classrooms across the country.

No doubt some Southern California educators will be in the audience taking notes as Chapin plays two family-oriented shows Sunday morning at McCabe's in Santa Monica.

Teachers from preschool on up say they play Chapin's songs as a way to introduce kids to the ABCs of biology, ecology, Earth science, history and more.

For example, Virginia Beach, Va., teacher Kathleen Fogarty routinely uses Chapin's song "Family Tree" as a genealogy, geography and language lesson. Preschool and first-grade teacher Janet Kolstad from Los Altos regularly spins "Good Garbage" as a scientific study on how things decompose. And when she taught kindergartners in Ohio, Lisa Heintz had her students find the poetry in "Together, Tomorrow."

All in all, teachers also say that using Chapin's songs is a welcome blessing, since music and art often take a back seat to reading and math skills that must be taught practically verbatim from curricula.

"I slip Tom's music in wherever I [can]," Linda Morris says via e-mail from Baltimore, where she teaches in an urban school for at-risk students. "There is very little time for the kind of creative, human approach that these particular kids really need. Music helps bridge the gap by creating enjoyable experiences ... in accordance with state and national mandates."

Indeed, late last year Chapin and writing partner John Forster penned "Not on This Test," a song decrying the lack of art and creative thinking in schools today. The lyrics lament that "So music and art and the things you love best / Are not in your school 'cause they're not on the test."

Not released on any CD, the song was first played on NPR's "Morning Edition" on New Year's Day and later was made available on the Web. Chapin recalls seeing it take off in cyberspace — with educators in the forefront downloading and sharing the song that has become something of an anthem for educational reform.

"I'm a huge fan of teachers; they are just awesome," says Chapin from his home in New York's Rockland County, adding that educators today face a daunting task.

"There's so much emphasis on rote learning, but the problem is that most rote jobs in America are gone. We need to get our kids to start thinking out of the box."

As it happened, Chapin never set out to be an educational advocate, much less in the children's recording industry.

"I had a nice little quiet career before then," he says with a laugh of his early success with the Chapin Brothers on the folk scene.

But when his young daughters had outgrown Raffi, Chapin decided to offer them — as well as other children — music that was smart, funny and, as he says, "not politically correct."

"You got to have a little anarchy to be delightful, otherwise kids won't bother with you," he explains. Eleven family albums and three Grammy awards later, Chapin realizes his place in the musical landscape as a troubadour who can appeal to, as teacher Fogarty describes, "the 'Kumbaya' and high-tech generations."

When not in the studio with his collaborators Forster, Michael Mark and Jon Cobert, Chapin is on the road playing both adult and family concerts, including school shows.

"I love the idea of people being together in one place and having a shared experience," he says. "When I'm up there, I say, 'I've got a great song and you can be a part of it.' And when we sing together, we are."

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Tom Chapin

Where: McCabe's, 3101 Pico Blvd., Santa Monica

When: 10 and 11:30 a.m. Sunday

Cost: \$15

Phone: (310) 828-4497