Tom Chapin's Biography

Born March 13, 1945, in New York, NY; father was a jazz drummer; married wife Bonnie, 1976; children: Abigail, Lily. 

*Education:* State University College at Plattsburgh, B.A. in history, 1969. 

*Addresses:* Record company-- Sundance Music, P.O. Box 1663, New York, NY 10011.

Tom Chapin's early career may have been overshadowed by that of his more famous brother, singer-songwriter Harry Chapin of "Cat's in the Cradle" and "Taxi" fame, but Tom has made quite a name for himself as an eclectic songwriter and singer nonetheless. By the early 1990s, in fact, his music written especially for children, with its toe-tapping tunes and rich guitar accompaniments, had pleased *parents* so well that they generally think of his later body of work as "family" music rather than "kids" music.

Considering his upbringing, Chapin was destined for a life in the arts. He grew up in New York City's Greenwich Village and Brooklyn Heights in a family that encouraged all the children to develop their creative talents. The senior Chapin, Jim, was a jazz drummer who performed with renowned bandleaders Tommy Dorsey and Woody Herman. One of Tom's grandfathers was a painter, and the other was a philosopher.

When he was 12, Tom and his two brothers, Steve and Harry, fell under the influence of the seminal folk group the Weavers. The Chapin kids formed their own folk trio, calling themselves the Chapins. They played nightclub gigs in New York for a number of years and recorded their first album, *Chapin Music!*, in 1966. The group broke up shortly thereafter, though, so that each brother could pursue his own interests. Meanwhile, Tom had started college in upstate New
York, earning a bachelor's degree in history and beginning work on a master's degree. In 1969 he accepted a job working on a documentary on sharks, *Blue Water, White Death*. His various jobs on the film included singing on the soundtrack, which launched his music career.

Between 1971 and 1976 Chapin worked in television, singing and hosting the show *Make a Wish*. He became a songwriter almost by default; his brother Harry had been contracted to write songs for the show but was so busy with his singing career that he was only able to write drafts of the songs, leaving the final versions up to Tom. "It ended up being a great lesson in songwriting," Tom told *Sing Out!* in 1988. "It was a real good experience." So good, in fact, that he realized it was becoming his main focus in life. "By '75-76, I realized: 'This is what I do.' Being a musician, specifically, being a songwriter.... No matter how many concerts I do, no matter what other kinds of work I'm pursuing, I feel most righteous when I've written something. That's the real me, that's what gets me up in the morning." During his years in television, Chapin also performed solo concerts, worked with brother Steve in the Chapins, and formed his own band, Mt. Airy, which released a record in 1973. He recorded his first solo album, *Life Is Like That*, in 1976.

In 1981 Chapin became the arranger for the Off-Broadway musical *Cotton Patch Gospel*, written by his brother Harry. Shortly thereafter, however, Harry was killed in an automobile accident. Tom became determined to keep his brother's musical and social messages alive. He completed work on *Cotton Patch* and saw its successful production. He also became involved in the political organization Harry had founded to fight hunger, World Hunger Year (WHY). He explained to *International Musician* why he started working for WHY: "[Harry] had started a number of things, and [the
family] felt very strongly that some of them should continue and we made our own choices as to what we wanted to do. Hunger was one that I had been very involved in, and Harry and I had done a lot of benefit concerts together for WHY." Tom joined the board of directors of WHY in 1982.

After finishing Cotton Patch, Tom continued to work in musical theater for several years. In 1982 and 1983, he starred in Pump Boys and Dinettes, first at the Fox Theater in Detroit and later on Broadway. The following year he and brother Steve produced a theatrical tribute to Harry, Lies and Legends: The Musical Stories of Harry Chapin, which played Off Broadway. He also actively pursued a songwriting and solo singing career. Chapin recorded solo albums in 1982 and 1986 and began to write music for children, including a series of "Cabbage Patch" songs for Parker Bros., the toy makers who caused a sensation with their Cabbage Patch dolls and who briefly supported a record label. Parker Bros. released Chapin's first children's album, Cabbage Patch Dreams, in 1986.

Chapin enjoyed writing children's songs, but more importantly, he discovered a real need to do so. "Around six years ago," he explained to the Los Altos Town Crier in 1992, "I looked around for music for [my daughters], and I realized there's not a lot out there for that age group. Kids [between five and ten] really change a lot--they become more verbal, they learn to get jokes, and I decided I'm going to see if I can write some songs for them." He embarked on a series of children's albums that have won high praise from experts and audiences alike. His first four children's records, marketed as "family" music rather than "children's" in response to Chapin's adult fan base, have all won awards from the American Library Association. Chapin's measure of success, however, is a bit more idiosyncratic. He explained to the Sun,
"The bottom line is when parents say 'Yours are the tapes we take on long [car] trips.'"

Chapin's music, though firmly rooted in the folk tradition of his idols Pete Seeger and the Weavers, borrows from several types of music. Many of his children's songs rely on the syncopated rhythms of Latin music. And he has written several blues tunes, including "I've got the Blues, Greens, and Reds," from his *Billy the Squid* album. The title track of that album--which features country singer Rosanne Cash and pop-jazz saxophonist Branford Marsalis--is a country tune and the cut "Sore Loser" is a good old-fashioned rock and roll number. Chapin also likes to include at least one piece by a classical composer on each children's album, like his "Ghost of Bleak House," also from *Billy the Squid*, which features music by French composer Charles Gounod. Chapin's folk origins, however, are clearly apparent in his intricate guitar, banjo, and autoharp playing.

Many of Chapin's songs offer serious messages, but they manage not to be preachy. "Ghost of Bleak House," for instance, praises sharing and making friends in the context of an almost-scary ghost story. His witty "Great Big Words" describes the fun that can be had in learning and reading. Several of his songs, including "Happy Earth Day" and "Bye Bye Dodo," emphasize environmental and conservation concerns; he has even released a concert video titled *This Pretty Planet*.

As with his music, Chapin has come by his social awareness and sense of responsibility through his family, who always encouraged thoughtful activism. In the Chapin household success was never measured by fame and fortune. "It was always 'Great. So you're making a lot of money. So what are you really contributing to the world?,'" he told Norm Maves of the *Oregonian*. As a result, Chapin has long contributed in
many ways. In addition to his more socially conscious songs, he remains committed to WHY and regularly gives benefit concerts to aid the hungry and homeless. He is active in environmental causes and the anti-nuclear movement as well. The central theme in all of Chapin's work is his desire to communicate his fundamental belief in the power of the individual. He explained his philosophy to *International Musician*: "If there's an underlying message to my music and my existence, I think it has to do with empowerment ... the idea that you matter ... you can make an enormous difference. I think Harry's life showed that--what one man can do in a short amount of time with an enormous amount of energy and not being afraid to try."

by Robin Armstrong

**Tom Chapin's Career**


**Tom Chapin's Awards**

Parents' Choice Award, 1988, for *Family Tree*; *Moonboat* named notable children's recording, American Library Association, 1980; Harry Chapin Award for Contributions to Humanity, National Association for Campus Activities,

**Famous Works**

- **Selective Works**
  - *In the City of Mercy* Sundance Music, 1982.

**Recent Updates**

**February 13, 2005:** Chapin won the Grammy Award for best spoken word album for children for *The Train They Call the City of New Orleans*. **Source:** Grammys.com, www.grammys.com/awards/grammy/47winners, February 14, 2005.

**Further Reading**

**Sources**

• *Los Altos Town Crier* (CA), April 1, 1992.
• *Sing Out!*, Winter 1988.
• *Sun* (Baltimore, MD), October 24, 1992.
• *Tampa Tribune* (FL), May 11, 1990.
• *Times-Union* (Rochester, NY), January 25, 1990.
• Additional information for this profile was obtained from Sundance Music, 1993.

Read more: [http://www.musicianguide.com/biographies/1608001698/Tom-Chapin.html#ixzz0rbeKU95o](http://www.musicianguide.com/biographies/1608001698/Tom-Chapin.html#ixzz0rbeKU95o)