

# Harry Chapin Brings Songs to Stage

By CLIVE BARNES

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**THE NIGHT THAT MADE AMERICA FAMOUS**, musical, with music and lyrics by Harry Chapin; setting by Kert Lundell; costumes by Sandy Barcelo; lighting by Imero Fiorentino; lighting supervised by Fred Allison; multimedia under the direction of Joshua White; musical direction by Mr. Chapin; dance arrangements by John Morris; audio designed by Michael Solomon; casting by Geri Windsor & Associates, Ltd.; choreography by Doug Rogers; directed by Gene Frankel; production stage manager, Herb Vosler. Presented by Ecor Lansbury and Joseph Beruh, in association with the Shubert Organization; Nan Pearlman, associate producer. At the Ethel Barrymore Theater, 243 West 47th Street.

WITH: Kelly Garrett, Delores Hall, Gilbert Price, Bill Starr, Alexandra Baris, Mercedes Ellington, Sie Marshall, Ernie Pysker, Lynne Thigpen and Mr. Chapin.

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The new, or supposedly new, musical "The Night That Made America Famous," which opened somewhat flashily at the Ethel Barrymore Theater last night, might make its composer and chief performer, Harry Chapin, very rich. I hope so. He is clearly popular and has a considerable following as may be witnessed by the number of records that have won their way into the rarefied upper stratosphere of best-seller record charts.

The people who put Mr. Chapin's disks in the top 10 are probably the ones who will most enjoy the show, which is more like an animated record album than a musical. But animated it certainly is.

Mr. Chapin was once called the Jacques Brel of Brooklyn Heights, and the format of the present show does bear some similarity to the old Jacques Brel money-spinner. But Mr. Chapin is not Mr. Brel, and the simplicity and freshness of the

Brel show have been superseded by some old-time multimedia effects, which may possibly seem highly original to people who never travel to theater outside of the Broadway limits.

Mr. Chapin is a very literary singer — an anecdotalist with a guitar. He touches a lot of bases—although some of his touches are somewhat dubious. He sings of popular radical subjects, such as the generation gap, women's liberation, welfare and the war in Vietnam. But he is not really a singer of social protest—he is not exactly a Bob Dylan or a Peter Yarrow. Perhaps he could be described as a singer of ironic dissatisfaction. He feels there is something wrong with the American dream and that when people wake up to that, it will be "The Night That Made America Famous." Very likely. The man has a point—but like most of his points it is platitudinous.

Mr. Chapin paid his dues at such places as the Bitter End before being placed on the charts and ennobled on Broadway. And he has a nice voice and an ingratiating personality. His music is somewhat monotonous and stereotyped, but it has a strong beat, makes pleasant use of strings, and occasionally its sound is varied with a banjo or a harmonica. Yet presumably his fans admire Mr. Chapin more for his storytelling than his music—for he sings ballads, songs that tell a story that actually have a beginning, a middle and, usually, a sad ending.

One of his hits—and it is

typical of his method — is "Taxi." A young woman hails a cab. Years ago she and the driver had had an affair. They parted. She wanted to be an actress. He wanted to be a pilot. Now he is taking her to a swanky address. She gives him a \$20 bill for a \$2.50 fare and tells him to keep the change. He accepts it, and philosophically ponders that they both have achieved their ambitions—she is acting that she is happy, and he, yes, is flying—in his taxi, on dope. Well, folks, life is like that.

Then there are the stories of a pick-up in a diner and a syrupy, compassionate sequel in a bar; of a poor amateur singer who is persuaded to give a Town Hall recital in New York, where his career is destroyed by cruel music critics; of a sniper gaining personal identity by slaughtering people; of a poor black kid, who never had a chance, winning glory in Vietnam, and then being shot down by the police at home during a supermarket robbery. This is Mr. Chapin's best song—but even so it goes too far. The guy has to die with his medal clenched in his dead hand.

This is not quite a solo gig—although one is never in any doubt about who is in charge. Of the quite large supporting cast—well chosen, and good singers and good movers all—Gilbert Price has the best chance with the song of the black Vietnam vet, which he puts over magnificently. Kelly Garrett and Delores Hall are also formidable talents, and a little

more of these three and a little less of Mr. Chapin might have proved to the show's advantage.

The show's big gimmick is its use of multimedia devices. A program note that explains "The action takes place during the last 15 years" presumably refers to the subject matter but could well apply to the staging. It opens with a sequence that might easily have been taken from the Joffrey Ballet's "Astarte" and "The Clowns." Throughout there are visual references to Alwin Nikolais and, of course, the Joshua Light Show that once reigned supreme at that old temple of rock, the Fillmore East. (This is not surprising, as the multimedia effects are under the direction of that very same Joshua, Joshua White.) And the use of closed-circuit television to offer a simultaneous contrast between image and reality has been used a great deal by the Chelsea Theater.

The setting by Kert Lundell—featuring a revolve and something like a geodesic bandshell—shrieks with chic, as Danny Kaye used to say, and the whole show has been energetically directed by Gene Frankel. The show's pretentiousness tries very hard to be unpretentious, and it will probably be best liked by present devotees of Mr. Chapin, by people who like a nice sentimental little story and people impressed by flossy-colored lights. With luck there may well be enough of them.