

Harry Chapin, Singer, Killed in Crash

By JOHN ROCKWELL

Harry Chapin, a folk-rock composer and performer active in many charitable causes, was killed yesterday when the car he was driving was hit from behind by a tractor-trailer on the Long Island Expressway in Jericho, L.I., the police said. He was 38 years old.

The Nassau County Police said that a flatbed tractor-trailer owned by Rickles Home Center of Paramus, N.J., struck Mr. Chapin's car at 55 miles an hour as the car shifted lanes with its emergency lights flashing near exit 40 at Jericho Turnpike at 12:27 P.M.

The force of the crash crushed the rear of the car, a 1975 Volkswagen, to the pavement, sending off sparks that set its fuel tank aflame, the police said. The truck driver, Robert Eggleton of Plainfield, suffered burns on his face and arms as he cut Mr. Chapin from his seatbelt and dragged him from the flaming wreckage, the police said.

Detective Donald Wecklein said Mr. Chapin apparently died from the force of the crash. He did not appear to be badly burned, the detective said, adding that he did not know whether Mr. Chapin's car had been disabled or why the emergency lights were flashing. No charges were filed.

Devised 'Story Song'

Mr. Chapin was pronounced dead at Nassau County Medical Center at 1:05 P.M. Westbound lanes of the expressway were closed to traffic in the area for three hours.

Mr. Chapin, who was to have performed last night at a free concert in Westbury, L.I., remained dedicated to folk music in an electrified rock age that prized ornate arrangements and pounding dance beats.

His principal contribution was his self-described "story song," a narrative form that owed much to older talking blues and similar structures. The subjects of these songs were often common people with poignant or even melodramatic tales to tell — tales of lost opportunities, cruel ironies and life's hypocrisies.

Mr. Chapin organized and appeared in many benefit concerts for causes, including a campaign against world hunger, environmental and consumer issues and the Multiple Sclerosis Foundation. At one time, more than half his concerts were benefits.

Raised Thousands for Arts

He lived in Huntington Bay, L.I., and was particularly generous with organizations on Long Island. He raised tens of thousands of dollars for the Performing Arts Foundation, the principal theatrical group on Long Island, and mobilized the business community to support the arts.

Recently he stood in the rain for half an hour in the rain at a large benefit at Caumsett State Park in Lloyd Harbor, greeted each car as it arrived. The benefit raised \$200,000 for the arts foundation that allowed the bankrupt group to begin working on a fall season. He also helped persuade the New York State Council on the Arts to support the formation of the Long Island Philharmonic.

"I think I've had the most social and political involvement of any singer-song writer in America," Mr. Chapin was quoted as having said.

Musically, Mr. Chapin worked in a rather rudimentary idiom, allying a



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Harry Chapin during a New York concert last month

conversational baritone with earnest strumming on his acoustic guitar. But his records, especially in the early 70's, sometimes involved more complex musical textures. In recent years Mr. Chapin continued to tour throughout the country, even though mass sales and critical acclaim eluded him.

Father Was a Drummer

Harry Chapin was born on Dec. 7, 1942, in Greenwich Village. His father, James Chapin, was a drummer who worked with the bandleaders Tommy Dorsey and Woody Herman, and Harry played the trumpet as a child before taking up the guitar.

Mr. Chapin left music while he studied at the Air Force Academy and at Cornell, and he later worked for a while in the film industry.

In the summer of 1964, he was reunited with his brothers Tom and Stephen and his father, and the family group played around Greenwich Village during the peak years of the Village folk scene. By the early 70's, after several personnel changes, the group became a backup for Mr. Chapin, and eventually released several albums. Mr. Chapin's biggest hit single was "Taxi," in 1972.

He also became involved with the theater. In 1975 he conceived a multimedia show entitled "The Night That Made America Famous," which received two Tony nominations, and in 1977 came "Chapin," a musical revue that played in several cities.

Mr. Chapin is survived by his wife, Sandra; five children, Jaimie, Jono, Jason, Jenny, and Josh; his father, James of Long Island; his mother, Elspeth Hart, of Brooklyn; three brothers, James of Queens, and Tom and Stephen, both of Brooklyn; and two half-brothers, Jeb Hart of Brooklyn, and John Hart of Port Jefferson, L.I.