

## Harry Chapin: All His Life Was a Circle

By CAROL STRICKLAND

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**H**ARRY was a jack-of-all-trades with the soul of a salesman," the singer Pete Seeger said of his friend, Harry Chapin. "That's nothing to be ashamed of, if the product is good. His legacy goes on, not just in his music but in his public spirit."

Chapin, who died in 1981 at age 38, sang to more than a million people a year across the United States and the world. The singer wasn't selling himself; he was giving himself. Half of his 200 to 300 concerts a year were benefits for charity. Exhorting his audiences like an evangelist, Chapin preached until he was hoarse about the need for civic involvement. Working to fight local hunger and promote the performing arts, the Huntington Bay resident had a huge impact on millions of Long Islanders.

His friend, Mark Green, New York City's Public Advocate, recalled: "Harry always said one concert for himself and one for the other guy. He would give half his income away. No one was more generous with his time and talent than Harry. I don't know an artist who better combined his craft and conscience."

Besides making a significant contribution to the Island, Chapin was also recognized for major contributions to the nation. In 1987, on what would have been his 45th birthday, Chapin was awarded posthumously the Special Congressional Gold Medal, in recognition of his tireless efforts for social justice.

Chapin's good deeds are legendary. He

### MAKING A DIFFERENCE

*First of a series of articles about men and women who have changed life on Long Island.*

co-founded World Hunger Year, a national organization that focuses on grassroots solutions to eliminate hunger. He was instrumental in establishing a Presidential Commission in 1978 to investigate root causes of domestic and world hunger. On Long Island, Chapin promoted cultural sovereignty. He served actively on the boards of Hofstra University, the Long Island Association, the Performing Arts Foundation, the Long Island Philharmonic and the Eglevsky Ballet (the latter three organizations Chapin founded and supported financially).

Chapin also founded Long Island Cares, a food bank that gives 2.8 million pounds of food a year to 300,000 people. (A sister organization, Island Harvest, is holding a fund-raising benefit Tuesday at the Crest Hollow Country Club in Woodbury.) Such organizations, like others Chapin started, including the New York City Food and Hunger Hotline and Center for Food Action in New Jersey, help millions of hungry people, "a very important part of the Harry Chapin legacy," said the World Hunger Year director, Bill Ayres.

In a sense, the Chapin legacy of financial support continues. Last year, the Harry Chapin Foundation of Huntington contributed more than \$70,000 from

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Larry Morris/The New York Times

Harry Chapin performing at the Dr Pepper Music Festival at Pier 84 in New York City in 1981.

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Luis Raimondo for The New York Times

A volunteer loads a van with food from Long Island Cares. Chapin's daughter, Jen, and brother Tom at tribute concert.

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record royalties to various organizations, including the Bay Street Theater of Sag Harbor, a mentoring program in the Huntington School District and the Huntington Arts Council. Chapin's widow, Sandy Chapin, is chairwoman of Long Island Cares Inc. and donates money from record royalties to the food bank.

The Long Island Cares executive director, Lynn Needelman, who worked with the singer 20 years ago when he founded the Performing Arts Foundation, said of Chapin, "He used to say he wanted to give back to the community. He desperately wanted his life to matter."

"The Island would be different without Harry," said Larry Austin, chairman and chief executive officer of Austin Travel and president of the Long Island Philharmonic. "Of all the people who've made an impact on Long Island, Harry is on top of the list."

Chapin was born in 1942 to a family of artists, writers and musicians. His widow described her husband's family as "financially poor but very rich intellectually."

His paternal grandfather, James Chapin, was a well-known social realist painter, while his mother's father was Kenneth Burke, a celebrated literary critic. Chapin's father, Jim Chapin, is a jazz drummer who played with bands led by Tommy Dorsey and Woody Herman.

"My family is very progressive," Harry's brother, the singer Tom Chapin, said. "We were taught that you work not just for the bottom line this week, but for the generations to come. The average Joe is getting a raw deal in America. We grew up with that in our veins." Tom Chapin described his family's can-do attitude: "As artists, you create your art. Why not create your government?"

Besides attempting to reform government, Chapin was a charismatic troubadour. His first hit was "Taxi" in 1972, and it launched his career as a popular performer. In 1974, "Cat's in the Cradle" (with lyrics by his wife) was the No. 1 pop song. Before his death, in an automobile accident on the Long Island Expressway, Chapin recorded 11 albums and raised more than \$5 million for charity.

Chapin's career as a pop star lasted only 10 years, but he squeezed eons of living and giving into that short span. "I wouldn't call Harry a philanthropist," his wife said in a recent interview. "A philanthropist is someone who writes checks, and Harry was really a social activist. We'd go to a board meeting and he'd not only be contributing funding but he would have the best idea of the group, and he would implement it."

As an example of how Harry "doesn't just throw out an idea; he absolutely forces the issue," she recounted Chapin's giving a keynote address in the late 1970's to the National Association of Record Merchandisers. Chapin chastised the group: "In the 60's music told us who we were and gave our lives meaning. Today all you are is a bunch of vinyl salesmen." He challenged them, "Next year I would like to see this industry give its first humanitarian award to Pete Seeger, a singer who has been at the front line of every important cause and a man who is never afraid to do the right thing."

Chapin insisted the industry give not just a plaque but a substantial sum of money for the Clearwater Foundation, Mr. Seeger's organization that promotes cleaning the Hudson River. The following year, the group presented the award to Mr. Seeger, with \$100,000 Chapin had raised. Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont, who worked with Chapin to establish the President's Commission on World Hunger, said the singer was anything but a gadfly. "He didn't just come in and lend his name to a cause, then say, 'Thank you very much' and leave," Mr. Leahy said. "He made sure if he was going to talk about food stamps, he knew more about the subject than anyone in the room."

Senator Leahy continued: "This



was not the cause du jour that Hollywood people get involved in, wearing a pin or a ribbon. He was really committed and worked at it."

Mr. Leahy recalled how senators would suddenly get deluged with letters from one city on a subject and wonder what spurred the outburst. The Senator would call Chapin and ask if he'd given a concert there. It usually turned out he had. "Harry used his celebrity to reach out and get people connected," Mr. Leahy said.

Chapin denounced what he called "event psychology," where celebrities stage one event, then consider the problem solved. His older brother, James B. Chapin, said: "Harry understood these causes required a lifetime investment psychologically. You don't just do one good deed, then the battle is won. The fat lady never sings."

Ms. Chapin recounted her husband's strategy when lobbying for the Presidential Commission. Knowing how difficult it was to see members of Congress, "Harry would hang

**A musician who made helping the needy a priority.**

out in the bathroom," she said. "He knew, sooner or later, everyone would be there. When a Senator walked in the door, he'd strike up his guitar and say, 'I'm Harry Chapin. I want to talk to you about hunger.'"

The consumer advocate Ralph Nader described Chapin as a "whirlwind" who was a "first-class Congressional lobbyist and civic strategist." He added: "When somebody unique passes away, we say we won't see his likes again. With Harry, we haven't seen anyone like him, with his consistency, generosity, and versatility. His death was a tremendous blow to the growth of democracy in America."

James Chapin, a former college professor who is Mark Green's senior policy adviser, called his brother a "genuine, small 'd' democrat" who truly believed in participatory democracy. He was convinced individuals could make a difference and constantly recruited others to get involved.

The singer Kenny Rogers said: "Harry was the most unselfish human being I ever met. He was almost abusive in his zealotness." He added, "We all went into his causes because he made us ashamed." Chapin tried to persuade the country music star to do half his concerts as benefits, as Chapin himself did, but Mr. Rogers replied, "Harry, I love you to death, but it ain't gonna happen." What did happen is that Mr. Rogers donated the proceeds from one concert (\$150,000) to World Hunger Year. "That I can do for you," the singer told Chapin.

Chapin's manager, Ken Kragen, said: "In the late 1970's, Harry was almost alone among performers in

being dedicated to the issues of hunger and homelessness. In terms of the difficult obstacles he faced, it was as if he were Don Quixote fighting the windmill. He accomplished everything through sheer force of will and almost blind devotion to the causes."

After his death, Chapin's example inspired musicians to band together in fund-raising efforts like "We Are the World," U.S.A. for Africa and Hands Across America. Mr. Kragen, who organized "We Are the World," called the star-studded recording a "direct outgrowth" of Chapin's influence.

Chapin's impact continues. Dave Marsh, music historian, said: "Harry's inspiration is a very simple, practical part of my life. It's a certain set of ideas and values Harry projected that are enduring. If I drive past a cornfield and wonder what they're spraying on it, that's Harry's legacy." He added, "I think of Harry whenever I'm trying to bring music and politics together, whenever I watch someone trying to make a dream fly."

Despite consorting with top public figures, Chapin remained down to earth. Mr. Austin remembered how Chapin stood in the pounding rain during a thunderstorm, welcoming cars arriving for a benefit. "Cars were knee-deep in mud, and the rest of us were under a tent praying for the rain to stop," Mr. Austin said. "Harry, with his hair plastered to his head, knocked on the window of each car, saying, 'Hi, I'm Harry Chapin. Just park your car and don't worry about the rain. You're gonna have a great time.'"

The Performing Arts Foundation, dedicated to bringing live theater to Long Island, was often on the brink of bankruptcy. Even its supporters said, according to Mr. Austin, "We have to let it go." Chapin refused to give up. "He'd give a benefit concert and keep it going," Mr. Austin recalled. In five years, Chapin raised about half a million dollars for the performing arts on Long Island, including the Performing Arts Foundation Playhouse in Huntington Station, the Long Island Philharmonic and the Eglevsky Ballet.

"He was attached to the idea of strong arts institutions on Long Island," Chapin's daughter, Jen Chapin, said. "He pushed the idea about Long Island not needing New York City, that it should not be a satellite." She continued: "For him, the arts were not a luxury but the key to articulating people's ideals, dreams and values — a necessary part of democracy. Long Island shouldn't depend on New York City to express its aspirations."

Now others are giving concerts to keep the memory of Harry Chapin alive. Last July, a benefit concert in Eisenhower Park attracted 12,000 fans, who contributed nearly 8,000 pounds of food for Long Island Cares. Mike Grayeb, the concert's organizer, reported that Chapin fans came from as far away as Canada, California and Texas to volunteer their help. "Harry is still touching people who believe the individual can make a contribution," he said. "Fans are carrying on his work and mission 16 years after his death."

Jen Chapin, who sang at the benefit with her uncle, Tom Chapin, char-

acterized the concert audience as diverse, with people of all ages and backgrounds. "His legacy was emphasized to me at the tribute," she said. "It sounds like a cliché, but he had an Everyman quality to him which affected people. He was very accessible."

Ken Kragen said: "Harry was one of the best concert performers I've ever seen. He gave everything there was in him to give and played until he and his musicians were ready to drop. He commanded the stage."

Chapin's songs — poignant mini-dramas about ordinary people — still elicit emotional responses that have kept his record sales steady. Pete Seeger said: "Harry was a great songwriter and a master storyteller. He made up songs not to get famous but to analyze what it means to be human."

Mr. Seeger recalled how Chapin typically ended his concerts by singing "All My Life's a Circle" at the front of the stage without a microphone. He'd ask the sound man to sing a verse, then invite a crew member in the wings to come forward and sing. "He'd get all the people backstage out front to remind the audience that a team was responsible for the show," Mr. Seeger said.

In addition to performing at white-hot intensity for three hours, Chapin would sign autographs during intermission and after each show. He talked to fans for hours, selling T-shirts and books to support his charitable causes. "His voice suffered," Jen Chapin said. "On one live recording, his voice is just a junkyard."

Sandy Chapin said, "Harry never wanted a 9-to-5 job, but he had more like a 7 A.M.-to-3 A.M. job." People asked her if the trouble Chapin was ever down. "No, he's either up or out," was her reply.

"I never met anybody energized to that degree," Mr. Marsh said. "The wear and tear of being around somebody like that is usually not sustainable, but every minute you knew Harry Chapin you were better off."

James Chapin said, "It was like being related to a steam engine."

Today, Chapin's influence proliferates through his music and his fans — both old and new. John McMenamin has performed Harry Chapin benefit concerts in Pennsylvania for years. "The concerts are like a family get-together where people sing along, and the family keeps getting bigger," he said.

Web sites on the Internet provide a forum for Chapin fans. Scott Sivakoff, a Florida college student who was 5 when Chapin died, said he's heard from "tons of people in the U.S., England, Germany and Canada" on the Chapin home page he created. "It just explodes," he said.

Brian Bieluch, a 19-year-old at Connecticut College, has had nearly 7,000 "hits" on his Chapin page since February. "I found all these people all over the world, a whole new generation responding to Harry's ideas," he said.

Jim Lauderdale, a Nashville recording artist, has written many hit country-western songs after Chapin advised him: "Do your own songs. You've got that fire in your belly. Keep that up." Mr. Lauderdale acknowledged, "He really did make a big impact on me."

Bill Ayres, co-founder and executive director of World Hunger Year, described Chapin as "a bulldog; He had this indomitable spirit and believed the key thing is to keep going and not lose heart." He added: "Nobody else left the kind of legacy of humanitarian caring. It's not just what Harry did but what has continued in his name. I can't tell you how many people got their start in work which is now helping the world at a Harry Chapin concert."

Dynamic, charismatic, unquenchable, visionary are adjectives that pop up again and again linked to Chapin's name. "He was a person of the utmost faith," Mr. Marsh said. "When you run into someone so possessed by faith, unless you're spiritually stone blind, it's a powerful, inspiring experience. Harry Chapin may have been a journeyman pop star, but he was an earth-changing human being."