

The Energy of Chapin

Geof Hewitt wrote "On the Road with Harry Chapin '64" for the Alumni News of December 1973. When word came of the death of the popular singer, songwriter, and activist in an auto accident on Long Island last summer, we asked Geof for his thoughts:

What made Harry Chapin unique was his strong sense of himself, undercut by an equally strong need to be loved. The result was, when I knew him at Cornell, an egotism that had a giving and vulnerable quality. Harry was a kind man, but bull-headed. Later, he became famous, and on some levels, the need to be loved was satisfied, I think. He seemed calmer, more sure of himself. I think he was pleased to be a family person and to derive the most significant form of recognition and love at home and within himself.

The newspapers reported that Harry's license was under suspension at the time of his fatal automobile accident. Somehow these tidbits mitigate the sympathy a stranger might feel. The scofflaw's ultimate justice may be too harsh a penalty, but look, says the stranger, the punishment fit the crime. Add to that the fact that the guy was a pop music star: the stereotype of some over-heralded outlaw screaming down the Long Island Expressway at 90 mph behind the wheel of his Porsche might comfort those who didn't know Harry, or who failed to read the accounts carefully enough to learn that he was struck from behind, while his emergency blinkers were on, and his car was moving at about 15 mph as he pulled from the left lane into the center lane.

It is significant to me that Harry, with license under suspension, did not simply retain a chauffeur to keep him mobile for the six months of his penalty. It is significant to me that he was killed driving a 1975 Rabbit, not a snazzy pop star car. It is significant that Harry wasn't interested in squandering his money, and was certainly not interested in any of the glitter associated with stardom.

Under Harry's bluff style, endless talking fired by enthusiasm for language and the desire to explore feelings and sit-

uations, lay great seriousness, revealed in his tireless work to combat world hunger. Whatever Harry's critics, myself included, could find to fault in his songs, we had only to look at what he was doing with his success to see that his spirit and generosity would rightly humble any of the musicians we could name as "more inventive" or "better artists."

In truth, it was Harry's aggressive and tireless manner that opened so many doors in Washington: he was incapable of a quiet crusade, probably knowing that hushed tones were not his style, and would accomplish nothing to end world hunger anyhow. So he became friends with several senators and members of the House, and parlayed those associations to win new support for his cause. His influence would never have worked without the example he set: it was nothing for him after a day-long recording session, to sing a benefit concert in Long Island, hop a plane and race the time zones cross country to close another benefit in L.A. Then, before retiring, I'm sure he was capable of phoning a few of his key people in Washington, catching them before their day was really under way.

For Harry, there was no end of the day, no end to the struggle—and yet, it was a struggle that he undertook with joy, and the energy of one who's had all the sleep he can handle. I hope his example will touch others who have just half the energy he possessed, and that all of us may become active in the noble war that cannot be waged by only a few.

Geof Hewitt '66

Calais, Vt.

Geof notes that contributions in Chapin's memory are being received by the Harry Chapin Memorial Fund, Box 538, Huntington, NY 11743 and World Hunger Year, 350 Broadway, Room 209, New York 10013.—Ed.

Med School awe

Editor: Is Nancy Littel kidding? ("So You Want To Be an M.D.," July News). I thought that articles about medical