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On tour with 'Let's Play!', his first release in seven years, Raffi has met longtime fans now seeing him in concert with their own kids



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Raffi, the Next Generation

Most artists mature with their audiences. Not Raffi. He's sung to the preschool set for 26 years. And as they've grown up, they've stuck with him

By B. J. Sigesmund
NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

Nov. 7 — Trinity Falk was 10 years old when she had what she calls her first "big Raffi moment." It was 1985, and she was sitting in the back of a van in west Seattle with her younger brother and sister and four kids from another family.

Trinity's mother was driving—or maybe it was the friends' mother, she can't recall. But she certainly remembers this: "We were singing 'Down by the Bay' at the top of our lungs."

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Parents and kids like Raffi's humor. His 1994 'Bananaphone' asks, 'What do you say when you answer a bananaphone? Yelloooooow!'

SEVENTEEN YEARS LATER, Falk is still hearing children wail to Raffi. Only now, she's listening to her own kids—including daughter, Phoebe, 5. "It's fun to teach her a new song and then tell her that I sang it when I was a little girl," she says. "We sing 'Down by the Bay' all the time. It's incredible."

Some artists mature with their audiences. But not Raffi Cavoukian. The longtime children's singer—whose first album came out in 1976—has never moved on from the preschool set. And while his fans mature, they never really forget about him. During his current tour for "Let's Play!"—the singer's first new release in seven years—Raffi has drawn lifetime listeners who are now seeing him in concert with their own children. "I meet them backstage or I hear from them by letter," says Raffi. And during the concerts, he adds, "the grownups seem to be singing loudest of all."



That seems to be the crux of Raffi's success. Unlike much of the other music currently made for kids, Raffi's songs are easy on a parent's ears—which is important when they're forced to listen to them endlessly. "I'd much rather have Raffi stuck in my head than

Barney," says Marjie Shulsinger, a Denver mom whose 4-year-old daughter, Rachel, discovered Raffi two years ago. Says Mom: "It's like Looney Tunes. The songs

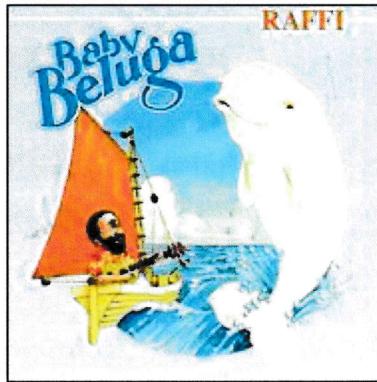
works on both levels. There's a subtle bit of humor that parents like. Plus, you can sing it in the grocery store and not be embarrassed."

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Raffi was the first artist to use sophisticated, professional musicians to make children's music, which is one of the main reasons it appeals to parents. The Egyptian-born, Canada-raised guitarist actually started out as a folk singer. But one day in his mid-20s, his wife-to-be's mother suggested he sing at her nursery school. A (children's) star was born.

From there came his first album, "Singable Songs for the Very Young," which contained his signature tune, "Down by the Bay." Raffi grew popular in Canada, and then a blockbuster 1980 release, "Baby Beluga," brought him wider fame. In 1985, he broke in the United States. (That year, *NEWSWEEK* reported that some saw him as "a Springsteen for kids.") In 1989, he sold out Carnegie Hall, where parents of desperate children paid up to \$300 for scalped tickets. Raffi now has 13 albums in total; just two weeks ago he rereleased "Raffi's Christmas Album," a remastered version of his 1983 record with a bonus track.

Still one of his most popular albums, 1980's 'Baby Beluga' brought Raffi widespread fame



The bearded, folksy Raffi, now 54, has been a longtime champion of the environment and other causes. He was among the first artists to push to eliminate the wasteful cardboard "longbox" in which CDs were once packaged. His autobiography, "The Life of a Children's

Troubadour," was published on chlorine-free paper. He's put two free songs up on the Web at www.turnthisworldaround.com: "Turn This World Around," which was inspired by Nelson Mandela, and "Salaam, Shalom, Side by Side," a song about peace in the Middle East. Though he's never liked being called an "activist," Raffi's social and political lobbying have earned him the respect of the more socially conscious of today's music fans. Look around at his concerts—large and small—and you'll see pockets of onetime hippies, now celebrating his music with their kids.

'Let's Play' emphasizes the importance of playtime for children



For children of a certain age, a Raffi

concert is the Holy Grail. Several years back, Cliff Adams and his wife took their daughter, Sydney, now 11, to see Raffi in concert in Sacramento, Calif. "I remember she got so excited at being right there that she couldn't sit in her own seat," says Adams, 52. "She sat on her mom's lap, in a death-grip hug. She couldn't face Raffi. Emotionally, that would have been too much. Her hero was right there in front of her." Adams always appreciated Raffi's lyrics, which he says are "crystal clear," unlike many other shrill children's songs. "One of the things that brought my daughter and me together was picking her up and singing these songs."

Susan Chacko believes her kids learned a lot from the lyrics, too. The Maryland mother says one of Raffi's songs taught her children, aged 5 and 8, to recognize various different musical instruments. A native of India, Chacko also likes Raffi's international scope. "In the song 'Like Me and You,' he has the names of different children. 'Koji lives in Japan, Nina lives in Chile, Farida lives in Pakistan.' He took the trouble to pronounce the countries correctly. He said it like someone in Pakistan would say it."



But for Cheryl Greenhalgh, it's Raffi's humor that keeps her and her daughter, Hayley, 4, entertained. They especially like "Bananaphone," his 1994 release. "You can hear the banana joke again and again," says Greenhalgh, who lives in Vancouver. "You know, 'What do you say when you answer a bananaphone? Yelloooooow!'" She says that for years, whenever she and Hayley got in the car, "it was, 'Raffi, please.' We have listened to 'Baby Beluga' 500 times, without exaggeration." But even that wasn't too many times for Mom. "The funny thing is, sometimes when she's not in the car, I pop it in," Greenhalgh admits. "We don't change our music a whole lot, and you're preoccupied a lot when you get in the car. Plus, it's peaceful, and I really do like the songs."

Apparently it's impossible to outgrow Raffi. Just ask Cathleen Auton, a fan who's in the sixth grade. When she was 6 or 7, she used to listen to him for an hour or two a day. Now, of course, it's more of a nostalgia thing. "When I go to his concerts," says the 11-year-old, "I feel like a kid again."