

Child's Play Column: Rocket Boy

Like many a new parent -- especially one who also happens to be a musician -- former Del Fuegos leader Dan Zanes was eager to check out what the kids' audio world had to offer when his daughter Anna was born in 1995. But what he found didn't thrill him all that much. So, Zanes began making his own children's music, eventually releasing an album called "Rocket Ship Beach" on his own label, Festival Five.

A rootsy, winsome collection of classic folk songs (mostly American but some Caribbean) and a couple of originals, "Rocket Ship Beach" includes guest performances by Sheryl Crow, Suzanne Vega, G.E. Smith, Bad Company's Simon Kirke, former Raybeats guitarist Pat Irwin, and a host of West Indian musicians from Zanes' Brooklyn, N.Y., neighborhood. "I grew up listening to Leadbelly and Pete Seeger," says Zanes, whose liner notes add Ella Jenkins and Chuck Berry to that list. "So I'd had an idea that kids' music was like early rock'n'roll -- raw, spontaneous but a bit quieter. The records I heard, though, didn't have that sound I heard in my head. Other parents in my neighborhood were telling me the same thing, so they were doing things like playing Beatles music for their kids."

Naturally, Zanes had no quarrel with the Fab Four, but he's a believer that children should have music they can call their own. "Otherwise, kids miss out," he says. "The world of animals, for instance, comes across in kids' music like it does nowhere else." Zanes did find some children's artists he wholeheartedly supported, Raffi and Tom Chapin among them. The way he saw it, though, there just wasn't enough of them.

So Zanes started holding loosely structured hootenannies at his house, inviting "friends and their kids to play and sing together. Some of those friends were celebrities; some were West Indian baby sitters in the neighborhood. Those just-for-fun sessions spawned a homemade tape, recorded at Globe Studios in New York's meatpacking district, which Zanes gave out to neighborhood kids.

Crow's involvement, he notes, came about through his having introduced her to Globe Studios. She cut an album there, Zanes says, "and I told her she could return the favor by singing 'Polly Wolly Doodle.' "

Vega's contribution is lead vocals on "Erie Canal." Kirke, who was Bad Company's drummer, wrote the song "All My Friends Live in the Woods," sang lead and harmony, and played guitar and bass on the cut. The West Indian baby sitters formed a group called the Sandy Girls, who perform Caribbean tunes "Emmanuel Road" and "Brown Girl In The Ring." There's also an irresistible track

called "Father Goose," in which New York dancehall rapper Rankin' Don plays the title role, giving a host of nursery rhymes his own distinctive spin. Zanes' Anna sings on the album with a kids' chorus, which also includes children of some of the other participants.

Zanes says the response to "Rocket Ship Beach" was enthusiastic. "Five hundred tapes later, people were asking for more," he says. He began performing live for kids and families, "at nursing homes and places like that; I didn't want to get paid. That way everybody wins -- we have fun playing together, and people get music."

Still, the entity that was "Rocket Ship Beach" kept evolving, and demand escalated, so Zanes founded his Festival Five label and "threw myself into this. It's since become something I'm passionate about. I never remembered a Del Fuegos show where people in droves wanted to come up afterwards and hit the drums with sticks, or where I could hold up a guitar and say, 'Do you know what this is?' and have everybody yell, 'A guitar!' Kids are everything I always wanted a grown-up audience to be. All the signs are there that this is what I should be doing."

For the "Rocket Ship Beach" CD cover, whose artwork was created by his brother-in-law Donald Saaf, Zanes was intent on making it as environmentally friendly as possible -- no plastic, no chlorine bleach. "So we made it into a chunky board book -- full color, eight double-sided pages," he says.

The album is available at retail stores in the New York area, as well as through Amazon.com, and soon will make inroads into Boston (the Del Fuegos' home base) the same way it did in New York -- via the trunk of Zanes' car. "I just put on my clean shirt, fill my bags with CDs, and go out into the world," he says, noting that he is looking for distribution. However, "until I can get someone to do it for me, I'll keep doing it myself."

"This is the stuff I was trying to avoid my whole life: the business side," Zanes says. "But [working in the kids' music realm] has been a nice experience. Everyone shares information." One of those helpful sorts, he notes, has been Sherry Goffin Kondor, leader of kids' retro-pop act Sugar Beats. "I called her out of the blue -- hadn't spoken to anyone yet in this business -- and she put in a good word for me with [a prominent distributor]. I almost cried. [Nashville-based, Grammy-winning lullaby entrepreneur] J. Aaron Brown, too, has been great."

Zanes' live act has evolved into the Rocket Ship Revue, whose full complement consists of his Wonderland String Band (a male-female collective), a Senegalese djembe player, and the Sandy Girls. "There are about 10 or 11 of us up there," says Zanes. "There are a lot of cross-cultural things going on and a loose, communal feeling. It's really been fun for us and for the kids."

-MOIRA McMCORMICK

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