

Frankel harnesses kids' energy in his music

By JACK WALTON Tribune Correspondent | Posted: Thursday, October 9, 2014 6:00 am

The first children's song that Joel Frankel ever wrote was called "We Go Together." A colleague recorded it and it popped up in a scene from the 1988 Tom Hanks vehicle "Big."

Scoring an appearance on a major movie soundtrack was a fine start to Frankel's career, and he's been writing and performing kids' music ever since.

On Saturday, he gives two afternoon performances at the Acorn Theater in Three Oaks. He does a lot of solo gigs, but this time, he'll have the accompaniment of his daughter, Layla, who has recently embarked on her own professional career in music.

"She's a great singer, so she makes me sound better," Frankel says by phone from his home in Chicago.

Both father and daughter are faculty members at Chicago's Old Town School of Folk Music. Joel currently teaches guitar and Layla teaches in the school's Wiggleworms program for children's music.

Although he's done music for adults as well, Frankel's catalog centers around his four albums of songs for kids. Over his many years of doing concerts for children, he's learned that it's crucial to harness the live-wire energy in those rooms.

"It's all about reading the audience," he says. "There are certain songs that will always calm them down and others that always pick them up."

This dynamic requires Frankel to be fairly freewheeling with any notion of a consistent set list,



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Joel Frankel performs his children's music in two shows Saturday afternoon at the Acorn Theater in Three Oaks. (Photo provided/Insight Pictures, MATT DINERSTEIN)

much to the chagrin of his more by-the-book daughter.

“Layla prefers to know what the heck I’m doing next. I’m certain of that,” Frankel says with a laugh. “I’ve been told in no uncertain terms.”

Along with vocals, Layla adds baritone ukulele and percussion to the mix. Frankel’s original songs are pop-rock tunes for the most part, with a few dalliances in other styles thrown in for variety’s sake. On “Welcome,” the rhythm rides on a Caribbean groove. Frankel says that those kinds of experiments are vital for audience and performer alike.

“It keeps things interesting, and it might be a chance to pick up a new technique,” he says. “It helps you stay away from doing one, key of C, tempo’s 120 beats per minute, then the next one’s key of C, tempo at 108.”

Many of the lyrics seize on universal experiences. Anyone who’s traveled with a child can appreciate “Are We There Yet?” Other songs focus on foods (“Bagels and Cream Cheese”) and animal noises, as in the case of “Hey Horse,” which asks the musical question “When you’re neighin’ are you sayin’ hi to me in Horse?”

Some of Frankel’s pieces have taken on lives outside of his own performances. His trademark song, “I’d Be a Bee,” is the prime example. It has a hyper energy to it, with a simple lyric and a blindingly fast tempo in the chorus.

“That’s my hit,” he says. “It’s so basic to early childhood development. Even babies can process it, I’ve noticed. A lot of people have covered it and a few have even covered it on recordings.”

It’s the tune for which he has garnered the most grass-roots acclaim as well.

“I’ll wander into some building,” Frankel says, “and someone will point and say, ‘Oh — that’s the bee guy!’”