

RAFFI: The Golden Voice Of Children's Music

Canadian kidsinger Raffi has become the top-selling artist of children's music today, and is expected to account for a million units sold in '87. He is the only children's artist signed to a major U.S. label, A&M, and the first to issue a compact disk, while his A&M video, "A Young Children's Concert With Raffi," is a kidvid staple. *Billboard* interviewed Raffi about marketing the kid wave upon the release of his new "Everything Grows" LP and eve of his U.S. fall tour.

BB: Is it my imagination or does your new album, "Everything Grows," seem to have some appeal to a little bit of an older audience?

RA: My hope is that it still includes the very young, which is its prime purpose. But if the point is that older kids and older people can also enjoy this album on their own terms, then that would be a wonderful bonus. I know that there are some sure-fire hits for the three-year-olds in the album, I also know that there are songs that are a bit wider in their appeal, and I have found through experience that if you choose the right song, or if you write a song in a particular way, that you can give young children levels of access to meaning and to images that they can individually find—depending on their individual place in time—that the songs can also work to stimulate older people and possibly adults. So I've been aware of that possibility for a few albums now and I've been working consciously in my writing to have as many of those kinds of songs as I can, because grownups are people too and we all have a bit of the child in us . . .

BB: Since you used an expression like "sure-fire hits for three-year-olds," do you think there might ever come a day when a Raffi song will have such general audience appeal that, heaven forbid, a *single* might be released and *radio airplay* sought?

RA: Well, I wouldn't bet against it. It would be a nice little surprise, and talk about a bonus, if that ever came to pass! It makes me think of back when "Baby Beluga" came out in 1980 in Canada, we lifted a single off that album, "All I Really Need." We even did a radio remix, slightly punchier. That tune in Toronto got played on one of the adult contemporary stations virtually every day for a span of six months, and I was quite pleasantly surprised by that, because Toronto is Canada's toughest radio market. Some other stations also picked up the single. It didn't cause a sensation in terms of what hit singles do, but it was a nice little adjunct to everything else that was happening, and I wouldn't say that's [a single] out of the question. I've got the feeling that if something goes really big in America that it's even more possible that something like a radio opportunity might come about, but we'll have to just wait and see.

BB: A&M had toyed with the idea. Two songs on the album suggested possibilities . . .

RA: We'd be wise to look at what pitfalls there would be in that, because the kind of career I have is pretty unique among entertainers, and the fact that there aren't very many mainstream, highly visible entertainers of children leads me to think that it would be a mistake to confuse the issue in the public mind. People might wonder, well, has Raffi all of a sudden taken to making songs for adults on the radio. I don't think I would do anything to change a song that I recorded on an album for it to be played on the radio. It would almost be wonderful if it happened accidentally as opposed to a push by us or by A&M.

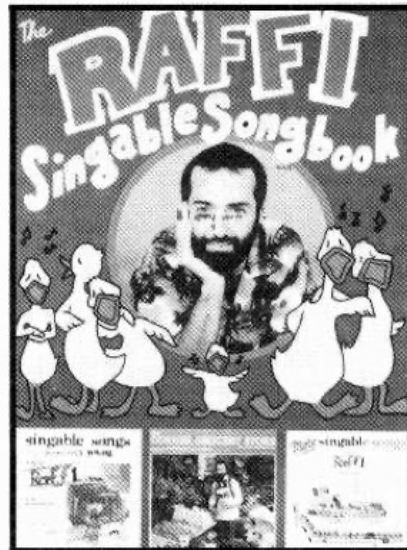
BB: When can we look forward to a second Raffi video? My kid has watched the one Raffi video so many times the tape

is wearing thin . . .

RA: We have been talking about a second video. This time it would be with my band, and that would sort of bring up to date what is currently happening with me because all my touring now is with a band. Virtually all the songs that we did would not be repeats from the first one, maybe with exception of "Baby Beluga." It would be the same style of video as the first, concert footage, exactly, with no with conceptual footage. I think it would be a fun thing, and I hope to have some news about it in a couple of months.

BB: Is any of your music on compact disk yet?

RA: Yes, in the spring A&M released "One Light, One Sun," and they told me that their initial pressing was sold out in a hurry, and they're now into the second pressing. I've also heard that the price of CDs will come plummeting down in the future. I got some information that there's been a technological breakthrough where the manufacturing cost of CDs has gone down to being comparable to the manufacturing costs of LPs, and if that



Cover art for "The Raffi Singable Songbook" from Crown Publishers. Raffi's new A&M LP is "Everything Grows."

comes about within a year, my goodness, it will change a lot of things. So I will probably see many of my titles out on CD. Already, the Christmas record will be out on CD this fall. Also "Everything Grows" will be on CD as well, and A&M is already talking about a couple of other titles to follow in the fall, so it looks like Raffi on CD is happening.

BB: Do you think that retailers understand what they are selling and how to sell it, when it comes to retailing children's music? Or is it something you feel they just have to rack up and if it's in the stores parents and kids will somehow find it?

RA: It's a complicated question. In Canada we have a number of children's artists who have gained distribution with A&M Records in Canada. That is not the case in the U.S. In

(Continued on page C-6)



Raffi

(Continued from page C-3)

Canada we think of having a viable children's recording industry. We mean that in the sense of the kinds of albums I've been doing and Fred Penner and Sharon, Lois & Bram, Jerry Brodie, Bob Schneider and a number of people who've put out records at full list price and so on. That being the case, the Canadian retailers understand that there's been a "new wave," if I can put it that way, of children's records in the last 10 years, since my records came out and achieved their popularity, but there's been a new wave of children's records, and I think it's brought some consciousness to them about the discriminating parent that is willing to pay the going rate for a quality record. Now I'm sure that we can't say that that exists in the U.S., when in fact I guess it doesn't, because I am the only one of the children's recording artists that has national distribution on a major label. So we can't really say that there's a viable children's recording industry in the U.S., and if that's so, then it's hard to really say that retailers have a sense of what to do with the product in the way that they might have about other kinds of records. Oddly enough, it's in the children's specialty stores, like children's book stores and so on, where customers will most likely get the most personal service about what children's records are out there that they need to know about to make discriminating choices. Hopefully, as my career makes more and more inroads, and hopefully as more children's recording artists gain distribution on major labels in the U.S., which is something that I hope will happen, then we can have a new look at what a children's

record section really offers to people.

BB: Do you think there will come a day when Raffi records, tapes and videos and books will be able to be found in many stores beyond record stores?

RA: I think that's happening already. What A&M devised was something called the cassette long-box, which is a colorful box that contains a cassette in it, and it was devised specifically for chains like B. Dalton and Waldenbooks and so on, that felt a need to display the product in that form. And soon my books will be available in book stores, which makes me very happy. I think the whole association with Crown Publishing has been a joy since day one. The "Songs To Read" series was an idea that was running through our minds at the same time that Crown approached us with it, so it was one of those synchronistic events that seems to happen when there's a good idea around.

BB: Do you foresee many radical changes in the children's market over the next five years?

RA: Some of the changes we see could be in the use of format. When I was selling my records 10 years ago, LPs were far and away the majority of what was being sold, cassettes were a slim minority, 10%-20%. Now that's almost reversed. I can see that kind of thing happening with other formats, be they CDs or DAT or whatever. Apart from that I hope that we see more and more children's entertainers whose music in any format is distributed by major labels, because that would then create a sense of a viable industry for children's recordings.

BB: What would you like to achieve in children's music that you haven't already achieved? What new chal-

lenges lie ahead for you?

RA: I think it would be wonderful if an Anne Murray or an artist of similar stature were to record one of the songs that has broad appeal. I think the continuing reward of what I do will probably come from opportunities to talk about children to an audience of eager listeners because let's face it, children are still the only minority at whom, in our society, we openly laugh at. When you consider the depth of that situation, then you can begin to understand my concern on their behalf and my commitment to promoting the view that children are whole people and that they have dignity and that they are people who are worthy of our respect. I can see that continuing to be the one area where I receive the most rewards, in being able to express and talk about that.