

Globe Magazine

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SAVING FRIENDLY'S

WILL TASTIER FRIBBLES, FASTER SERVICE, AND CLEANER RESTAURANTS BRING CUSTOMERS BACK?



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ALASTAIR MOOCK,
IN THE FOOTSTEPS
OF SEEGER AND
GUTHRIE, MAKES
**REAL KIDS
MUSIC**
THAT PARENTS
ACTUALLY ENJOY

BY HOLLY LEBOWITZ ROSSI



LITTLE FOLK

MOVE OVER, WIGGLES. ZIP IT, BARNEY. Alastair Mook and his musical compatriots create songs about real life that kids and their parents can both love.

BY HOLLY LEBOWITZ ROSSI



IT'S 10 A.M. ON A SATURDAY AT Club Passim, the storied Harvard Square folk venue frequented by Joan Baez and Bob Dylan in the 1960s, and the place is packed. Strollers neatly line the walls of the club's tight foyer, and the small tables inside are already littered with Starbucks cups, sippy cups, and baggies of Cheerios. Adult chitchat mingles with a—mostly—cheerful din of toddler noises.

In a tiny brick-walled back room, Alastair Mook, dressed in jeans, a blue checked shirt, and a newsboy cap, is seated on a stiff-looking chair. It's a big day for Mook—it's his 10th family show here, and he'll be debuting songs from his new album, *Singing Our Way Through: Songs for the World's Bravest Kids*. In the audience are his 6-year-old twin daughters, one of whom, Clio, is the inspiration for the album. Clio is undergoing treatments for leukemia; a pink headband adorns her bald head.



Alastair Mook, with guitar, shoots his "When I Get Bald" music video at a Melrose barber shop; daughter Clio (below) joins him in the video.

Many in the audience know the 40-year-old Mook, his music, and his family's story. But others, who have come for a fun weekend outing, don't realize they're about to see a day in the life of childhood cancer. Is Mook nervous that he'll be able to hit the right notes, so to speak, for his whole audience? "No," he says simply. A beat later, with a thoughtful smile, he adds, "Not anymore."

During the 45-minute show, cancer isn't center stage—music is. Kids either stare or dance, clap or gape as Mook sings in his gentle, gravelly voice and plays the acoustic guitar and banjo. Jamie Walker, a sideman with deep smile lines and wild gray hair, plays the electric guitar, and musician Mark Erelli, here with his young sons, jumps onstage to play mandolin. The set list includes originals from Mook's earlier kids' albums, classic tunes like "Old Joe Clark" and "Chicken," plus the new songs. Mook gets a laugh from parents when he describes "B-R-A-V-E," a rap about going to the doctor, as "medical hip-hop."

MUSIC VIDEO
SEE ALASTAIR MOOCK PERFORM "WHEN I GET BALD" AT BOSTONGLOBE.COM/MAGAZINE.

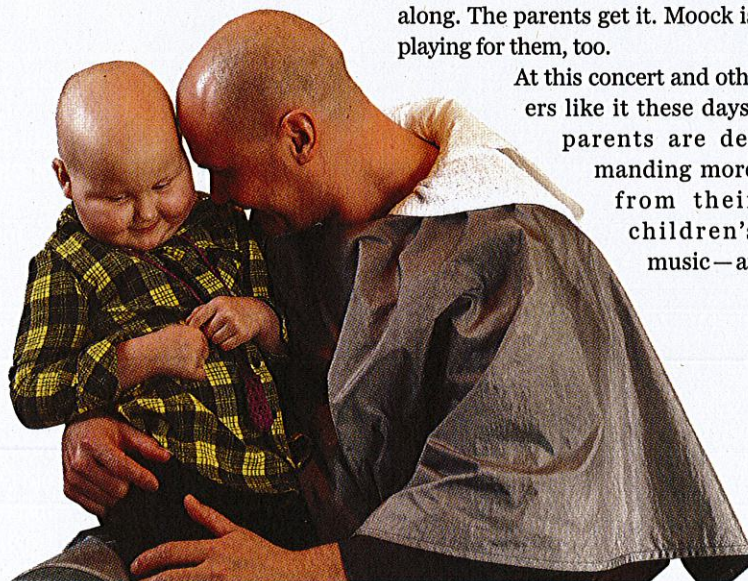
This is a concert for children, yet it's not, well, childish. There are no puppets or princesses, no synthesizers or cutesy costumes. Even more surprising is that parents here are clapping along to the beat, and not in some ironic way. They have their smartphones out, sure, but they're only snapping photos of their bopping kids. Many are even singing along. The parents get it. Mook is playing for them, too.

At this concert and others like it these days, parents are demanding more from their children's music—at

minimum requiring what Richard James Burgess, director of marketing for the record label Smithsonian Folkways, calls "music that doesn't make you want to jump out of the minivan." No one wants the same old "The Wheels on the Bus."

Maybe it comes from a yearning for all things natural and authentic that has parents shopping local, eating organic, and limiting screen time. Or perhaps it's a backlash against Barney, coming from an ever-so-slightly selfish generation of parents who just can't summon the energy to clap or sing along to music they don't like.

Whatever the reason, Mook and others like him have created a thriving kids' folk scene in the Boston area, true to the city's history as a folk music hub and replete with choices for the under-5 set. Trust me on this. As the mother of a 2½-year-old boy, there have been days when we can't decide which sing-along or concert to attend. Options include outdoor shows by the tie-dye-clad Ben Rudnick and Friends,



PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

and library and toy store singalongs, like banjo-wielding Jeremy Lyons's Saturday-morning gigs at Stellabella Toys in Inman Square. Elizabeth Mitchell, a national favorite among kiddie-folk fans, played at the Regattabar in the Charles Hotel this summer while visiting from upstate New York. Club Passim's frequent family shows are big hits.

Music is a powerful thing, the soundtrack to childhood (and parenthood), as well as a source of amusement, nostalgia, and connection for adults and kids alike. Even more important, music can be a shelter from many of life's storms and a wellspring of healing. It's been both of these things for Moock and his family.

ALASTAIR MOOCK DIDN'T start out as a children's musician. He almost didn't start out as a musician at all, majoring in economics at Williams College and imagining a career in Third World development, something both his parents did for organizations such as the World Bank while raising their only child in Westchester County, New York.

Moock grew up listening to folk music. His passion for it took hold one summer in middle school, when his father brought him to see Pete Seeger and Arlo Guthrie play one of their many concerts together at Wolf Trap National Park for the Performing Arts in Virginia (a "magical place" that Moock felt awed and humbled to play himself in July). When Moock left for college, his dad's guitar went with him. By senior year, economics was no longer his calling.

Moock moved to Boston after graduation—he and his family now live in Medford—and started waiting tables and singing at open-mike nights around the area. At 23, he released *Walking Sounds*, his first of five records geared toward adults. To make ends meet, he also took jobs at after-school programs, first at Jackson Mann School in Allston and later at Fayerweather Street School in Cambridge, where he taught sports and music and helped kids \\\

A TOUR OF BOSTON'S MUSIC SCENE FOR KIDS

ALASTAIR MOOCK & FRIENDS

STYLE Folk, roots, and creative originals, sung in a gravelly voice

UPCOMING SHOW September 21, 10:30 a.m., Center for the Arts at the Armory, Somerville (tickets are \$10 in advance, \$12 at the door); singingourway.brownpapertickets.com, moockmusic.com

BEN RUDNICK AND FRIENDS

STYLE Upbeat rock and traditional folk covers

UPCOMING SHOW September 15, 11:30 a.m., Family Farm Day, Appleton Farms, Ipswich (\$25 per car for general admission to day's festivities); benrudnick.com

WAYNE POTASH

STYLE Folk classics as well as fun and funny originals

UPCOMING SHOW September 7, 4:30 p.m., WCPA Beach Concert and BBQ, Wayland Town Beach (tickets for those not members of the Wayland Children & Parents Association are \$10, with a maximum of \$30 per family); waynepotash.com

with their homework. He figured if the singer-songwriter thing fizzled out, he might make a good teacher.

He began to work on a few songs he could play with the schoolkids, soon writing what would become one of his best-known songs, "A Cow Says Moo." After his twin girls, Clio and Elsa, were born in 2006, the writing flowed even more freely for the stay-at-home dad (his wife, Jane Roper, 39, is an advertising copywriter and author). "Creativity has its own life, and in some ways you're a scribe and you're writing what you hear," Moock says. "Which sounds funny when you're writing about bellybuttons."

Before long, Moock realized he was a musician with one foot in bars, the other in playgrounds. And as his singer-songwriter career started to stall, he wasn't sure he was ready for the direction his music was pulling him in. "I think I had a vision of what children's performers were, and I didn't want to be one," he says. "That Barney approach to music—yeah, I'm willing to take on Barney—gets kids singing and it can reinforce positive messages, and



VANESSA TRIEN AND THE JUMPING MONKEYS

STYLE Exuberant classics and original songs

UPCOMING SHOW September 22, 11:15 a.m., Brookline Day, Larz Anderson Park (free); vanessatrien.com

KAREN K & THE JITTERBUGS

STYLE Joyful retro-rock songwriting with a musical-theater sensibility

UPCOMING SHOW October 5, 10:30 a.m., Regent Theatre, Arlington (tickets are \$8 for kids and seniors and \$10 for adults); jitterbugsnyc.com

MATT HEATON

STYLE Rockabilly originals and traditionals

UPCOMING SHOWS September 3, 10 a.m., Edith M. Fox Library,

Arlington, and September 18, 10 a.m., Bestsellers Cafe, Medford (both are free); mattandshannonheaton.com

JOSH & THE JAMTONES

STYLE A rock and ska sound that is great to jump, clap, and jive to
UPCOMING SHOW September 21-22, Life is Good Festival, Canton (tickets start at \$20 for kids and \$65 for adults); lifeisgood.com, joshandthejamtones.com

those things can be helpful. But it's also inane for adults. To go to a show of that kind of music is torturous for most adults, unless they have a capacity for transporting themselves into being children that I don't."

Moock knew Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger could easily move from singing about labor unions to singing about bath time. Even Johnny Cash and Jerry Garcia recorded kids' albums. But Moock thought he'd missed the period in music when "people could do smart music for kids that was also musically solid and they didn't have to give up their adult careers to do it."

With the 2009 release of his album *A Cow Says Moock*, however, it turned out he was launching his kids' music career at a time when lots of musicians were toggling between family and "grown-up" music with relative ease. The hip and indie Austin City Limits Music Festival has Austin Kiddie Limits, a kid-themed section, and Lollapalooza, the alternative music festival created by Perry Farrell of the band Jane's Addiction, also has a dedicated kids' stage, Kidzapalooza. At kids' events,

songs are liable to include covers of songs by Dire Straits, Cat Stevens, or The Beatles. (Though sometimes cover tunes can push the envelope, as when a musical duo played The Rolling Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil" at children's music festivals a few years back).

Now, Moock can switch between his genres of music, depending on the audience. For kids, he tends to be especially careful, steering clear of songs like "I Know an Old Lady [Who Swallowed a Fly]," for example, because of its creepy refrain, "perhaps she'll die." He says, "I think the stakes are high with kids."

Neither Moock nor any of the other musicians I spoke to expressed resentment or disappointment that they "had to" play for children. Anyone with an attitude like that, the consensus is, just won't make it—kids can spot a fake a mile away. "You have to love children, you have to respect what you're doing as important work," says the legendary kids' musician Raffi Cavoukian, who lives on Salt Spring Island off the west coast of Canada. "Respect them as an audience."

Which doesn't mean parents always respect the performers. "There are some shows where parents come with their cellphones [and stand] at the back of the room," Mook says. "It's just baby-sitting. And I don't enjoy it." The performer Jeremy Lyons, for his part, will sometimes chide, "It's a singalong, not a stare-along or a talkalong." Lyons says: "I want to promote active listening and participation rather than passive listening. . . . I think there's something really valuable in being where you are when you're there."

THE SPRING OF 2012 WAS shaping up to be an exciting time for Mook's family. His wife had just published *Double Time*, a memoir of her first three years parenting twins and her successful climb out of the depression that followed their birth. But instead of doing readings and book signings and instead of playing gigs to promote *These Are My Friends*, Mook's second children's album, he and Roper found themselves embedded at Floating Hospital for Children for four weeks as they stared down the path of their family's new normal: Clio had been diagnosed with leukemia.

Mook and Roper turned to their respective crafts to help them process and cope. Within 48 hours of Clio's diagnosis, Roper was beginning to chronicle their medical journey on the blog at her site, janeroper.com. Within a week, Mook was bringing his guitar into Clio's hospital room to sing to her.

"Alastair's constantly playing and singing at home, so I think when he started singing and playing in Clio's hospital room, it made it feel more like home to her," says Roper. "You could see the immediate effect of that on her mood and her sense of well-being and comfort. I think it helped Alastair feel better, too, because he was back in the frame of mind of 'this is what I do.'"

Father and daughter began making up songs together to pass the time and have some badly needed laughs. Together, they wrote "I'm



Mook and Jamie Walker get the crowd jumping at New York City's Madison Square Park.

a Little Monkey," which, with its "I feel fine" refrain, Mook thinks of as Clio's protest song, a subconscious way they were refusing to let her condition define the two of them. "I think songwriters reflect what's going on with them, and whether they're 6 or they're 40, stuff comes through," he says. "It can't not get into the

play funny, sweet songs for them at a time when his own family felt so fragile. He felt nervous, distracted, and as if he were hiding something.

After a few songs, he stopped. "It's tricky. I'm not up there to do therapy for myself, and I'm cognizant of that," he recalls. "But the only way I can function in front of an au-

Mook knew Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger could easily move from singing about labor unions to singing about bath time.

songs, even if you're writing about a monkey. We were getting outside through words because we couldn't do it in person." Clio has two writer's credits on *Singing Our Way Through*.

After canceling a few shows in the early weeks after Clio's diagnosis, Mook stepped back onstage for a performance at the library in Medford. It was hard to look out into the audience of healthy, happy kids and

dience is if I'm honest with them." He told the audience the basic details of what was going on—that his daughter was in the hospital and had been diagnosed with cancer.

Not only did the people in the audience not "run screaming from the room," but Mook immediately felt their warmth and compassion. "I think I realized at that point that I can talk about this from stage, and I

can include kids in it," he says. "Kids are capable of understanding what it means to be sick, to be in the hospital. They don't need to know all the details about cancer, but they understand that that's not fun and that it can be hard and scary for both the kid and the parents."

In *Singing Our Way Through* and his performances onstage, Mook tries to strike a balance between having fun and teaching, between comforting others and coping with his emotions. Sometimes he has struggled to find that equilibrium.

At a show in March in Philadelphia, Mook decided to play "When I Get Bald," about a chemotherapy side effect, despite the fact that there were two birthday parties going on and the song requires an introduction explaining that sometimes medicines that make kids get better also make strange things—like losing their hair—happen to them. The room got quieter. "As soon as I started, I thought, 'Shoot, we shouldn't have done it,'" he says. "I feel like I'm still charting territory with this stuff." Almost six months later, he now plays "B-R-A-V-E" at every show and saves "When I Get Bald" for those shows where Clio, a born performer, can proudly sing the empowering song alongside her dad onstage.

Though *Singing Our Way Through* is never morose, neither does it hide from poignancy and emotion. The album's first track, a spoken poem, gets right to the point: "C is for cancer that's growing in me" is its first line. It joins more upbeat tracks on the album, including a rollicking Guthrie cover, "Hard Travelin'," which Mook sings with The Okee Dokee Brothers, 2013's Grammy winner for children's music.

Mook wrote "Have You Ever Been Jealous?" for Elsa, Clio's twin, trying to capture the feelings a healthy young girl has when her ill sister is suddenly inundated with attention and gifts. The song is one of many on the album that Mook hopes will connect with healthy kids, too. "We're dealing with [jealousy] in an unusually specific way," he says, "but it's something that

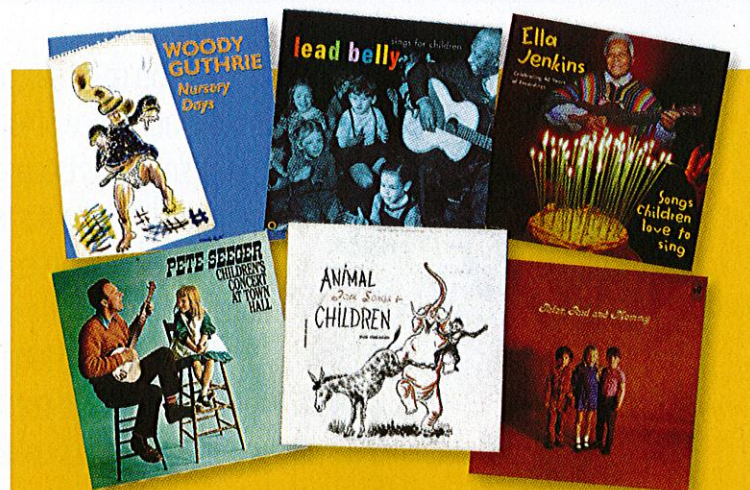
every sibling deals with.”

“Take Care of Your Grownups,” written by Moock and the album’s co-producer Anand Nayak, is an eminently singable salve for weary parents who are walking any difficult family road. “I think in some ways the benefit of an album like Alastair’s might even be more for the parents,” says Rani Arbo, a 45-year-old woman who survived cancer and also sings on the album. “But for the kids, here’s a record that’s fun and funny and talks about their issues, keeps their parents laughing and crying, and it kind of keeps everything going on normally. I almost feel like that’s what kids need in those moments; they need their parents not to buckle, to be able to keep the joy and the fun in the family.”

The album, because of a painful situation he never would have asked for or invited, is turning out to be the fruition of something Moock has been trying to do for years—to build and foster a community, connected by music, just like his heroes Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger did. “Folk music is about our real lives as we live them day to day,” says Scott Alarik, a Cambridge-based journalist who writes about folk music. “The family experience is an important part of that, as are work and love and romance and political issues.”

After the shootings in 2012 at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, Moock led a round of “This Land Is Your Land” at a small State House rally in Boston about gun violence. After the Marathon bombings, he joined an all-star roster at the One Family Music Festival, which drew about a thousand people to the Boston Fish Pier and raised more than \$23,000 for The One Fund Boston.

Violence, particularly violence against children, makes Moock angry in a way that even cancer, remarkably, doesn’t. But he also believes that anger can be channeled and some sense of personal power reclaimed. Whether he’s singing at a benefit or writing a song about his family, he says, “all you can do is to



CHILDREN'S FOLK CLASSICS

Nursery Days

To hear Woody Guthrie imitate the “aah-OOO-gah” sound of a car horn in his “Riding in My Car (Car Song)” is worth the price of admission on this collection. Another standout is “Don’t You Push Me Down,” often called an anti-bullying anthem.

Children's Concert at Town Hall

This 1963 album is Pete Seeger at his best, seamlessly playing songs like “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad” between explanations and stories that hold a young audience’s attention. Moms and dads will especially like “Be Kind to Your Parents.”

Lead Belly Songs for Children

Huddie William Ledbetter was an American master who is often cited, along with Seeger and Guthrie, as a father of the folk revival of the 1950s and ‘60s. This collection includes classics like “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “Skip to My Lou.”

Animal Folk Songs for Children

Peggy Seeger, half sister to Pete and daughter of Ruth Crawford Seeger, calls this album “one of the best CDs for children that our family produced.” Its foot-stamping songs take wild things as their subject, ranging from go-phers to bears to gators.

Songs Children Love to Sing

Ella Jenkins, the “First Lady of the Children’s Folk Song,” created this album by choosing from among hundreds of recordings she’d made since the mid-1950s. Her arrangements will be familiar to anyone who’s ever sung at nursery school.

Peter, Paul and Mommy

Peter, Paul and Mary packed their sweet 1969 album with singalong songs for parents (the poignant “Day Is Done”) and children (“Going to the Zoo”) alike. You’ll find “Puff the Magic Dragon,” too, though you can debate its meaning later.

try to create your own light around these situations.” He ultimately wants to provide free copies of the album, for which he raised more than \$28,000 mostly through the crowdsourcing website gofundme.com, to patients at every children’s cancer ward in the United States.

THE DAY AFTER THE CLUB Passim show, Moock is at The Barber’s Den in Melrose, about to get his head shaved. As the clippers make the first pass, he looks into a camera, guitar resting on his barber’s cape, and sings some lines

from “When I Get Bald.” The new album’s first video shoot is underway.

One of the costars of the video will be 14-year-old Maddy Salveson, who is just arriving. Moock flashes her a wry look and says, “You’re here just in time to see me lose it.” Maddy smiles. Diagnosed with leukemia about the same time as Clio, she, too, has lost her hair.

Soon Roper arrives with Clio and a pile of pizza boxes. Elsa is at a friend’s house for the afternoon. It makes sense. This is Clio’s song.

Clio has always loved to perform—a few months before her di-

agnosis she wrote a song called “I’m a Rock Star,” and she’ll often refer to herself as “a professional musician, just like Daddy.” At most Moock shows, she’ll get onstage right next to her father and belt out “When I Get Bald” into her own microphone.

But now, seated in a barber chair with a big camera in her face, Clio seems to be feeling a little too shy to play the kazoo. Moock folds his 6-foot-2-inch frame to her level and speaks quietly. Roper plops down on the floor and plays air kazoo, giving her motions to imitate. In a moment, Clio turns in a star performance.

Waiting for the video crew to set up for the next take, Moock is in a reflective mood. His guests on the album—including Elizabeth Mitchell, local bluesman Chris Smither, Rani Arbo, and a group of cancer patients he calls “the world’s bravest kids”—all seemed to have an instinctive connection with the spirit of the project. So do the people at the video shoot, including Maddy, 8-year-old Bennett Olson, and even the owner of the barbershop, Evan Georgopoulos. He immediately agreed to open his shop on a Sunday when Moock stopped in to ask. Several other shop owners had said they weren’t interested. “It was important to me that everybody involved understood what we were trying to do,” Moock says.

That sense of community Moock is after is palpable in the room—the feeling that when you hear about a family with a sick child, and there’s anything you can do to help, you do it. You do it because you would want others to do the same for you and for your kids.

“We’re struggling with something that’s pretty extreme, but everybody has stuff happening in their lives,” Moock says. “So the idea of writing songs that talk about struggle makes sense. Kids deal with this stuff, kids struggle. They understand that concept; it’s not foreign to them.” ■

Holly Lebowitz Rossi is a freelance writer in Arlington. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.