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Schoolhouse rocker

Never heard of SteveSongs? You obviously don't hang around a lot of first-graders

by WALLACE BAINÉ

This is not how the concert business usually works. You don't usually drop an e-mail to a favorite entertainer to ask if he's planning to ever perform in your area code and to expect to get a response that says essentially, "good idea — let's do it."

But that is basically the story of how singer/songwriter Steve Roslonek came to be invited to Santa Cruz.

If you've never heard of Roslonek, who performs under the name "SteveSongs," you're likely not between the ages of 3 and 8. Roslonek has become something of a national sensation in the pre-school demographic with his bouncy, ear-friendly tunes aired each day on PBS between the network's most popular shows. With a few CDs and a new DVD package called "The Marvelous Musical Adventures of SteveSongs," Roslonek is fast becoming the Bruce Springsteen of the peanut-butter-and-jelly set.

"My sister sent me a CD last summer," said Deana Tanquay, the Santa Cruz mom responsible for bringing Roslonek to the Messiah Lutheran Church & Preschool in Santa Cruz for a Saturday afternoon concert. "She sees him on the East Coast with her kids all the time."

So Tanquay subscribed to the SteveSongs newsletter and found that had never had a Northern California date. She dropped him a line, and things happened.

"It turned out he had a show in Dallas originally scheduled for Nov. 8, and that he was playing in L.A. the next day," she said. The Dallas show was cancelled, so Roslonek penciled in Santa Cruz.

"I enjoy playing shows tied in with people in the community," said the Connecticut-based Roslonek. "And there's a person in our band from San Francisco, so we're really looking forward to it."

Roslonek, 37, was already embarked on a career as a business consultant when his brother in Boston, a first-grade teacher, asked him to write a few songs for his class. Roslonek discovered a knack for writing and performing songs that could speak to young children, drawing primarily from his love of the "Schoolhouse Rock" TV series of his own youth.

A few CDs followed before PBS caught wind of Roslonek's music. Earlier this year, he was hired for a very specific task: to write and perform songs to be used as between-shows filler after "Clifford the Big Red Dog." That meant songs that were no longer than a minute.



PBS performer Steve Roslonek has become the master of the one-minute children's song.

"It was a fun assignment to keep the songs down to a minute and still have a beginning, middle and end to them," said Roslonek.

The songs were so successful that PBS in September upped the SteveSongs dosage, playing the songs three or four times daily instead of once and giving Roslonek a bit of rope to go past a minute per song.

Naturally, the songs repeat throughout the day, which works on a developmental level for young children. As a result, Roslonek has had to master the fine art of making songs that appeal to kids that won't drive parents insane with repeated listens.

As a performer, Roslonek has a pleasant upbeat style that is never too cloying, mixing songs of overtly educational content, with others more aimed at drawing kids into singalong participation. "We try to do interactive things."

Though a relative newcomer to the national stage, Roslonek draws from a wide range of experience as a singer and songwriter. "When I first started doing this job, I worked to get into about 20 different pre-school classes as a visiting artist." At one point, he was doing six half-hour classes a day.

Now, Roslonek is a father himself — his son just passed his first birthday. In a couple of years, he'll have a live-in audience to float his material past. Said the proud dad, with a laugh, "I hope he likes music."

If You Go

What: SteveSongs, in concert

When: Saturday, Nov. 8, 4 p.m.

Where: Messiah Lutheran Church & Preschool, 801 High St., Santa Cruz

Tickets are \$7 in advance (until 9 p.m. Friday); or \$10 at the door. (800) 937-3397 or www.stevesongs.com.