

‘Octopretzel’ — Music, Effervescence, and Love

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Published: Wednesday, May 5, 2010 10:51 AM PDT

Hannah Kingsbury just turned 3.

That, naturally, makes her a walking, talking sponge, absorbing new experiences and data by the mini-minute.

One Saturday afternoon last month, a couple of days after the seemingly unrelenting rains finally stopped, sunlight pranced along the Town Hall lawn in San Anselmo.

Hannah said she liked “the warm.”

She also liked the mild breeze that kept the bright concert-announcing balloons bouncing off each other, and the California Republic and American flags fluttering high above.

Hannah, her grandfather (that’s me) and her grandmother (that’s my wife, Nancy Fox) got there early.

We wanted to make sure we’d get an up-front seat for “Octopretzel,” which was putting on the free San Anselmo Library- and Ross Valley Rotary-sponsored event for kids in the Town Council chambers.

A purple octopus on the sign outside welcomed us, as did the colorfully dressed quartet inside.

Hannah, staying at our San Anselmo home for her second twice-monthly visit, was thrilled: Since only the four singer-instrumentalists were there, she got to play with one of their props, a fuzzy octopus puppet.

To me, because everything nowadays tends to become Hannah-centric, its arms resembled her pigtailed.

Less than 10 minutes later, and during the entire interactive show that followed, she — and the other 28 young people there — danced and sang, clapped and shouted. It was difficult to find a kid (or a grown-up, for that matter) who wasn’t smiling.

Lila McFadden, a 3-year-old in purple blouse and pink dress whose parents traveled from El Cerrito to see the show, kept spinning around and around at a high-speed pace that made me dizzy just watching.

She also gyrated her hips on cue from the band.

Seconds later, Hannah and the others, also following instructions from the quartet, crawled like caterpillars and then simulated the flight of butterflies.

Like everyone else in attendance, I couldn’t help but grin.

During “Eensy Weensy Spider,” percussionist-puppeteer David Doostan asked us all to “give the spider our vote of confidence. Since we’re in the council chambers, that seems appropriate.”

The parents — a healthy ballot-box mixture of white, Asian and African-American — got the reference. The kids didn't. They were too busy giggling and squealing to care.

At one point, eight toddlers lined up in front of the band like a precision chorus line might. The difference was that almost every flailing arm and kicking leg was out of synch with every other one. All 27 parents and grandparents who'd accompanied the youngsters smiled at the mess.

Hannah was distracted. For a minute or two, she decided her grandma's floppy straw hat held more interest than the number being played. As she toyed with it, everyone else no longer existed for her.

Many of the younger kids demonstrated similarly erratic attention spans, but each always returned his or her gaze to the quartet.

Only a couple of 7-year-olds stayed focused the whole time, as opposed to the 6-month-old in a carriage who didn't give a hoot about anything going on beyond his immediate sightlines.

Almost every child became fully involved, however, when asked to "dance around, jump around — and stop; dance around, jump around — and stop."

I loved watching Hannah hop in time to the music.

In contrast, a particularly poignant moment found a little girl, about 4, gently steadying a wobbly younger sibling by cupping her shoulders from the back. Simultaneously, the younger kid was doing the same thing to an even smaller one in front of her.

One toddler, 3-year-old Stephanie Wong of San Francisco, came straight from her ballet class in Larkspur. She still wore her fluffy tutu.

Jack Mullins of San Anselmo, who just turned 1, couldn't keep up with the other kids' jumping and foot-stomping. But he did smile and clap with the best of them.

"Octopretzel," normally a quintet (puppeteer Jan Kantor was on maternity leave), adapted many familiar tunes. They ranged from an old standby, the alphabet song, to a jazzy spiritual more recognizable by parents, "When the Saints Go Marching In."

Lyrics to that one, however, transformed into "when the kids go skipping in" and "when the ducks go quacking in," etc., etc. and so forth.

"Octopretzel" was named, according to mandolin-violin player Dave Rosenfeld, "for two things kids love" — and, says Sarita Pockell, songwriter-guitarist, "because the octopus represents reaching out to each other while the pretzel's about coming together."

On its CD, the group's founder, guitarist Melita Doostan, added two brief interludes by the Doostan daughter, Leila, now 5.

Whether you catch them in person or on disc, "Octopretzel" is a charming group guaranteed to amuse toddlers through G-rated atmosphere, effervescent fun and enchanting music.

But they'll never create anything nearly as melodic as Hannah's voice when she says, "Grandpa, I really love you."

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