

A Mr. Rogers for a new age

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Loved by children around the world, singer-songwriter Raffi (Raffi Cavoukian) will be in Boston today to kick off a two-day conference run by the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood . As one of the few artists who refuses to have his work belittled to the realm of ringtones -- and who recently withdrew from an international children's conference because he saw it as overly commercialized -- Raffi is a man of conviction who knows of which he sings. To reward his dedication to his craft and his fans, the Judge Baker Children's Center will present Raffi with the second annual Fred Rogers Integrity Award on Thursday. We caught up with Raffi on the phone. -- MATT ROBINSON

Q How did you get into music for younger people?

A I was married to a kindergarten teacher who taught me to respect young children as whole people. My entire career was founded on that respect, beginning with my first children's recording and concerts.

Q What inspires and frustrates you about the world children live in today?

A I am frustrated by a corporate culture that exploits naive kids for brand recognition from birth. It's a violation of the child psyche. It is unethical [and] morally repugnant. I am inspired by people like Susan Linn [of the Judge Baker Center] and Sharna Olfman , editor of the book "Childhood Lost," who champion the child amidst the onslaught of advertising money frenzy.

Q How did you become involved with the Judge Baker Center, and what does this award mean to you?

A Susan Linn is an esteemed colleague whose work at the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood merits big praise. When she informed me of this award, I was deeply moved, having been a respectful fan of Fred Rogers.

Q Your new album is called "Resisto Dancing." What does it mean, and why did you feel the need to produce it?

A Psychologist Abraham Maslow wrote that healthy individuation requires resisting unhealthy enculturation. Add the dance element and you've got a metaphor for creatively (and nonviolently) resisting unhealthy "bottom line" culture. It's about being true to one's inner self. It's a fusion of Dylan, hip-hop, funk and Shakespeare in a genre I call "Hip Hope."

Q Is it hard being known as the "Baby Beluga" man?

A It's fun! Fans I meet get jazzed about the new book and CD. They're invited to join the compassion revolution, to help turn this world around, for their and their children's futures . . . to make like belugas and form pods, be pod-pals, pod-cast, and pod-ruple their power to embrace a compassionate revolution in values.