Old song sparks wave of new popularity for children's entertainer

"I had almost 350,000 books and recordings in print, and until then, I thought that was impressive," says children's songwriter, author and entertainer Barry Louis Polisar.

He's referring to a "big-bang" type of moment in his career: the release of the movie *Juno*.

Call it serendipity. Call it cosmic coincidence. Jason Reitman, *Juno*'s director, was searching *iTunes* for songs that he could use in the film when he discovered "All I Want is You," one of Polisar's songs from 1977. He spoke to Polisar about using it at the beginning of the movie.

Soon after *Juno*'s release, Reitman told the *Baltimore Sun*: "I have always been a big fan of opening title sequences; I find them crucial for setting tone. I narrowed it down to a few songs, but nothing quite had the spark of Barry's twining voice against his harmonica and guitar."

The tune – Polisar describes it as a "kid-like love song" – begins: "If I were a flower growing wild and free,

all I'd want is you to be my sweet honey bee." It became the first song on the *Juno* soundtrack, an album that was just nominated for a Grammy. The album "sold almost 600,000 copies in three months," he says. "*Juno* just propelled me into another universe."

In addition to becoming known in places like Thailand, Ireland and Australia, the movie has re-united him with past fans, Polisar says. "These people would go see the movie and they'd say: 'I know that off-key voice, I know that out-of-tune guitar player.'"

Polisar's expanded recognition has also given momentum to an existing push among contemporary musicians – ones who listened to Polisar's music during their childhood – to record their own versions of his songs.

Aaron Cohen, leader of a Los Angeles band called "The Radioactive Chicken Heads" and a Polisar fan, started a trend that has evolved into a "Barry Louis Polisar Tribute" album. Polisar recalls Cohen getting in touch with him seven years ago when the West Coast band recorded an up-tempo rock-and-roll version of Polisar's song "Underwear."

Tribute album release

Cohen has coordinated production of the tribute album. Scheduled for

release this year, the album includes versions of his songs that Polisar never imagined. Deborah Berman and the "Nogoodniks," for instance, present a Yiddish rendition of "Don't Put Your Finger Up Your Nose." David W. Jacobson and "September's Shadow" offer an English pop version of "I Need You Like a Donut Needs a Hole." And, JLA, a rapper from Brooklyn, New York, does a hip-hop rendition of "When Suzie Sneezed."

"Lots of children's singers took my songs and made them into more polished and non-threatening versions," Polisar says. "Big Bird was the first to sing one of my songs." The popular yellow-feathered character sang "I've Got a Dog and My Dog's Name is Cat" on a 1982 Sesame Street album, *Grin and Giggle*.

When Polisar, 54, started his career in 1975, "it was all about creating something for people," he says, recalling his mantra at the time: "People before profit." He adds: "And now, 34 years later, it's still the goal. People can listen my songs for free on my web site and I've started posting my books on my site as free PDF files."

Mindful of "giving back to the community," Polisar says he has hosted a few "barn concerts" at his home, a 16-acre property by the Patuxent River Watershed near Silver Spring. He and his wife Roni invite about 100 people for a potluck dinner. They also invite a group of folksingers who are still in the process of reaching their professional goals. "We have a pass-the-hat sort of thing" as the musicians perform, he says. "They all share a common thread – they all have stories to tell."

'Unique niche'

Polisar began his career with folksongs, emulating prominent singer-storytellers of the day, such as John Prine, Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen and Loudon Wainwright III. As he gravitated toward children's music, he discovered "a unique niche" for himself. "I still think of myself as a poet, a storyteller," he says.

Though audiences have gotten younger, Polisar says, "kids still laugh at the same things." Parents, however, "have gotten more protective, more restrictive. What's acceptable has changed." As a result, he says, he revised and updated some of his older songs. In his 1977 song "My Dog Bernard," for instance, "there was a line about a dog running off with the milkman and going to the dogs; drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. I changed that to running off with the

bus driver, watching TV and eating donuts," he says.

Polisar has consistently injected a playful attitude into his songs. He's an entertainer, after all, who found inspiration at the start of his career in "Alvin and the Chipmunks" albums. He liked the rebellious nature of the songs and their "edgy feel," he says. Even as a child, Polisar liked to sing Johnny Cash songs. He also mentions Rolf Harris – the Australian singer who wrote and sang the early 1960s hit "Tie Me Kangaroo Down Sport" – as an influence.

About 15 years into his career, Polisar ran into a ticklish situation. A high-school music teacher in Anne Arundel County got the county to ban Polisar's music for six months in 1990. "Had I just been starting out – been an emerging artist – it would have knocked me out," he says. "But, people knew my work then." In fact, it was at the same time that Polisar was invited to perform at the White House.

Currently Polisar is working on two poetry books: one about fish and another about animals. He's also just published a book about the 1839 Amistad slave rebellion. During his career, he has produced a dozen albums, published approximately 150 songs, and written a dozen children's books. His web site includes detailed information.

Polisar is the recipient of two *Individual Artist Awards* from the Maryland State Arts Council. He also recently received a *Lifetime Achievement Award* from the Children's Music Web. His album, *Old Enough to Know Better*, garnered a 2007 National Parenting Publications Award for music.

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