

One for the record . . . and classroom



Tom Farley and wife Tania, singing background, perform at Virginia Beach club

Photo by Craig L. Moran

Tom Farley blends a love of teaching, passion for music

By MATTHEW SOWERS
Staff writer

Don't blame Thomas R. Farley if he hesitates when he fills out the box marked "occupation" on his tax returns. For more than a decade the Virginia Beach resident has lived a double life — junior high school social studies teacher by day, musician-songwriter-recording artist nights and weekends.

Currently, he is working on his second album of original songs. But after 12 years of teaching, he has no intentions of giving up the classroom.

"I work two jobs, is the way I look at it," he says. "I have two full-time jobs."

Job No. 1 is teaching. At least, that is how his wife of nine years, Tania, 35 — who sometimes sings with Farley, 34, in stage and in the recording studio — says when she introduces him.

Music will run a closer second step next spring when Farley plans to release his new album. It probably will be a mini-LP or laser disc with four or five songs, and may include a live performance taped at an area nightclub.

"If something happens with this (album) and I made zillions of dollars, I'd want to retain a teaching position somewhere," Farley says earnestly. "Probably not at a public

— Please turn to page 11

A love of teaching and a passion for music

— From page 1

school — the demands are too high. Maybe at a community college, teaching a songwriting course."

Teaching is not just a way-to-pay-the-bills thing for Farley, according to his boss and students at Indian River Junior High School.

Principal Theophilus Lawton first worked with Farley at Indian River High School and did not know of his musical interests until reunited with him at the junior high school. Lawton says he worries that someone will recognize Farley's musical talent and make the teacher an offer he cannot refuse.

"If he ever decides . . . to leave the teaching profession, it'd be a loss," Lawton says. "If you need a friend, if you need a father, if you need a counselor, if you need someone to really talk to, Tom is there."

"Not only is he an asset because of his music, but he's effective as a teacher."

Some of his eighth-grade world history students paused after a recent class to say that Farley is their favorite teacher. His footwear certainly has been a hit — students all over the school began wearing Reeboks athletic shoes after he showed up in them at the beginning of the year. They call them "Mr. Farley shoes."

"He's like us; he puts it in our terms, I guess," says Melanie Bautista, 14.

In many ways, Farley looks like the prototypical musician. Beard. Blue jeans. Open-necked shirt. Casual shoes.

But this day he has a piece of chalk in his hand instead of a guitar pick. And he is standing under the fluorescent lights of his classroom instead of the spotlights over the stages of such area nightspots such as Reisner's Delicatessen in Norfolk and Smackwater Jack's in Virginia Beach. His audience has open notebooks before them instead of pitchers of beer.

His teaching style is casual, his

conversation sprinkled with "this guy" and "all right." He moves around beneath the maps lining the classroom, a VPI banner and a globe sticking out sideways from the wall near the door. He involves the students, constantly asking questions, making them work with him, kidding them.

A girl gets a perfect 100 percent on a test and he chides her to do better next time. He calls the students "culturally deprived" because they have not seen Charlton Heston's classic movie "The 10 Commandments." He calls the saga of Cleopatra the "soap opera of the century." He invites comments on his chalk rendering of the Nile River.

On stage, he is more restrained. Playing what he calls "high-energy acoustic" music, there is little banter between songs. Farley, acoustic guitarist Cam Head, a bass and conga player swing from original ballads to "Twist and Shout" on the small stage at Reisner's. He and his wife take turns on vocals.

"They're one of my biggest draws," says Jodie A. Ausch, co-owner of Reisner's. "He is one of the best acoustic artists in the area."

Ausch, who has known Farley for more than seven years, says she does not look at him on stage and see a teacher who only plays

— Please turn to page 17

He blends a love of teaching with his passion for music

— From page 11

music part time.

"I think this is his first love," she says. "In this area, it doesn't really pay the bills. You have to have another job. Education's his career, I guess."

Tania Farley agrees.

"We enjoy music and music is a good source of income, but stability-wise . . . you can't make a living at music," she says. "This is a hobby for us."

Tom Farley is too dedicated to his kids to give them up entirely for music, she adds.

"He could have gone into engineering, he could have gone into architecture, but he chose this (teaching)," she says. "I think the children benefited from his decision. It doesn't pay well, but he's not into it for the money."

Farley wrote songs while attending Virginia Polytechnic Institute in Blacksburg. He graduated in 1973, majoring in English and history with minors in drama and education. He since has obtained a master's degree in education from Old Dominion University.

He first performed folk and country music. Now, his club shows are the result from the

"When you're teaching, you do have to perform a little bit," he says. "It took a lot longer for me to open up in the classroom than on stage."

"You've got to get a certain flow of energy happening. If it's not happening, they'll pick it up in a heartbeat."

Farley produced his first album, "Songsmyth," in 1982, recording it at Live Oak Sound in Norfolk and mixing it in Nashville, Tenn. A mix of bluegrass,

blues and folk rock, it included such titles as "Norfolk Days" and "Sixty-Nine Pimpmobile."

It sold about 600 copies locally with little radio play, which Farley says is respectable for an initial effort. It also taught him a lot about the recording business. He said he has cut his mistakes in half on the second album.

He also has learned his future in music will be in the more lucrative and less hassled writing-producing arena.