

Gordon Bok, fisherpoet

A rememberer, a keeper of songs and traditions

Don't bother trying to characterize Gordon Bok. Call him a musician, and you'll find he's also a woodworker and master wood carver. He's received an honorary doctorate for helping to preserve the heritage of the working waterman of the Northeast, but he's also a poet and a folk music innovator.

Bok calls himself a "rememberer, a keeper of songs and traditions (and) ways of thinking that set us apart from others yet confirm our pace in the flow of humanity."

Friday and Saturday nights he will appear at the FisherPoets Gathering for the first time since 2011. "I like the company," he says, "and I like to hear what they say, and I'm always surprised and delighted at what they come up with."

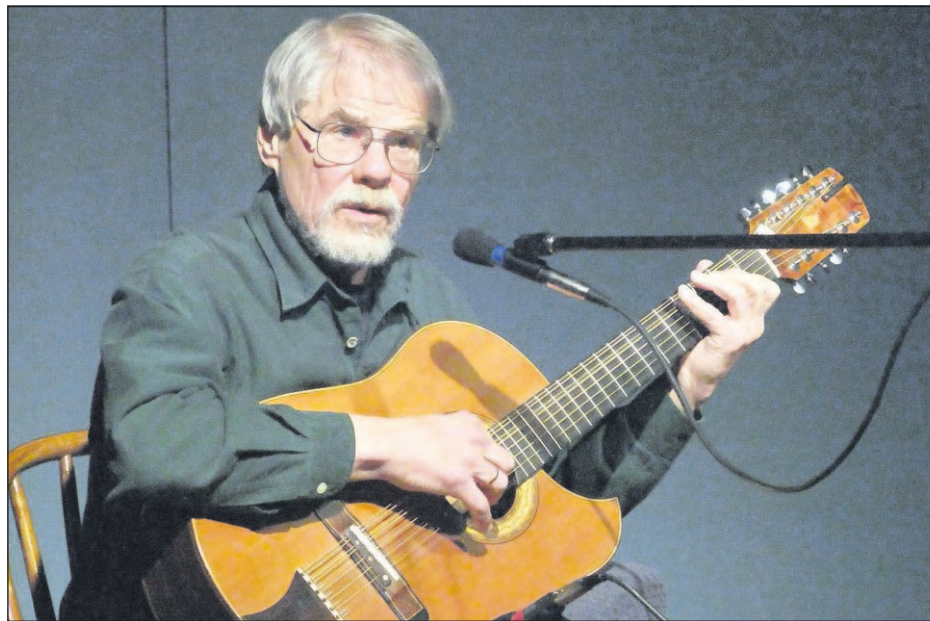
In his resonant baritone, Bok will share with the Gathering his music and stories, gathered in from around the world and re-interpreted and rooted in the traditions of the sea-girt lands about the Gulf of Maine: New England, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Cape Breton Island. He promises, "some recent stuff and some traditional music."

Bok has been around for a while. His first, self-titled album was produced by Paul Stookey of Peter, Paul, and Mary, and released in 1965. Since then he has released more than a score of solo albums and almost as many with other musicians. As a songwriter, Bok draws traditional ballads and evocative descriptions from his experience around the world of working fishers.

"My music was regional when I started," the singer says, "but it's broadened a bit, certainly. I've wandered farther and learned songs from all over the world, and that shows."

Bok may also reach into the depths of the myths that surround and haunt the sea. Here he is likely to combine song and spoken verse to speak of selkies, faires, and spirits, as in his "Seal Djiril's Hymn" album. Or he may create cantefables, the "folk opera" form he reinvented and developed, and which is now widely used by storytellers and musicians.

Bok has always been an innovator. He was the first to bring the contradance tunes of Maine and New Brunswick into the folk guitar repertoire, and he was playing South American tunes long before people



Gordon Bok, of Camden, Maine, performs in 2011 at the Astoria Arts and Movement Center.

were dancing the bossa nova. He invented the "balanced bridge" that improved the acoustic 12-string guitar, promoted the use of the viola da gamba in folk music, and in the 1970s devised the multi-keyed "Bok whistle."

Bok's repertoire includes songs from Mongolia to Australia, but his great strength lies in the music of North America and Britain, particularly of the Hebrides. Over the half-century of his career, many of his compositions based on the seafaring life have passed into tradition. "I'm drawn to songs that show me how others have lived their lives and sorted through their problems," he says. "That's the great wisdom in traditional music. They've shown me how to live, and if others learn something from my passing them on, that's another pleasure."

It is in the maritime tradition of remote parts of the English-speaking world that Gordon is most at home. Which makes him perfect for Astoria's FisherPoets Gathering.

Gordon Bok appears at the FisherPoets Gathering at 7 p.m. Friday, Feb. 27 at the Astoria Event Center and at 7 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 28 at Pier 11. He will also be part of "The Didliest Catch," a songwriting workshop with John Palmes and Jon Campbell, "to take a little bit of the mystery out of it," on Pier 11 from 11:30 a.m. to 12:45 p.m. Saturday morning.

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Gordon Bok and his wife, Carol Rohlf, perform in concert at the Astoria Arts and Movement Center following their appearances at the 2011 FisherPoets Gathering.

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Story and photos by DWIGHT CASWELL