

Maine folk musician returns for FisherPoets Gathering

Bok is a renowned creator, preservationist

BY SARAH DOYLE

The FisherPoets Gathering brings people from across the world together every year to celebrate the maritime industry through poetry and prose.

This year, since the event will be held virtually, a legendary folk musician and composer from Maine will return to the stage.

Gordon Bok has been writing and performing music for over 60 years. He produces eclectic blends of cultures from across the world that celebrate maritime life, telling stories and bringing experiences together. His love for folk music stems from his love for people.

“It’s music that’s not selling anything — it’s music about people’s lives,” Bok said. “It’s just like going to the movies for me, singing long ballads. It’s a very connective form of communication.”

Though Bok continues to write and perform, he stopped touring a few years ago to focus on his health and settle down in his hometown of Camden, Maine.

Bok’s last performance at the FisherPoets Gathering was about six years ago. He wouldn’t be joining this year’s event if it were held in-person, he said.

“We have found a lot of positives these days in this, because I am a fairly solitary person, and not having to travel anymore, there’s a lot I miss,” Bok said.

Bok recorded an original song for the event. He plans to perform something live as well.

Bok’s passion for music began early with influences from Scottish, German, Italian, Australian and American songs he and his family sang and learned from places lived in. He spent some time working in boats and heard sea shanties and ballads, which inspired his musical career.

“I’ve been around fishing during my youth. My brother was a fisherman,” Bok said. “I’d go out on the boats with them, but never (had) a permanent spot.”

In his 20s, Bok gained a new influence from a unique but small culture. A mass immigration of Kalmyk Mongols to America after World War II resulted in small Kalmyk communities — including one in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. There, Bok became embroiled in their music, dance and culture.

On the Kalmyk community’s 50th anniversary of immigrating to America, Bok was invited to return to the city and celebrate with them. He realized they had not



Photos by Kathy Pease

ABOVE: Gordon Bok. BELOW: Bok plays guitar.

been able to continue singing and dancing.

“They kept their language somewhat. They kept their music somewhat. It is multicultural within one dimming culture,” he said.

To help the Kalmyk’s keep their culture alive, he is working on maintaining his collection of their music, which is the only accessible collection now. It has doubled in the last 15 to 20 years, he said.

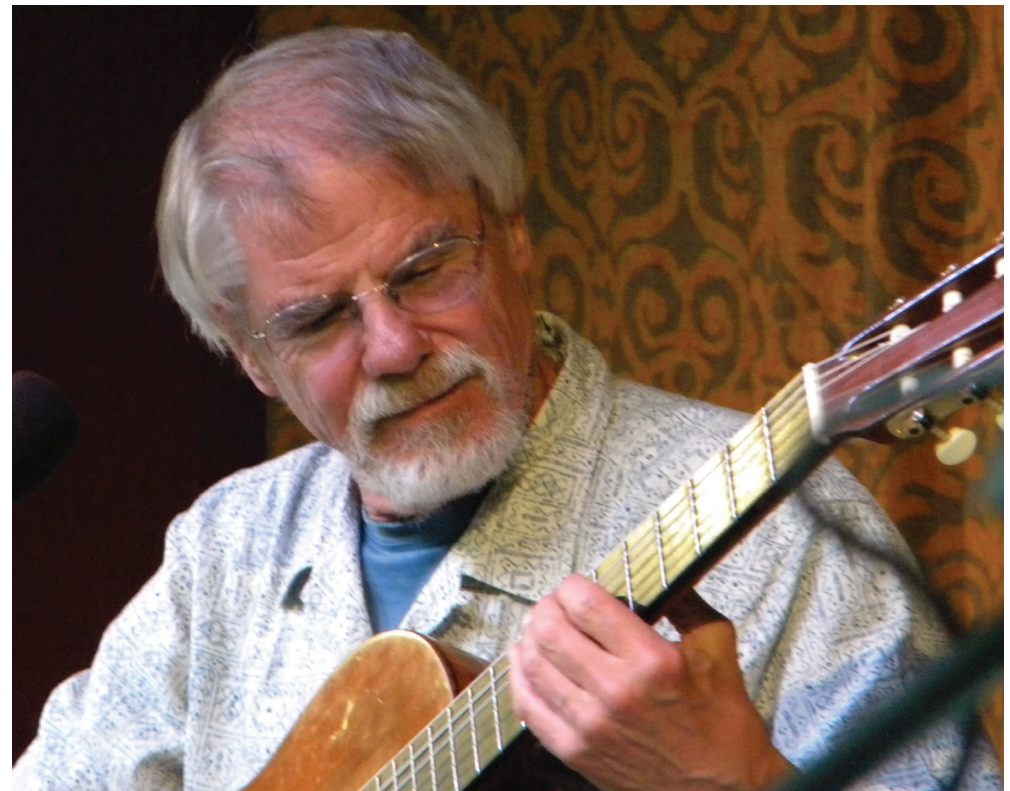
His love for the human experience has motivated him to collect and preserve culture and heritage, which he is doing for the Kalmyks and for fishermen in the Northeast. He was honored with an honorary doctorate from the Maine Maritime Academy for his preservation work.

This love is also what brings him to events like the FisherPoets Gathering.

“It’s a wonderful way to see some glimpses of the world that sustains you,” Bok said. “It’s a lovely thing to see the camaraderie and the energy they produce and they’re talking about doing some pretty useful things.”

Though he considers himself retired, Bok is still hard at work performing and composing. He has a barn on his property which doubles as his studio.

To improve safety during the pandemic



but continue playing music, he built a rig that allows him and his friends to play together but be separated enough that they don’t share much air but can still see and

hear each other. They keep it heated by firing up a wood stove.

“You can’t stop a musician from learning and keeping playing music,” Bok said.