

Finding human lessons in the work of a civilized artist

By Bill Jantz

It was about 12 years ago that I first saw Gordon Bok at an event hosted by the Folk Music Society of Huntington. What I remember most, aside from meeting the man during intermission, is that two videos I posted on YouTube were removed after a complaint was filed by Bok's own publishing company, Timberhead Music. Bok addressed the incident in an online message board noting that it was a violation of the songwriter as well as an insult to the people who went out of their way to attend a concert. The 60-something-year-old bemoaned that it was "another way for technology to interfere with our lives." As a man in my 20s, I thought he sounded like an old crank; someone hopelessly out of touch with the modern world.

But something about that experience took root in my mind. As technology seemingly advances with each passing day now, Bok's words return to haunt me time and gain – not as out of touch but as the voice of reason.

July 2018. On a perfect summer evening at an idyllic spot off the coast of Maine, a 78-year-old Bok takes the stage to a room full of adoring fans, friends and local residents. The set consists of 17 pieces: breathtaking originals "Gordon's Farewell" and "Turning Toward the Morning;" covers penned by friends Dave Toye ("Bold Reynolds"), Dave Calder ("River Drive"), Bob Zentz ("When All Thy Names Are One"), and Jon Broderick ("A Good Trip After All"); Scottish traditionals "Bonnie lass o'Fyvie" and "Lang Johnny More", a poem by Frederick Marryat set to music ("The Captain Stood at the Carronade") and my favorite of the night, a spoken word memoir called "Maintenance" about the dangers of not talking care of your gear. Bok also shares memories of notable Maine author Ruth Moore.

So far removed from the mainstream is Bok's repertoire that the evening's only reference to rock music comes in the form of a joke. While attempting to tune his guitar, Bok butchering Stephen Stills quips: "If cannot tune the one you pluck, pluck the one you're with." Credit Bob Stuart with the laugh.

Bok never plays the same show twice. And while the songs might always change, his purpose remains the same. He's not here to merely entertain us. In a way, he's here to rescue us from the perilous waters of Huxley's Brave New World, and to remind us what it means to be human. With one foot firmly planted in a distant country, he reels us back in to our eternal sacred selves.

Popular music has long been a means for cultural debasement. Our tastes, much like our opinions on more worldly matters, are not our own. We are a manufactured people, no different than what's being served up in a fast food restaurant. That's what makes an artist like Gordon Bok so important: he stands before us as a relic unaffected by our dystopia, an authentic bridge to a more civilized age.

The printed program contains these words written by Bok himself: “I refuse to tell my audiences what to think or feel. I respect them too much for that. I will sing them what I honor and trust, and I trust them to sort out what they can use.”

I walk into the Stonington Opera House carrying only a pen and a few scraps of paper. My phone is left in the car and I have no camera. At 40, I’m certain I can live my life with Gordon’s words gently guiding me.

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