

The Maritime World of Gordon Bok

Renowned for his songs of
Maine and the sea, this
multi-faceted artist has
turned his hand to
woodcarving with the
same intensity.

BY GRETCHEN PISTON OGDEN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIM DUGAN

*When Bok inherited his mother's
carving tools he became serious
about wood sculpture.*

WHEN I HEADED OUT TO Gordon Bok's place on the outskirts of Camden for a chat on a hazy summer day last August, I was wildly curious about the workings of his musical life, since I'm a singer myself. It wasn't just Bok's career as a maritime folk-singer that I wanted to discuss with him, however. A show of Bok's nautical wood carvings at a local gallery and a recently published songbook illustrated with those carvings had also piqued my interest. I grew up in midcoast Maine and spent the past 10 years living in Camden, so I thought I "knew" who Gordon Bok was, but now I wondered. Craftsman? Singer? Woodworker? Rich kid? Sailor? Musician? Local-boy-made-good? All of the above?

Bok greeted me warmly, his tall frame casually clad in jeans, short-sleeved button-down shirt, and Birkenstock sandals. The smells of the season surrounded us as





“So I Jumped,” Alaskan cedar on yellow poplar.

we ambled up the grass-and-gravel drive to Bok’s home, which he designed himself. Inside the long, low building, I found the place to be completely and utterly in chaos. Bok apologized profusely for the disarray, then told me that he was in the middle of renovations.

Despite the mess (rooms cordoned off with plastic, piles of lumber everywhere), I could see that the place had been created to suit a man with close ties to the sea. Arched beams and doorways echoed a windjammer’s cabin, lots of exposed wood made the space cozy.

We settled in at a table cluttered with the detritus of a busy artist’s life: cassette tapes and CDs, scrawled notes, copies of his latest book, notes from friends, sketches on scraps of paper. The man responsible for such classic songs as “The Hills of Isle au Haut,” and “Bay of Fundy,” has the craggy face and eyes of a waterman. Those eyes light up when he smiles, which he does often, and his self-deprecating, almost shy manner immediately put me at ease. We began to talk, and I found myself wondering just why this man became a folk singer when he could have been, well, most anything.

PART OF THE REASON surely lies in Bok’s mainly small-town upbringing. Nobody needs to be told that the Camden Bok grew up in during the 1950s was quite different from the tourist mecca of today.

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The town's woolen mills were functioning then, there was a lot more boat-building going on, and the waterfront was geared more toward work and life's essentials.

Yet Camden was, and still is, a town that attracted people of means, among them Bok's family. If you spend any time at all here, you can't help but benefit from the legacy left by Gordon's grandmother, Mary Louise Bok Zimbalist. She was heir to the Curtis Publishing Company fortune, married the company's editor, Edward Bok, and upon his passing made a second marriage to Efreim Zimbalist, Sr. and founded the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. She summered in Camden most of her life, and among the capital improvements for which she was responsible are the land where Camden's library, amphitheater, and Harbor Park now sit. She went together with partners to donate the parcel that is now the Village Green, remodeled the Camden Opera House, financed the building of what is now

Camden's public landing, and financed a remodeling of the YMCA building. At the time of her death, it was said that Camden had lost one of its greatest benefactors.

She and her first husband had two sons: Cary and Curtis Bok. Cary Bok, in turn, had two sons of his own, both of whom made Camden their home: Tony, who passed away in 2002, and Gordon.

You might expect someone with such a background to spend his life jet-setting around the world to rub elbows with the rich and famous. But around Camden and among those who know him well, Bok is well-respected for his generosity, hard work, and down-to-earth demeanor.

I asked about his early years growing up in town. "I was born in Pennsylvania, and we moved here when I was quite young," he told me. I was immediately drawn to the timbre of his deep voice, which also helped answer the "why a folk singer" question. "I didn't expect to be a musician, I really wanted to be a writer,"

he continued. "But I didn't last long in college; my head was never in it."

"I more or less grew up in the shipyard that's now Wayfarer," Bok told me. "I knew all the guys there, and that's what we kids did after hours: go over there and make stuff. We made whatever it was we wanted. And we heard lots of stories, of course. I think stories are one of the best ways to pass on character. My songs are just stories of people's lives and how they've solved their problems...or not.

"When I was growing up I literally had my butt kicked by any variety of adults, and I usually deserved it," Bok continued. "If I'd gone running home to my parents, they'd have figured I deserved what I got. We were connected to the community more than, and people took responsibility for you even if you weren't their kid."

Bok is reticent about his family history, but it's clear that his parents were a large influence on the man he became. He grew up in a musical home and start-

ed playing guitar when he was nine years old, learning to play the nylon-strung six-string from his mother and her siblings and listening to all kinds of music.

“My father sang, and my mother drew, and carved, did busts in clay and then cast them in bronze. She wasn’t afraid to try anything: painting, wood-working, drawing. I don’t remember my parents ever keeping any kind of music away from us.

“These days, people will want to change a song that talks about death because they think the kids can’t handle it. I disagree with that—kids can handle most anything, and if they are having trouble with it, that’s when their parents can be there for them.

“I didn’t understand what my father did because he worked in an office and there was nothing that came out of it that I could feel—you couldn’t put a coat of varnish on it. I was one of those twitchy kids—I concentrated better when I was doodling or moving. That wasn’t understood very well then. I did get interested



As in his music, the sea is a constant theme in Gordon Bok’s art.

in poetry and books because of one great teacher, and we were friends until he died. He was proud when I became a musician—he didn’t care what I did as long as I used my brain.”

After high school, Bok worked on several of the schooners that hailed from Camden. He cut his teeth on the *Alice Wentworth*, then was the original first mate on the then brand new *Mary Day* and stayed with that boat for most of seven seasons. As he sailed, he played and sang, and collected songs and ballads of the sea, but he remembers his time aboard ship as part of his broader education.

“One old skipper I worked for saw me put on a piece of apparel and said, ‘You’re not going up on deck like that are you?’ I was thinking to myself ‘since when has this become a fashion show?’ so I said, ‘Well yes, I was thinking of it!’ Then he told me a story about a man who got injured because he was improperly dressed aboard one of these boats. You can get your socialization from stories of people doing things, and you process the stories and learn from them. He was teaching me an important lesson in his own way.

“The people I grew up with were pretty much all storytellers. Storytelling

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is a way to pass on information, just as the old songs are, and that's one of the reasons I've never been able to get too far from traditional songs. They are a communal folk memory, if you will, and very valuable for that reason.

"I don't try to tell anyone's story in their own exact words, I just pass it on from my memory—it's the oral tradition. I'll preface with 'They might not have said it quite this way...', and then I'll tell it with the salient points all there, but it's been processed through my life too."

FOR SOMEONE DESTINED to become a folk singer, Bok's timing was nearly perfect. He came out of a place with strong working traditions at a time when the folk genre was enjoying a major revival in the United States. Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, and the trio Peter, Paul, and Mary are among Bok's contemporaries. Bok mastered six- and twelve-string guitar and the six-string "cellamba" (a cello that has been converted into a viola da gamba). Working

as a carpenter and teacher in Philadelphia during the winters when the schooners were laid up, he discovered a thriving folk music scene and began to perform. He found that he wasn't satisfied with the way people who worked on the water were generally being portrayed, so he started writing his own songs about the honest, salty, sometimes roguish folk he knew from his time in Maine. A break came when Noel Paul Stookey, of Peter, Paul, and Mary fame, produced Bok's first album for Verve Folkways.

Bok had his time in the folk-music sun, singing in coffee houses and concert halls, performing at festivals, and recording more than a score of albums with a wide variety of like-minded musicians, but he has lived in Maine for some 60 years. He and his wife, the harpist Carol Rohl, collaborate on projects and are a familiar sight at folk music performances in the area. He works often with members of the large pool of midcoast Maine folk musicians, Cindy Kallet, Anne Dodson,

Matt Szostak, Will Brown, Nick Apollonio and Kristen Tescher among them.

Bok has played with the likes of the Paul Winter Consort and the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. He has been heard on "A Prairie Home Companion" on public radio, and recently was a featured artist on a PHC cruise to the Canadian Maritimes. While some musicians grumble about time spent on the road, Bok seems to delight in it even after a long career filled with many road miles.

"I enjoy being on the road...I'm not reachable by anybody until I choose to be. I need that time. I don't mind driving because I have a high-maintenance voice and a very big repertoire and both need to be exercised so I'd naturally rather drive than fly." He chuckles, and says, "You can sing lot louder in the car than you can on an airplane."

Over the years, Bok has worked closely with Nick Apollonio, a midcoast Maine master instrument builder, singer, and songwriter. Together they have designed and built lauds, guitars,

and viols. Bok and Apollonio even developed a twelve-string guitar that is specifically designed to complement Bok's gentle ballad singing style and large hands.

I ask if playing the guitar is relaxing for him, or if it's too much like work.

"The time I love to noodle on the guitar is on the boat at sunset just after we get in at the end of the day and I'm watching the day darken down and just sit and play," he replied.

Bok tells me that he learns new music and stays "fresh" in many ways.

"I listen to radio some to hear new things, and I try to go see lots of musicians. I maintain a very wide correspondence with musicians from all over—Australia, Scandinavia—we trade music back and forth."

As with most singers who are able to enjoy a long career, Bok has done some formal voice study.

"I still go back to my voice teacher when I need a tune up. I also do this for other people, at Meadowlark [an annu-



"Tuning the Yawl Boat III:" a scene from Bok's days as a schoonerman.

al summer music camp in Washington, Maine]. People come to see me about their singing and usually in half an hour I can spot something that needs a bit of work. Often it's something I've been working on myself. The basics of singing are not too hard, it's all the refinement that takes time and effort. I'll work with a student to make up exercises based on what they need to learn or work on."

Given this rich history, it's not surprising that this man, whom *Time* magazine once deemed the "poet laureate of those who go down to the sea in ships," is most widely known as a musician.

But there is another creative side to him that is beginning to be more widely known.

ACCORDING TO BOK, it was after he inherited his mother's tools upon her death in 1977 that he began to focus on carving in a more serious way. When I asked what first inspired him to take up this new mode of expression, Bok responded, "I've been making stuff all my life, it's always been my recreation. Music is extremely high-concentration work for me. Sometimes I get up after a concert and I can barely walk, I've been concentrating so hard. I remember one night

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after a concert I literally couldn't remember which side of the street I was supposed to drive on to get back to the hotel.

"With carving I can let my mind go in neutral and go where it needs to go, I don't have to push it like I do when I'm performing. I think you need resting time: sailing and gardening and mowing the lawns and pruning trees...knitting...then your mind can do the things it needs to do, not just the things you keep telling it to do. What I do with all my art is distill the stories that people have given me. Many of my carvings, for example, have a specific story behind them, and sometimes I'll write it out on the back.

"The carving titled 'So I Jumped' is an example—a skipper tried to shanghai a crew member, I do believe there was alcohol involved, and as the boat was leaving, when there were about six feet between the departing boat and the dock, the crewmember jumped for it.

"Others such as 'Tuning the Yawl Boat III,' are more of a compilation. When we had a long push in calm weather [yawl

boats are used to push the engineless schooners when the wind doesn't cooperate], I would 'tune' the yawl boat's engine so we could play music and the engine pitch wouldn't be too offensive. Carving is a wonderful way to wander around in my own mind (laughs). It brings up all sorts of connections—doing something with my hands helps those connections get made, at least for me.

"Some carvings don't get done because I know I don't have the angle on it. I have too much respect for the wood to dive in when I know it's not something I'm capable of. I did more experimenting when I was just whittling on scraps, but now I have such lovely woods from my boatbuilder friends and other carvers. People are always giving me wood to try. The furniture maker up the street here just gave me a piece of pear wood, for example.

"I'd like to take carving lessons. I'm always carving myself into a corner. I know enough now so I can plan better, so much of it is about planning. I get so

itchy, to just get into the wood and see what's in there. I work by hand mostly, I never have liked power tools much. They take a different frame of mind. I also don't like to have to wear ear protection.

"The woods I like are silver balli, butternut, popple, sunken Cyprus. A friend sent me some sassafrass from Maryland by boat—he knew a boat that was coming this way and asked them to bring the wood to me. Believe it or not, he said, 'Take this to Gordon in Camden, Maine.' and it worked. I got a call from the yacht club, 'Mr. Bok, there seems to be some...wood here for you. Would you come and get it please?'"

A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ARTIST
Bok has spent his share of time at sea working on schooners and the like, so nowadays he and his wife enjoy sailing on the 32-foot fiberglass ketch that he restored.

"My wife said to me 'when you bought that boat I wondered what I'd gotten myself into, but now I know that you are a man of vision!'"

“We don’t play recorded music on the boat, there are so many other sounds to enjoy. We keep a couple of guitars, a small harp, and a viola da gamba in the forepeak so we can play all we want to.

Now in his early sixties, Bok is still touring and performing around the country. His music has grown, naturally, but in many ways, he hasn’t strayed too far from his watery roots. As he explores new avenues, he strives to maintain the same sensibilities that have made him and his music into enduring classics. But all talk of his accomplishments evokes an “aw shucks” sort of response from him.

“I keep saying I’m cutting back on touring, but I have plenty of it going on. The interesting jobs now are the ones with people I want to go see again, and so I pick and choose. There’s never enough time to do everything. But I need to sing enough. If I’m not singing all the time, I shouldn’t be performing.

“I played solo concerts for many years and these days I want to make music with other people. I don’t mind carving alone, though, I’ve always got enough to think about that I don’t need company.

“I can pass it on—that’s what’s neat. When I’ve digested something enough I’ll pass it on to other friends—it’s something they might not run into otherwise. And they do the same for me.”

When I asked him what he thought the biggest lesson his life as an artist taught him he replied “I think people today don’t take the time to slow down and mono-task. They miss an awful lot of what the life experience is all about.

“For example, I do have a cell phone, but it’s almost a joke, I’m not even really sure where it is right now...maybe out there in the car? Or...someplace around here. Anyway, it only gets turned on when Carol and I need to communicate. I said when I got it that it’s for *my* convenience, and it shall remain so.”

That sounds about right to me. This Birkenstock-wearing folk singer has thrived over the years by adopting the technologies that suit him and setting aside the rest. There’s a modern-day folk tale in there somewhere; perhaps one of the many musicians Bok has worked with along the way will be the one to set it to music. 

Gretchen Piston Ogden is managing editor of this publication. She often wears Birkenstocks herself.

For More Information: TimberheadMusic, the publishing company Bok put together some 20 years ago, has lists of recordings, bios of Bok and selected folk musicians, a touring schedule, and reviews on its web site. You can purchase recordings and song books, and, in a nod to our modern world, download clips of some of Bok’s favorite songs or a pdf of Timberhead’s complete catalog: www.timberheadmusic.com.

Or, put on your Birkenstocks, walk down to the post office, and order a print catalog the old-fashioned way: Timberhead Music, P.O. Box 840, Camden, ME 04843.