

Juno winners form The Contenders

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The Contenders, featuring Juno Award winning Canadian singer and songwriters Valdy and Gary Fjellgaard are touring the Okanagan and Interior during George Ryga Week in B.C.

On Sunday they will be at The Barking Parrot and on Tuesday at Summerland's Centre Stage Theatre. Both shows are 8 p.m. starts. Tickets are available at The Dragon's Den (250-492-3011) in Penticton and at Martin's Flowers (250-494-5432) in Summerland.

Ryga was a Summerland playwright who gained notoriety for The Ecstasy of Rita Joe which was commissioned by the Vancouver Playhouse Theatre company debuting in 1967. More than 40 years later, the play remains an influential and decisive piece of work in modern Canadian theatre. The George Ryga Centre, established in Summerland in 1996, has been a cultural centre and retreat in the memory of his vast contributions to Canadian culture.

Valdy, from his home on Salt Spring Island, talked about what it means to be called a contender.

"Gary wrote a song in anticipation of us going on the road and that although there are lots of people ready to usurp the microphones from us we're not quite ready to quit yet," he said.

Born Paul Valdemar Horsdal, Valdy is best known for his tune, Play Me a Rock and Roll Song. Fjellgaard newest album is titled All in the Journey and in total he has released 14 albums in his 40-year career.

"We're still writing and putting new material together," said Valdy. "What we do for the folks is a blend of the songs they might know us by plus we've got new material that we're sprinkling in as well."

Regardless of what audience he's played to, Valdy said people always enjoy hearing familiar songs.

"I've gone to hear others play and they didn't do any of the things I knew them by," he said. "I always like their new material but you want those benchmarks again, you know. We blend the two of them together."

He began his journey in the 1960's in Ontario playing bass with groups such as the London Town Criers and The Prodigal Sons playing traditional lounge music before moving out to the West Coast and eventually gravitating towards folk music cutting his first record in 1970.

For Valdy, 64, and Fjellgaard, who

is in his 70s, it's more the love and not really the need that keeps them performing.

"It's the love of it and it's also a bit of an addiction to the roar of the greasepaint," he said. "He's (Fjellgaard) so good at what he does. He's still writing. He keeps my socks up. He's a keen writer and he's a keen performer."

Ideas for Valdy's songs come from personal accounts and an adherence to social awareness, a topic which he's been dedicated to since he started in the business. Sometimes the inspiration comes from within while other times, he sits down and scribbles words on paper and then pares them down.

"The main thing is to just do the writing because there's a log jam," he said. "If the logjam never gets cleared it never gets cleared."

Valdy noted that he never had the opportunity to meet Ryga but is familiar with some of his work.

"I know that he is the champion of the disenfranchised," he said. "He's the champion of social activists and of the people that those social activists are vying to support."

In his time, drastic changes to the music business due to advances from recording music onto blank cassette tapes in the 1970s to the computer downloading happening in the present have cheated artists from receiving their royalties on copyrighted material and personal property, said the Ottawa native.

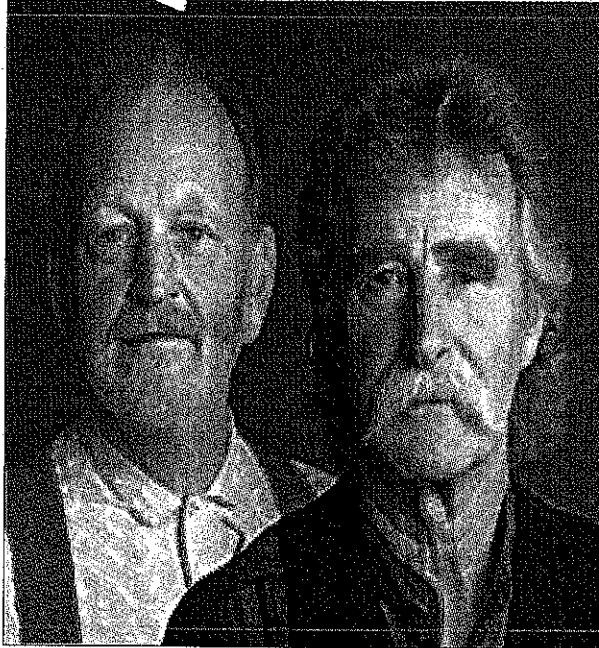
"I've always lost about 85 per cent of my residuals to piracy," he said. "As soon as they brought out the tape deck that people could record on, everyone in the music industry started to take a dive."

Valdy does allow people to listen to "snippets" of his work online but he has not authorized any free downloads of his songs. Now, like a large percentage of musicians, he exercises a greater control over his career and performs in places suitable for his style.

"Sometimes that means a bigger venue. Sometimes that means a smaller venue," he said. "We at least steer our career where we want."

From performing at large folk festivals in front of thousands, to the smaller intimate settings with a couple of hundred in the audience, Valdy likes them all.

"I really enjoy seeing people's eyebrows, where you can actually catch a glimmer of what's going on as opposed to just relying on the murmur," he said. "As long as the room sounds good I play well."



Submitted photo

The Contenders, featuring Juno Award winning Canadian singer and songwriters Valdy and Gary Fjellgaard are touring the Interior during George Ryga week and will make two stops in the South Okanagan.