

Arts

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Still in the running

The Contenders return with a skip in their feet and a song in their hearts

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One's a folksy known for playing the occasional rock and roll song at festivals around the world. The other is a country gent who rambles around the countryside in a 34-foot Commander with his guitar, wife and their two-year-old puppies.

They meet once a year at the crossroads along Highway 97 to tour the Thompson-Okanagan and pay homage to one of Canada's most respected writers.

Yes, The Contenders — Valdy and Gary Fjellgaard — are returning for their annual pilgrimage to these parts to support the George Ryga Centre and the official proclamation of Ryga Week in B.C., Nov. 1 to 7.

“(Ryga centre) manager Ken Smedley is a brave soul to take us on again,” said Fjellgaard, calling from out on the road in his motor home somewhere in Ontario.

With two albums, *The Contenders*, and *Contenders Two: Still in the Running*, the duo, surprisingly, doesn't get together that often.

Fjellgaard, who now calls Gabriola Island home, teamed up with Salt Springer Valdy a few times this summer, at the Kemp Shore Maritime Music Festival and the Great Canadian Barn Dance near Cardston, Alta., but other than that, the two usually only tour together once a year for the Ryga centre.

“Valdy's a busy boy,” said Fjellgaard. “But when I'm with him, it's one of those comfortable things. We're just relaxed and laid back with each other.”

With Valdy's dulcet tones, and Fjellgaard's rich, timbered voice, the two also know how to spin a yarn, just like Ryga did in his heyday.

The late author's Summerland landmark

and former home, where he penned his most famous play, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, is celebrating its 15th year as a non-profit artists' retreat — where musicians, actors and writers have gone to create their own great works of art.

“We feel we have something in common with Ryga who wrote these great plays and stories,” said Fjellgaard. “The retreat in Summerland, it's a refuge where we can stay and write. We've worked on a few songs there.”

Currently on a two-month solo tour through the country with opening act Saskia and Darrel — hence the 24-foot motor home — Fjellgaard just released his 11th solo effort, *All in the Journey*.

The album contains the song *Knowin' When to Quit*, which he says he wrote with Valdy in mind.

“It's about getting long in the tooth and how I still enjoy performing although my joints are getting a little sore,” laughed Fjellgaard, who has fully recovered from the heart bypass surgery he had five years ago.

“The beautiful part about the music we do, is we love what we do, and we're not ready to give it up. The Contenders' theme is still out there. We're still in the running and are reluctant to give up our place on stage.”

The Contenders play a number of shows in the North Okanagan, starting with Friday's performance at the Armstrong Zion United Church Hall, starting at 8 p.m. Tickets are at The Brown Derby (546-8221).

The duo will also be at Lorenzo's Café in Ashton Creek, Saturday. Dinner starts at 6 p.m., with music at 8 p.m. Call 838-6700 for reservations.

On Nov. 4 they will be at Lumby's Charles Bloom Theatre at 8 p.m. Tickets are at The Snac Shack (547-6160) or Monashee U-Brew (547-2504).

The local end of their tour wraps up at the Okanagan College Kalamalka Campus lecture theatre, Nov. 7 at 8 p.m. Tickets are at the BookNook in Vernon (558-0668).

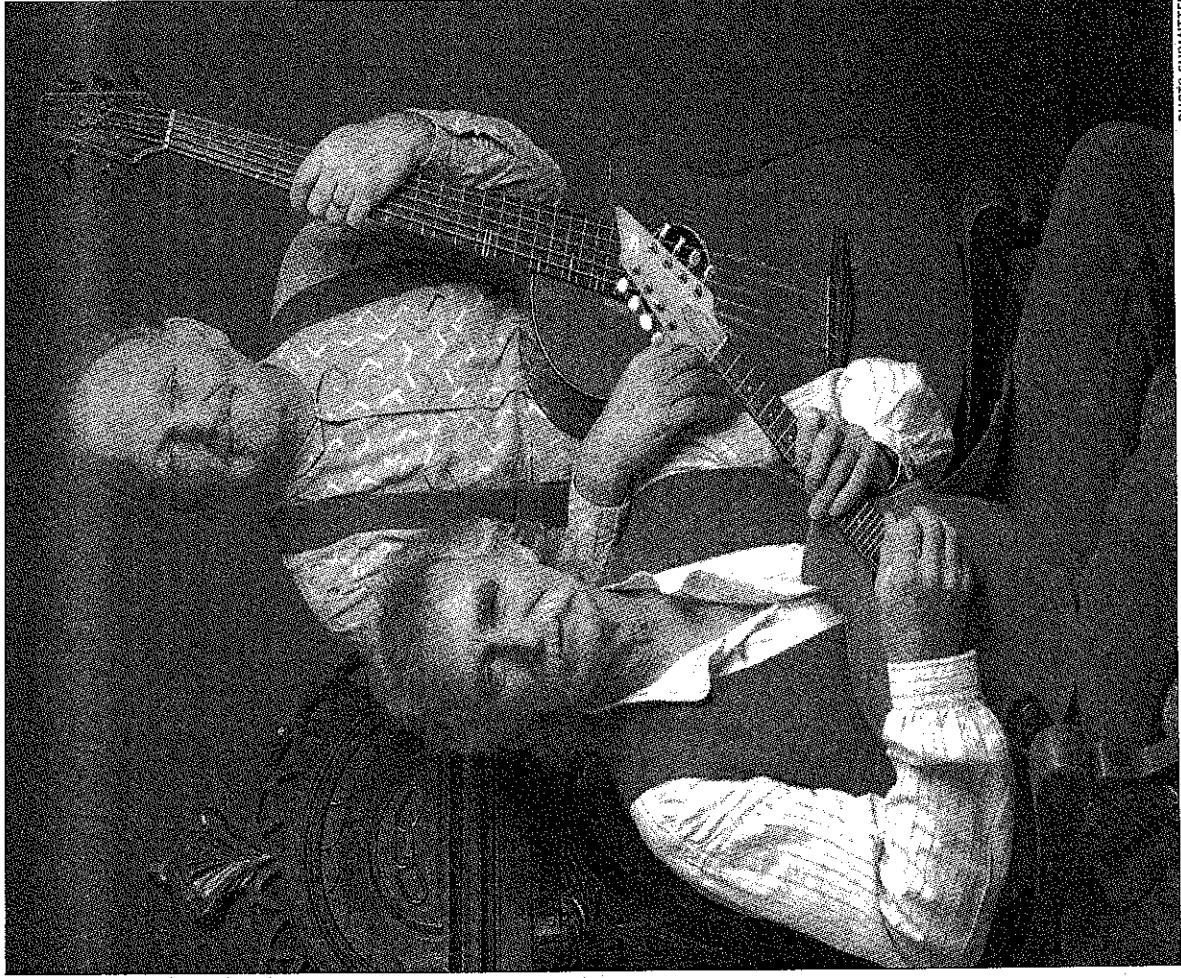


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Gary Fjellgaard, left, and Valdy are back together as The Contenders for their annual tour in support of the George Ryga Centre. The duo plays a number of dates in the North Okanagan, starting Friday in Armstrong.