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# Doug Moe: Twenty-five years of cowboy songs

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KG (Karen Gogolick) & The Ranger (Rick Roltgen) have been playing cowboy songs since 1989.

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## Doug Moe



Doug Moe writes about Madison and the people who make it a unique place.

His column runs Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays in the State Journal.

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The first thing to remember about cowboy music is, it isn't country.

Country music — in the famous estimation of David Allan Coe — should be about mama, trucks, trains, prison or getting drunk. Mention all five, and you have a classic.

Cowboy songs and Western music are about the mythology of the Old West — the good guys winning, not being fenced in, finding happy trails, and not caring about the clouds until you meet again. It also doesn't hurt if someone's yodeling.

Karen Gogolick, 64, and Rick Roltgen, 72, sing cowboy songs. As KG & The Ranger, the Madison husband-and-wife duo is celebrating 25 years of performing this year. Never mind getting drunk, they don't even perform in bars.

They do yodel, well enough that the Western Music Association named them Harmony Yodeling Champions in 1999, 2002 and 2005. And they know about happy trails. They were on a stage in Tucson in 1994, singing along, when Roy Rogers performed "Happy Trails" for the last time. More on that momentarily.

First it should be noted that KG & The Ranger are saluting their quarter of a century of making cowboy music with a new CD — titled "Moonlight Trails" — and a series of performances, including one from 7 to 8 p.m. Aug. 9 at the Oakwood Village Arts Center on Mineral Point Road that is free and open to the public.

There is a story that starts in two Midwest locales — Cleveland, the city in Ohio, and Plymouth, a town in Sheboygan County — in the 1950s.

In Cleveland, a young girl watched Roy Rogers be a cowboy and sing on television. In Plymouth, a boy gathered with his family around a radio and listened to "The WLS National Barn Dance Show" out of Chicago. Each loved the music.

The boy — Rick Roltgen — went to see Gene Autry, another famed singing cowboy, live on stage in Sheboygan, and later took guitar lessons in Fond du Lac.

The girl — Karen Gogolick — taught herself guitar at 14, and went through a phase where she sang folk songs and wanted to be Joan Baez, while never losing her early love for those old cowboy songs.

They met in Madison in 1986. Gogolick — who came to study art at UW-Madison — had a jewelry design business, Middle Earth Goldsmiths, off State Street. Roltgen was working for a credit union.

Both showed up at summer barn dance in Olin Park presented by the Wild Hog in the Woods Coffeehouse, a nonprofit co-op that's still around, now operating in the Wil-Mar Neighborhood Center.

The 1986 barn dance encouraged people to bring instruments for a pick-up band. Gogolick brought her upright bass, and Roltgen spotted her across the barn.

"I liked her bass," he said.

As it happened, Roltgen, too, had brought a double bass. Gogolick played hers in a band called Stone Soup. She was planning to switch to banjo, and took the opportunity to ask Roltgen if he might join Stone Soup as bass player. Roltgen joined the band.

Rather quickly they discovered they were probably Dane County's two biggest fans of the Sons of the Pioneers. When, inevitably, they tried singing those old cowboy songs together, it clicked.

"Like a light bulb went on," Gogolick said.

It wasn't romantic at first — "we spent about two years trying not to get interested in each other," Gogolick said — but eventually they started dating, and were married in 1989, the same year they played their first gig as KG and The Ranger.

The songs weren't all cowboy at first — early on they mixed in some country and Everly Brothers — but as their singing and yodeling improved, it was the Western songs, along with their yodeling in harmony, that set them apart.

Gogolick sold her jewelry business in 1992, which gave her more time to spend on the booking and business side of their music. By 1999, they were doing 125 shows a year. In 2000, Roltgen left his credit union job, which meant they were a full-time musical act. It was a dream come true, one that, 14 years on, continues.

They play everything from national festivals to private parties. The first time they saw the Riders in the Sky perform, one of the band members mentioned what number performance it was for the band that is probably the biggest name in Western music. Gogolick decided to keep a record of KG and The Ranger's performances. By end of this year, they will top 2,500.

The memories that mean the most involve meeting their heroes.

One night, they were jamming in the living room of a festival organizer's house, playing something from the Sons of the Pioneers, when Pioneers' tenor Rusty Richards came running in from the kitchen to sing harmony.

At the Western Music Association annual festival in Tucson in 1994, a celebration of 60 years of the Sons of the Pioneers, when all the performers, including KG and The Ranger, were invited on stage at the end to sing "Happy Trails" with Roy Rogers. A never-to-be-forgotten moment.

Looking back, it sometimes feels like they just started all this, that a quarter century passed in an instant.

Karen Gogolick smiled at her Ranger. "I hope the next 25 years doesn't go as fast," she said.

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Contact Doug Moe at 608-252-6446 or [dmoe@madison.com](mailto:dmoe@madison.com). His column appears Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday.

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