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Saturday will be a night to remember at the fair

By Michelle Flood

Democrat staff writer

When planning a four-day county fair there needs to be contests for people to enter their best, exhibits featuring the best, carnival rides and games, things to do and see, food and first class entertainment and offered at a great price.

The El Dorado County Fair, "Hooves to Horsepower", June 18-21, has it all and more.

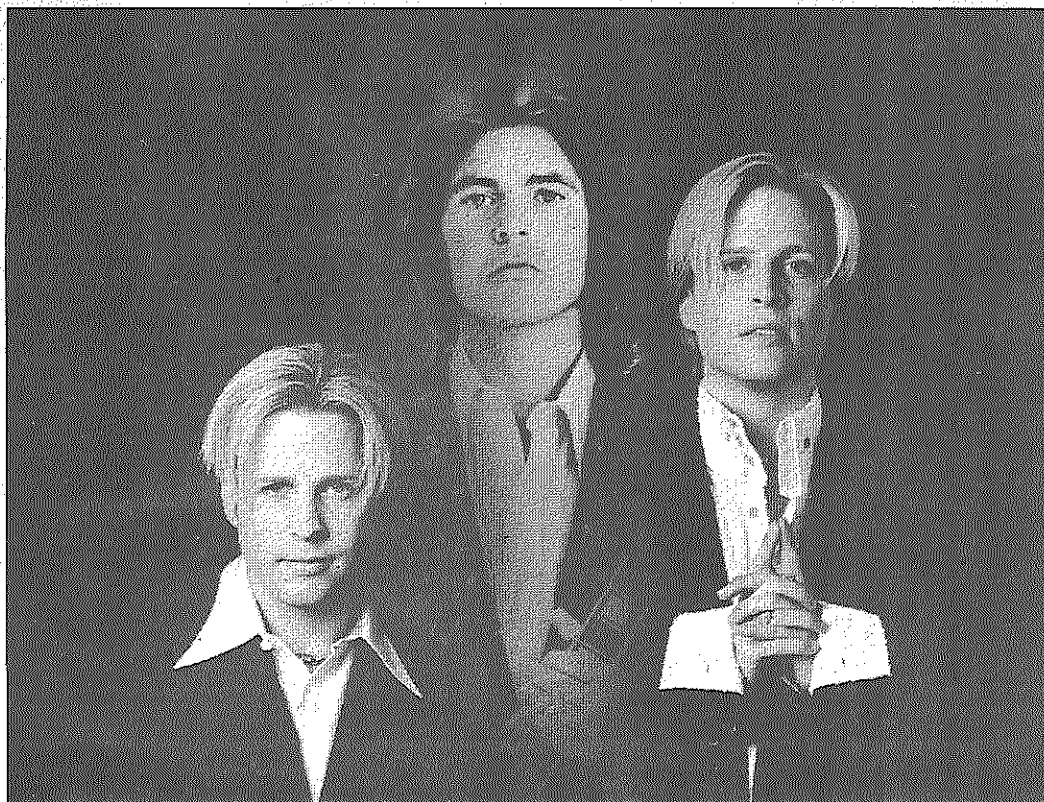
Part of the more is the Main Stage appearance of Ricky Nelson Remembered at 8 p.m. on Saturday.

Ricky Nelson Remembered

No need to be a "Travelin' Man" or even go to a "Garden Party" to enjoy the smooth sounds of the great Ricky Nelson. His twin sons Gunnar and Matthew Nelson will be performing "Ricky Nelson Remembered" on the Main Stage at 8 p.m.

The apples didn't fall far from the tree when it comes to talent in the Nelson family. The twins come from a long line of performers. They are the heirs of an American entertainment dynasty.

Their paternal grandparents Ozzie and Harriet Nelson started out in the Big Band era with Ozzie as the leader and Harriet the band's singer. They had a radio and then TV show



Courtesy photo

"RICKY NELSON REMEMBERED" will be on the Main Stage at 8 p.m. on Saturday. Matthew, left, and Gunnar Nelson play the music of their famous father Ricky Nelson.

called "The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet," which ran from 1944 to 1966.

Ricky and his brother David grew up in front of America on the show and Ricky was the first "teen idol" to promote his hit records on a television show. Between 1957-62 Ricky had 30 Top-40 hits — surpassed only by Elvis with 53 and Pat Boone with 38. In addition to being a singer and musician Ricky was also an actor and

appeared in both motion pictures and television.

The twins' maternal grandparents were football legend and sportscaster Tom Harmon and actress Elyse Knox. Their mother, actress and artist Kristin Harmon, is the sister of actor Mark Harmon — of the television show "NCIS."

Gunnar and Matthew's siblings are also in the entertainment industry. Their older sister Tracy Nelson is an actress

("Father Dowling Mysteries") and their brother Sam started and performed with the group H Is Orange.

Gunnar said he and his brother are excited about coming to Placerville.

"We love the area. We grew up in Susanville — where we did a lot of fishing — and have been to Placerville many times and are looking forward to the fair," he said.

Matthew and Gunnar are

musicians in their own right — they became teen idols with their band Nelson when their "After the Rain" album went triple-platinum in 1990.

With a history like this it might be easy to think the Nelson twins had everything handed to them just because of who they are — but that's not so. Fame may have its perks but it can have a real downside, too.

The twins lived through the very hurtful and public divorce of their parents when they were 12 and 13 years old and their father died in a plane crash when they were only 18. These episodes are life changing and affected them deeply.

When asked about growing up in such a talented family Gunnar was quite candid.

"I hate sounding trite but it was all relative to us. It was inspiring and great to grow up in that kind of atmosphere where to pursue your dream (as an artist) was always considered possible in a legitimate way. Not like some people who get no support from their families. But it also created a very high standard for us. My father was a very talented musician and my mother is an accomplished artist in her own right. She has beautiful coffee table books and cards of her art and she has a painting that hangs in

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the White House. And like all artists I do struggle," Gunnar said.

"Some of my first memories are of watching my dad play on stage and watching him make people happy. I started playing the drums at 6 years old. I told my dad I wanted to play drums so he went to a pawn shop and bought me an old set of drums to see if I would stay with it and three years later I was still playing. I was always encouraged by my father about my music and my mother wished we would do anything other than music," Gunnar said.

A passion

When explaining his music Gunnar is passionate and needs no encouragement to talk about it.

"I don't know if you would call it a skill or an addiction. It's like breathing. If I didn't play what

would I do? I'm 41 now and I've been a professional since I was 11 years old. The music was always there. Lots of times (in my life) when things were dark the music kept me from going under," he said.

Matthew and Gunnar worked hard and paid their dues like any other struggling musical group. As teens their life was pretty regular — except for the fact that they played the clubs in Los Angeles.

"We cut our (musical) teeth playing the clubs. When we were 12 and 13 we were playing with groups like the Go-Go's. They even made a law for us to allow us to play in the clubs, like the Whiskey. The law made it possible for underage artists to play if we were escorted to the stage and then escorted out after the set," Gunnar

explained.

"Our life was normal. We went to school and did maybe two to three shows a week. We had to make sure we got the earliest time slot so we could get in and out and get home by curfew or else we'd get grounded because we had to make it to school the next day," he said.

"My father died when we were 18 and it was a very difficult time. It left the family unprepared so we decided to go ahead with a musical career — and we struggled. We were turned down by every record company and sleeping on friends' couches. And when we were finally signed by Geffen Records we only had \$32 left in the bank," Gunnar said.

"This (music) is really my calling. Songwriting has really been the North in the compass of my life. The how and when of my life

have been answered by the what and that is creativity. There were very difficult times in my life and it was the creativity that kept me sane."

More than music

Creativity is not limited to music for Gunnar. He also expresses himself through the visual arts and the martial arts. He is a mixed media artist and printmaker.

"You learn the rules to break them and then creativity (emerges). In art and music and as a martial arts master the more you do it the better you get — and no matter how good you are you can always get better," he said.

Fate and a lot of hard work took over and the group Nelson took off. "We had a great run from the time we were 18 to 23 and success came at age 21 and we did a world-wide tour," he said.

Nelson (the group) is very

excited about its "Ricky Nelson Remembered" show. They have been performing it around the country and get a lot of satisfaction playing this tribute.

"Ricky Nelson Remembered" is close to our hearts and allows us to be closer to our father," said Gunnar. "It takes people back to all the innocence and goodness of the times and it is great music. It connects every single generation and does this with a lot of finesse. And Nelson is about connection. We get people connected — with our music and with our positive emotions. My father was really that guy they saw on TV. He was the coolest guy — really sweet and very kind

to people. The Nelsons were a real family playing a real family. Although it been 25 years since his passing ... sometimes when I'm down one of his tunes comes on the radio and I get a lift because I still hear him with me. In a way I feel selfish because many have lost loved ones and don't have that. Our tour all about sharing that feeling with folks who 'grew up' with our father and introducing his music to those that didn't," said Gunnar.

For the schedule of events at the 2009 El Dorado County Fair log onto eldoradocountyfair.org.

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