



# The Gordon Lightfoot Tribute

*A home-grown act has taken hold  
in a Northern Michigan showplace*

Photos by Jerry Pond

His performances have consistently drawn crowds to experience "Up North" culture through songs of the woods, the lakes, lost loves and broken hearts.

Cheboygan's Opera House, a stage that has hosted shows as varied as local theater productions, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, the Russian Ballet and a troupe of Chinese acrobats, has patrons lining up to see Mackinaw City singer/guitarist Mike Fornes and his band Whispers of the North perform The Gordon Lightfoot Tribute.

The production, recalls the Opera House's retired executive director, Joann Leal, began at the Victorian-themed theater almost by accident.

"Back in 2007, when times were tough for the arts and grants were difficult to obtain, the Opera House had to get creative in order to keep the beautiful, historic theater alive and busy," Leal recalled. "The Benefit Concert Series was conceived with the idea of enlisting local and area artists who were willing to donate their time and attract an audience who would buy tickets at the modest price of \$8. One of the first artists to step forward and participate in this series was Mike

Fornes and his band. He did it on a dare that he could put on a show."

According to Leal, audiences of 60 to 70 people were not uncommon to see the bar bands, karaoke singers and civic musicians who willingly donated to the cause. Problem was, the Opera House was seeing little profit from small crowds.

The lure of Gordon Lightfoot's tale of "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" and the ballads that embraced the lakes and the woods proved to be the draw that got the box office busy again.

"What can I say?" Leal smiled. "Their premier performance of The Gordon Lightfoot Tribute was a smash hit, breaking all records for the series by selling out the house and bringing the audience to its feet begging for one encore after another as the show wound down to a close."



It wasn't long before the band was booked to return for repeat performances and continued to bring in the crowds, most recently accompanied by a 19-piece backing orchestra and bell choir to emulate the sounds of Lightfoot's recordings.

"The addition of the bell choir provided a unique new sound to Mr. Lightfoot's music," said Pam Westover, executive director of the Cheboygan Area Arts Council. "Our audience was again delighted with the beautiful and unusual lighting effects that Mike Fornes created. This was a show that we have presented in the past with an entirely new and innovative twist."

The productions have proven to be a boon for Cheboygan's downtown area, filling restaurants with concert-goers before and after they visit the Opera House.

Citizens National Bank, a long-time supporter of the arts and the Opera House, stepped up to sponsor Fornes appearing as Lightfoot for the most recent three engagements in 2011 and in 2013.

"As a community bank we believe in supporting efforts that bring value to the communities we serve and feel that the arts afford a unique opportunity," said Susan Eno, president and CEO of Citizens National Bank of Cheboygan. "The Gordon Lightfoot Tribute performance showcased the talents of many area residents as members of the orchestra and featured Mike Fornes and the Whispers of the North band. The performances delivered on the promise of bringing the magic of Gordon Lightfoot's classics alive for the audience and the feel and sound of the evening encompassed the essence of northern Michigan — tranquil, yet resilient."

In 2012 Fornes played approximately 50 shows, with increased bookings already scheduled for 2013 and beyond. The appeal of the tribute act is spreading to other states and to Canada.

"It is a thrill to know that the Opera House played

a role in launching what has since become a successful musical experience for audiences all over the Midwest and beyond," said Leal, who also formerly served as director of the Embassy Theatre in Fort Wayne, Ind.

With a schedule that now includes dates at summer amphitheatres, concert halls and dinner theaters, Fornes says the band considers the Opera House to be its home.

"It's always fun playing for friends and family," Fornes said. "There is a bit more pressure to perform at your best when the crowd has seen you before and is more familiar with Lightfoot's music. The acoustics are fantastic and the audience response is always magical. We enjoy seeing the backstage posters of all the performers who have played on that stage. We are treated well there by very gracious hosts."

The Cheboygan Area Arts Council annually sponsors continued education at music camps for local students through the Robert L. Moloney Scholarship Fund. Fornes, who also teaches guitar, has supported the effort by sending several of his students to the program.

"Someday I will see some of them on the Opera House stage," Fornes predicted. "The arts are alive and well in Cheboygan, and what a great place to showcase them — at our wonderful Opera House. The history there is amazing. How many towns have a performing arts palace that goes back to 1877, has burned twice and then been rebuilt and restored three times?"

Lightfoot himself has enjoyed an association of nearly 50 years with a revered theater in his Toronto, Ont., home — Massey Hall, a venue he has sold out more than 150 times over the years.

The Gordon Lightfoot Tribute has played the Opera House every two years since the inaugural show. The band is due to return in 2015.