

LIGHTFOOT'S LEGEND LIVES ON

By ROGER LeLIEVRE

Jim Stevens (bass guitar), Mike Fornes and Matt Wohlfeil (drums). (Roger LeLievre)

INSET: That's the real deal Gordon Lightfoot at night – see the resemblance?

Canadian folk music icon Gordon Lightfoot may be gone, but his legend and music lives on through Mike Fornes, a Gordon Lightfoot tribute artist who, with his band, offers an uncannily spot-on recreation of a Lightfoot concert.

Lightfoot, who died May 1, 2023, is credited with helping to define the folk-pop sound of the 1960s-'70s and is considered Canada's greatest songwriter. Over the course of a prolific career, Lightfoot released 20 studio albums, three live albums, 16 greatest hits albums and 46 singles. Although he's best-known for his unlikely hit "The Wreck of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*," Lightfoot, a strong supporter of the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum at Whitefish Point, MI, had success with "Sundown," "If You Could Read My Mind" and "Canadian Railroad Trilogy."

The Gordon Lightfoot Tribute, based in Mackinaw City, MI, played its first show in January 2008. "It was formed on a dare," Fornes recalls, at the request of the organizer of a concert to benefit the local opera house.

"I began to think about the area, the forests, the lakes, the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, lost loves and broken hearts. Gordon Lightfoot fit that to a T," Fornes says. "I put a band together and we sold out a couple of shows."

As more shows sold out, Fornes realized they were onto something. "There are probably 50 Beatles tribute bands and just as many for The Eagles. We are the only one that does Gordon Lightfoot to this extent. We strive for the full experience of being at a concert. The idea is to sound like Lightfoot's records and look like Lightfoot's band." Their repertoire of Lightfoot's music now stands at 77 songs.

And how did Gordon Lightfoot feel about the group? After seeing photos and hearing recordings of the tribute band perform, Fornes recalls getting the ultimate compliment from the man himself: "That could be us!"

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To help perfect the look and sound, Fornes and his bandmates attended one of Lightfoot's shows at Saginaw's Temple Theatre, took notes and were invited backstage to meet the legend and his musicians. "They were an invaluable help with technical settings and instrumentation – they were incredibly generous with their time and information in helping us nail this down. We probably saw his show 15 times after that," says Fornes, who considered Lightfoot a close friend.

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Their research and personal interaction with Lightfoot lead to accurate mannerisms, speaking patterns, clothing and even guitars, amplifiers, keyboards, drums and effects pedals identical to those used by Lightfoot. They even replicated the stage set and lighting.

Fornes, who is 70, said he thinks one of the reasons Lightfoot was so supportive is he saw the tribute as a way to "go out with a great legacy." It is no secret Lightfoot led a difficult early life, with alcoholism and two troubled marriages. He quit drinking in the 1980s, Fornes says, and "he was able to turn it around." Fornes recalls the icon telling him that when he died, he "wanted to leave a clean campsite."

When the news broke that Lightfoot has passed, Fornes said he was not surprised, since the singer's challenges have been many the past several years. "He had been canceling shows," Fornes explained. "You knew he could only keep up that busy touring schedule for so long. I think he kept going hoping to help make right the things that happened in the '70s and '80s."



The Lightfoot tribute band is not Fornes' only tie to Great Lakes history. A former newspaperman, he has written five books, one of them telling the story of the U.S. Coast Guard icebreaker *Mackinaw*, now a museum at Mackinaw City, MI. Also retired from a radio and television play-by-play career that spanned 26 years and more than 1,500 broadcasts in the National Hockey League and professional baseball, he was also a longtime hockey coach in the Straits area.

The Mariners' Church in Detroit (the "Maritime Sailors' Cathedral"

mentioned in "The Wreck of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*,") fittingly honored Lightfoot the day after his death by ringing its bell 30 times, 29 for each of the crewmen lost on the ship and the final time for Lightfoot himself. "I wish him fair winds and following seas," Fornes said.

Scan the code at right to hear the Gordon Lightfoot Tribute perform.



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