

Lightfoot concert this weekend

Tribune Staff Report

CHEBOYGAN — Five years in, and Mike Fornes is more enthusiastic than ever about playing the role of Gordon Lightfoot in a show that continues to reach new heights.

His performances at 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday mark Mike's fifth appearance at the Cheboygan Opera House.

"The first show in 2008 was to be a one-time thing, a fund-raiser for the Opera House when state funding for the arts was cut," Fornes recalled. "The Benefit Concert Series had begun and I more or less responded to a dare to try and put on a show to raise money for them. We had so much fun that we did a second show in 2009 and *Whispers of the North* was on its way."

The performances established attendance records that enabled the band to donate more than \$9,000 to the Opera House along with badly needed new main speakers and stage monitors that are now in use.

The band's bookings have steadily increased

with theater concerts, casinos, county fairs, group tour and convention work adding to solo shows

by Mike that numbered 50 performances in 2012 with plans to continually increase the schedule.

This time around the group will be backed by a 19-piece orchestral ensemble with the sweeping sounds of strings, winds and bells in the music of the North Country.

Violins, cello, oboe, flute, glockenspiel, tubular bells and hand bells will accent a setlist that includes Lightfoot's standards — "If You Could Read My Mind," "Rainy Day People," "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald," "Sundown" and "Carefree Highway," plus some surprises from his catalog of more than 300 songs.

Fornes also has re-written and will perform Bob Dylan's "Ring Them Bells," often performed by Light-



Fornes

foot in concert, to include references to Cheboygan area Catholic churches.

The show will be recorded before a live television audience for distribution on Public Broadcasting stations, including a 16-track digital audio recording.

"I get teased about the hair around town sometimes," Fornes laughed, "usually by women with hair shorter than mine. I think once people see the show they get it as to the role I'm playing on stage. It's funny how many people call me 'Gord' now.

"I think Gord is amazing. He is a gifted storyteller and songwriter and has been a Canadian icon for 50 years. I am not Gordon Lightfoot, but I have so much respect for him and want to keep his music going. I do the best I can at looking the part and playing the music the way he does. I have both of the acoustic guitars he uses and that helps with the sound. Singing like him is not as easy. Gord has a very distinctive voice; a beautiful singing voice even today at 74 years old."

Of course, the show is

more than just Mike playing Gord. The other four members of *Whispers of the North* also play the roles of Lightfoot's band members using authentic instruments and effects.

"The guys are great; they really enjoy the music and the challenge of re-creating Gord's stage show," Mike explained. "We want audiences to feel they've experienced the next best thing, and maybe for a moment be immersed enough in the music that we can create that illusion for them."