

The Sault Star

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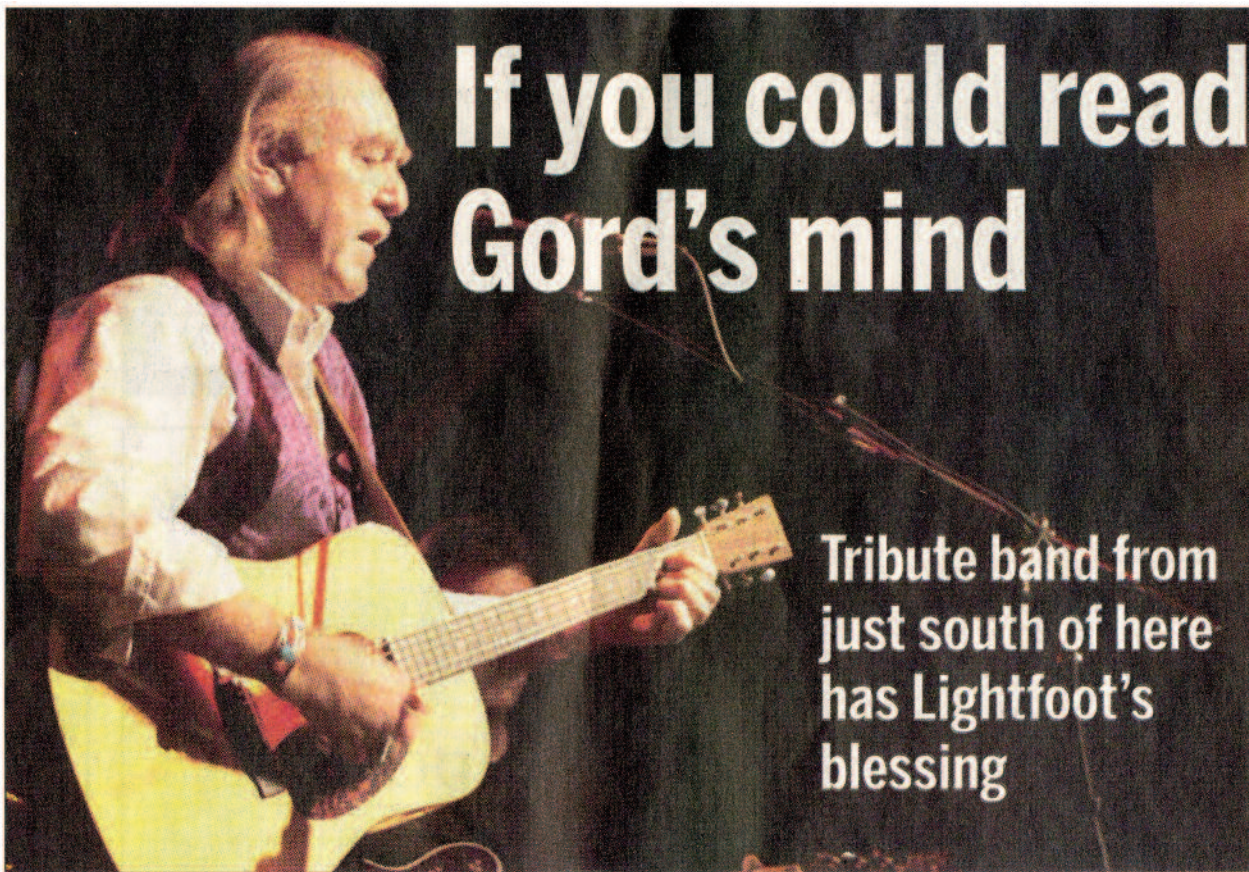


Photo Supplied
Mike Fornes
portrays
legendary
Canadian
musician
Gordon Lightfoot
in the tribute act
Whispers of the
North.

If you could read Gord's mind

Tribute band from
just south of here
has Lightfoot's
blessing

JEFFREY OUGLER
The Sault Star

It's not like Gordon Lightfoot plans to pluck Mike Fornes and his buddies from the audience tonight and invite them on stage to do backups on *Baby Step Back*.

The legendary Canadian songsmith won't even likely acknowledge the presence of his "special guests" during tonight's Essar Centre performance.

"No, no. We wouldn't even want to do that," said Fornes late last week from his Mackinaw City, Mich., home.

Fornes is the frontman for Whispers of the North, a Lightfoot tribute act, which, according to its leader, has received the Canadian balladeer's blessing.

"We're just there to admire."

And meet.

The five-man outfit is invited to greet Lightfoot and his band after the show, mind you not to just press flesh and pass on compliments.

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Few details are overlooked

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Technical queries will no doubt be pitched.

Whispers of the North's keyboard player, George Krawczyk, recently acquired an instrument nearly three decades old.

"It's new to him, but it's the exact keyboard that Mike Hefernan plays with Gord's band," Fornes said.

"He's going to be checking out some esthetics, trying to find out some things about how to program it."

And lead guitarist Todd Golnick was a "huge" fan of the late Terry Clements, Lightfoot's longtime axeman, who died last February at 63.

This time around — Fornes and some of his posse have crossed paths with Lightfoot's gang about a half-dozen times — he'll get to talk shop with Carter Lancaster, Lightfoot's new lead guitarist.

The big treat tonight for the Michigan-based act is having each Whispers of the North member in attendance to experience Lightfoot in his homeland.

"That's what's real for us," Fornes said.

"It's like we're going into the motherland to meet this guy."

Fornes, 58, who by day is a staff writer for the Cheboygan *Daily Tribune*, has been a Lightfoot admirer for years, as have his bandmates.

Canadian music, it seems, has always tickled Fornes's fancy.

"When I was in high school, I had a garage band and wanted to play The Guess Who ... That's what we did," said Fornes, who hopes to eventually bring the tribute north of the 49th parallel.

"It was just kind of a northern thing. That's the music we listened to regardless of which side of the border you were physically on."

Whispers of the North, which celebrates its fifth anniversary as an active musical outfit in

January, came about thanks to what were, at the time, tough times for The Opera House in Cheboygan, Mich., due to what Fornes branded as state cutbacks to the arts.

A number of local musicians lent their talent at no charge for a concert fundraiser.

"I just got a bunch of people, who I thought were really good musicians, and we said, 'Hey, we're going to do a tribute show to Gordon Lightfoot.' We packed the place," Fornes said.

An encore performance followed one year later.

"The guys said, 'You know, this is a lot of work for playing once or twice. We should get out and do this.'"

“It was just kind of a northern thing. That's the music we listened to regardless of which side of the border you were physically on.”

Mike Fornes

Along with holding down day jobs — Golnick, for example, is a detective lieutenant with the Cadillac Police Department — Fornes and other members Chuck Kopp (drums) and John Riemer (bass), played 27 shows, so far, this year in Michigan and have 32 gigs on the books for 2012, a figure the group's leader expects to see increase.

"We're not a bar band," Fornes said.

"The only places we really try to play are theatres. Our theatre schedule is the exciting thing."

Whispers of the North, Fornes said, takes itself seriously as a true tribute to the Lightfoot package, so much so band members actually advertise as portraying corresponding musicians.

For example, the bio feature on Whispers of the North's webpage reads, "John Riemer as

Rick Haynes. Bass guitar."

"We really enjoy putting on the whole thing ... the stage set, the whole nine yards of what you get in the Lightfoot experience, which is kind of unique," Fornes said.

"It's different than a lot of concerts."

Few details are overlooked.

"We pay attention to things like lighting, set design ... We try to do things that are very similar to what they do," said Fornes, who looks after lead vocals, as well as six- and 12-string guitars.

"The average fan probably doesn't even realize that's what we're doing. But the real aficionados who have appeared at our shows ... That's the best compliment when they come up and say 'Wow, that was dead on.'"

Whispers of the North's repertoire contains some 60 songs essentially spanning Lightfoot's more than five-decade career.

"You've got the big 10 you're going to hear any time," Fornes said.

"Then you've got the other things, the real Lighthheads really like to fuss about."

Fornes, conceding Lightfoot isn't easy to duplicate, said Whispers of the North seeks to portray the original act as it appears now — from vocal delivery down to duds.

"I don't look like (Lightfoot) in the '80s," Fornes said. "I can't look 38. I don't look like the cover of (the 1970 Lightfoot album) *If You Could Read My Mind*. I can't look like the cover of (1982's) *Shadows*."

Does Whispers of the North's frontman believe he physically resembles the man himself?

"I'll leave that to you," chuck-

“It's like we're going into the motherland to meet this guy.”

Mike Fornes

led Fornes, whose current long locks mimic those Lightfoot was recently seen sporting as he toured Occupy Toronto, in support of his activist daughter, Meredith.

"I don't think so, but Gord has just given me a smile. The last time I saw him, he put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'Michael, just keep on playing those songs.'"

As for the hair, "My kids are getting a little nervous," Fornes laughed.

What about aping the distinctive Lightfoot voice?

"I've had some people say they think it's pretty close," said Fornes.

"I think the more we do the show, the more we try to portray the role, try to portray the character."

As a listener, Fornes favours, overall, Lightfoot's 1980s contributions ("I like the real old stuff, but I like the *Shadows* era").

But he fingers a 1970 classic as his all-time top song pick.

"I've always been captivated by *If You Could Read My Mind*. I never tire of hearing it. The words are just incredible."

Curiously, it's such ballads Fornes finds easiest to perform on stage, and "the faster stuff" more difficult.

"It's harder to sound like (Lightfoot) on *Baby Step Back*. It's harder to sound like him on *Blackberry Wine* than it is in the *Canadian Railroad Trilogy* ... For me, that is."