

CHEBOYGAN DAILY TRIBUNE

By Tribune staff

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‘Whispers of the North’ returning to Opera House



Local musician Mike Fornes and “Whispers of the North,” The Gordon Lightfoot Tribute return to Cheboygan Opera House state Saturday, Sept. 19 at 7 p.m.

The Cheboygan Area Arts Council 2015 Concert Series kicks off Saturday, Sept. 19 with “Whispers of the North,” The Gordon Lightfoot Tribute, 7:30 p.m. at the Cheboygan Opera House.

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The performance will mark Mike Fornes' seventh appearance playing the role of Gordon Lightfoot at the Opera House, in a show that continues to reach new heights.

“The first show in 2008 was to be a one-time thing, a fundraiser for the Opera House when state funding for the arts was cut,” said Fornes.

“The Benefit Concert Series had begun and I more or less responded to a dare to try to put on a show to raise money for it. 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 group returned for shows in 2010 and 2011, and a two-night production of “Symphonic Lightfoot,” in 2103 that was backed by a chamber orchestra and bell choir.

The band’s bookings now include a steady schedule of theater concerts, casinos, county fairs, group tour and convention work, adding to solo shows by Fornes that now include performances in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Florida and Ohio.

“This is my retirement job, so I have more time to work on marketing,” said Fornes.

“This year alone we have played the Calumet Theatre, the Braumart Theatre in Iron Mountain, the Ramsdell Theatre in Manistee, the Northport Community Arts Center and beautiful amphitheaters in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

“We love playing the Opera House, because it’s like a home game for us. It’s really fun to play when you know practically everyone in the house. We really feed off that energy.”

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The show is more than Fornes just playing the role of Lightfoot. The other four band members of Whisper of the North play the roles of Lightfoot's band members using authentic instruments and effects.

The show's lighting and background set are identical to those experienced at a Lightfoot concert, and frequent trips to see Lightfoot on tour and gain technical and musical advice have resulted in approval from the Canadian icon and his band members. Lightfoot and his band have played key roles in assisting Fornes and his group.

"The project has come a long way since 2008. We've worked very hard at authenticating each instrument's role and sound in the music," said Fornes.

"The songs are the best they've ever been right now. Anyone who hasn't seen us since the beginning, or in the past few years, will immediately see how hard we've worked on our presentation.

"The instrumentation is very, very close to hearing Gordon Lightfoot live. 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. We continually add new songs to keep the concerts fresh and new."

Cheboygan's George Krawczyk, an original band member, will play the show's keyboard score, and Mike Freymuth, of Gaylord, will play lead acoustic and electric guitar. Jack Boyd, of Waterford, will play bass, and Cadillac's Matt Wohlfeill will handle drums and percussion.

Tickets are available from the Cheboygan Opera House Box Office, 231 627-5432 or 800 537-5841, and are \$20 for adults and \$10 for students. Tickets for the 2015 concert series are also available, with adults costing \$60 and students \$20.

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The event is sponsored by the Cheboygan Area Arts Council together with an award received from the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs together with the National Endowment for the Arts.