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'THE LEGEND' LIVES ON

By JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO
Sight & Sound Editor

BENTON HARBOR — No one was more surprised to discover “The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald” had become a popular hit than singer-songwriter Gordon Lightfoot.

The song to commemorate the sinking of the bulk carrier SS Edmund Fitzgerald on Lake Superior on Nov. 10, 1975, appeared on Lightfoot’s June 1976 album, “Summertime Dream,” but it wasn’t until August of that year that his Reprise label decided to release it as a single.

“At a promotion stop in Detroit the record company thought it should be put out,” Lightfoot says by phone from Toronto. “I knew nothing about this because I was up in northern Canada on a canoe expedition. When I came back, suddenly it was climbing up the charts.”

In the U.S., the ballad reached No. 1 in Cashbox, and No. 2 on the Billboard Hot 100, as well as No. 1 in Canada, making it one of Lightfoot’s most successful songs in a 50-year career that’s also produced gems such as “Early Morning Rain,” “If You Could Read My Mind,” “Carefree Highway,” “Sundown,” “For Lovin’ Me” and “Rainy Day People,” to name a few.

Now, a month shy of his 78th birthday, Lightfoot, who has never stopped touring, is on the road again. This time he’s playing 18 U.S. cities, including Sunday’s stop at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, on a tour whose name is culled from his popular sea chantey. “The Legend Lives On,” however, could just as easily refer to Lightfoot’s remarkable career.

He is one of the best-selling folk-pop artists of all time, having sold more than 10 million albums and earning more than 18 spots in the Top 40, both in Canada and in the U.S. He has five Grammy nominations and was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2012. In his native Canada, he has received the highest civilian honors, the Governor’s General Award and the Com-

IF YOU GO

Who: Gordon Lightfoot

When: 8 p.m. Sunday

Where: Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

How much: \$42-\$66

Contact: 927-1221 or themendelcenter.com

Artist info: gordonlightfoot.com

panion to the Order of Canada, and has even appeared on a postage stamp.

Still, it’s “The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald” that has seemed to cement his name in popular culture, a fact that isn’t lost on Lightfoot.

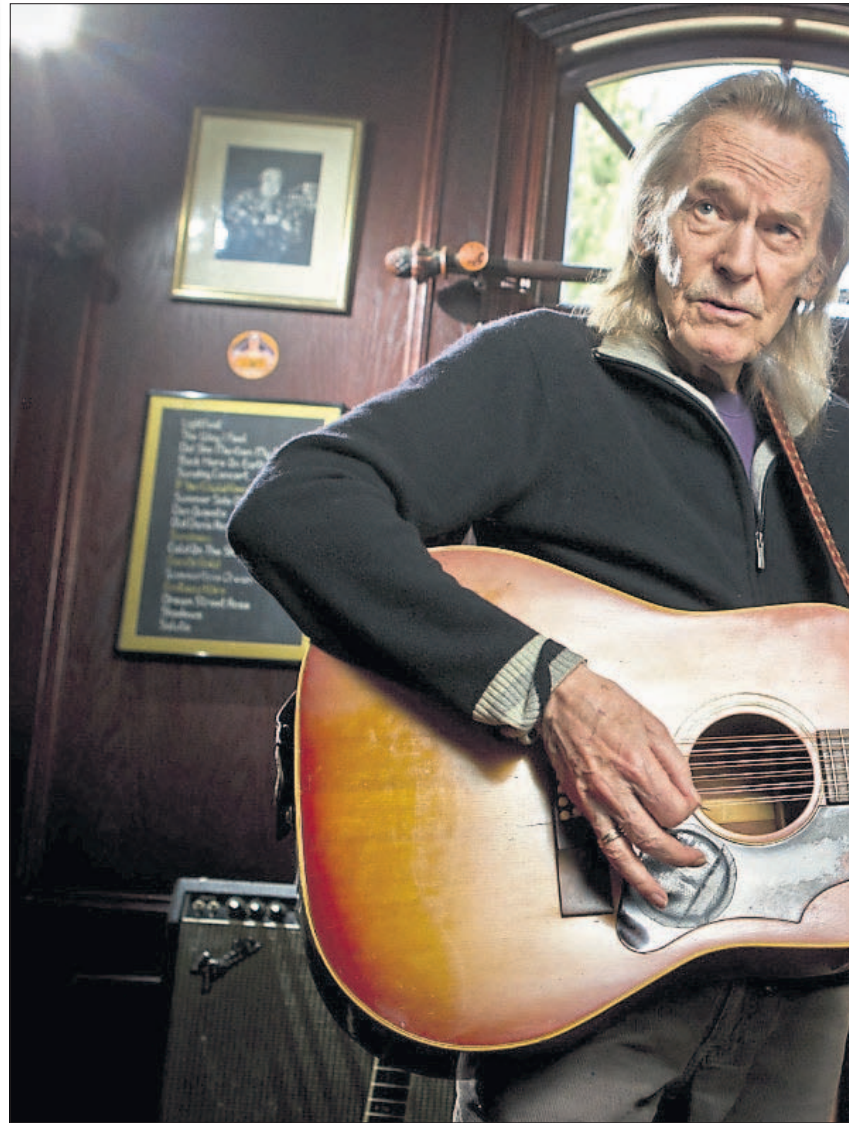
“Most people don’t know that I have written two songs about shipwrecks,” he says. “The other is called ‘The Ballad of Yarmouth Castle,’ which is a true story about a ship that sank going from Miami to Nassau with a whole load of tourists and caught fire. It was a terrible scene. At least this one here I was only dealing only with water and not fire.”

Lightfoot, who was born in Orillia, Ontario, became interested in music at a young age. His first public performance was singing an Irish lullaby over his school’s public address system in the fourth grade.

“I had several aunts and my mother and a couple of uncles who were all into music,” Lightfoot says. “My grandmother played piano, quite well I might add, and I took piano lessons really early on. I never became a good piano player but it sure taught me a lot about the keyboard and the time values that really helped me a lot.”

In high school, he taught himself to play guitar, and soon started writing his own songs, influenced by Pete Seeger and The Weavers.

“I was beginning to perform in coffeehouses and folk clubs and bars as a soloist and I needed that material,” Lightfoot says. “So I started



Gordon Lightfoot brings his “The Legend Lives On” tour to Lake Michigan College’s Mendel Center Mainstage

writing songs to sing in the folk clubs. People were writing contemporary folk music at that time – Bob Dylan and Paul Simon and quite a few others. I followed along in their

footsteps.”

In 1965, Lightfoot signed a management contract with Albert Grossman, who also represented a significant number of prominent

American folk performers like Bob Dylan, who famously said, “Every time it’s like I wish it was me.” The feeling was

Lightfoot brings famous folk songs, deep-album cuts to Mendel Center



David Cooper / Toronto Star

Theatre on Sunday night.

ormers, including sly said of Light-foot hear a song of his, uld last forever.” mutual.

“I was also one of his biggest fans,” Lightfoot says. “I was impressed with what his work ethic was like and how prolific a person he was, and I followed his example. I said, ‘If he

can write (songs) that quick, then maybe I can write them half that fast and I will be OK.’ And I did and it spurred me on. Watching him helped my songwriting. Just the work ethic is

what I really learned from Bob Dylan, plus I loved his music.”

In 1966, Lightfoot released his debut album, “Lightfoot,” which featured many now-famous songs, including “For Lovin’ Me,” “Early Morning Rain,” “Steel Rail Blues” and “Ribbon of Darkness.” It also cemented his reputation as a songwriter. Everyone from Peter, Paul and Mary to Judy Collins to The Kingston Trio to Elvis Presley recorded versions of either “Early Morning Rain,” “For Lovin’ Me,” or in some cases both. Presley covered “Early Morning Rain” twice, once on his 1972 album “Elvis Now” with a second version on the 1978 posthumous collection “Mahalo from Elvis.”

Although Lightfoot has released 20 albums of material, including his personal favorites 1983’s “Salute” and 1986’s “East of Midnight,” he doesn’t consider himself to be all that prolific of a songwriter.

“I was under contract with record companies for 33 years so I had to produce songs,” he says. “That was my job. You had to do it. ... I always had lots of melodies. Melodies weren’t hard to come by, but sometimes the lyrics were. It was always a marriage of the melody and the lyric for me. ... In the beginning, I would draw from emotional experience. ... So there are some songs that bring back memories of emotional stress. ... ‘If You Could Read My Mind’ is a direct reference to the break up of my first marriage. Every time I sing that song on stage it brings back images of my first wife and what a wonderful woman she was. That’s the kind of song you can always find an emotional context to, and you can be sure that I always save it for the end of the show because it’s a good one.”

Lightfoot also realized that there can be an underlying melancholy to much of his work – songs about loss, regret – which was symptomatic of his own marital strife, struggles with alcohol addiction, and the loneliness of the road.

“When I got to album No. 17 or 18 I started to lighten up a little bit,” he

says, laughing.

His last studio album was 2004’s indie effort, “Harmony.” Lightfoot had recorded 15 demo versions of those songs, which he was about to bring to his band, when he suffered a ruptured abdominal aortic aneurysm in 2002, which resulted in multiple surgeries and a six-week coma.

In 2006, he came back from a minor stroke that left him without the use of the middle and ring fingers on his right hand. Since early 2007, Lightfoot has regained full use of his right hand and plays all of the guitar parts in concert as he originally wrote them.

“I’m doing really good now,” Lightfoot says of his health. “I had a case of the walking pneumonia last year. It was vertigo and pneumonia all in one. It hit me while I was on the road and it took a few months and some meds for me to feel back to normal, but I’m feeling fine now and I’m back into my workout routine and everything is normal.”

Normal, for Lightfoot, means he is back on the road doing what he does best. Backed by his longtime band of bassist Rick Haynes, keyboardist Michael Heffernan, drummer Barry Keane and guitarist Carter Lancaster (who replaced the late Terry Clements, who died in 2011), Lightfoot performs his well-known hits as well as some deep album cuts all woven together with some behind-the-scenes stories and personal anecdotes about his career.

“There are about a dozen standards that must be in every show that I play,” Lightfoot says. “The others are songs like ‘Don Quixote’ and ‘Sit Down Young Stranger.’ We have lots of good album cuts that maybe they didn’t get high up on the pop charts but they are songs that are well-known from my albums. Some of them are about travel, protest songs on acts of war and the environment. Some are about gaining love and losing love.”

And at least two are about shipwrecks.

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