



Mike Fornes of Mackinaw City brings the music of Gordon Lightfoot to the stage at Ground Zero's cabaret club this Friday. Warming up the show will be Acoustic Dynamite with a tribute to the songs of Bob Dylan.

Whispers of the North: Mike Fornes as Gordon Lightfoot

By Kristi Kates

While some tribute bands pay homage to big acts like Pink Floyd or The Rolling Stones, a plethora of performers around the country choose a solo artist to be the focus of their act. Mackinaw City guitarist/singer Mike Fornes has chosen to perform the music of Gordon Lightfoot, the Canadian performer perhaps best known in Michigan for his Lake Superior-centric song, "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald."

Lightfoot's music has become legendary in folk/pop music circles, and Fornes - along with his band of backing musicians - pays careful attention to every performance detail in order to do justice to Lightfoot's talents.

AUTHENTIC INSTRUMENTATION

Known for his work in journalism and sportscasting ("I have lived several professional lifetimes in the broadcasting and journalistic worlds," he says. "Right now, the Lightfoot music project is my main focus."), Fornes sings in a voice of similar timbre to Lightfoot's, and he purposefully plays similar instruments.

"I play Gord's Gibson B-45 12-string and the Martin D-18 that he uses," Fornes explains, "and Todd Golnick's lead guitars are a Martin and a Gretsch Country Gentleman, just like Terry Clements plays in the Lightfoot Band. We have the same amps and effects too. All of us use authentic instruments in order to create the sounds of a Lightfoot concert."

The instrumentation, Fornes believes, helps the show stay as true as possible to Lightfoot's original recordings. In addition to Golnick, Fornes' sidemen include George Krawczyk on keyboards, John Riemer on bass, and Joe Kwiatkowski on drums and special effects, augmenting his drum kit with percussion instruments for various songs.

IDENTIFIABLE MUSIC

Fornes himself got his first guitar in the fifth grade, he says, and "loved The Beatles."

"I learned to sing in church, and in school choirs and performing groups," he says.

Those formative years would prove useful later in his life, when he began putting together the replication of a two-hour concert of Lightfoot songs that would resonate especially well with Michigan audiences.

"This is music from our culture, our way of life," he explains.

His Lightfoot playlist is set to include such classics as "Carefree Highway," "Sundown," and, of course, "... Fitzgerald."

"I think you have to play the big songs," he says, "especially that song. It happened less than 100 miles from where we're from, and anybody who has ever heard that song identified it with storms they have seen here, and what happened on that horrible night. But there will be some surprises, too - some other great music Gordon wrote that I think people will really enjoy."

CAPTURING A LEGEND

Lightfoot's music, Fornes says, "connects with a lot of people," and he sees a lot of emotional reactions, from hand-holding to sheer attentiveness, at his performances "as" Lightfoot.

"I think our show is simply an honest effort at recreating the Lightfoot concert experience," he says, "his music is about the forests and lakes and ships, and a lot of it is about broken hearts and lost loves, as well."

If you couldn't already tell, Fornes is a respectful fan as well as a tribute performer.

"We're in awe of the man's songwriting and performing abilities," Fornes says, "we've worked very hard at capturing the acoustic presence his music brings to a theater."

For Fornes' upcoming Lightfoot show at Ground Zero in Traverse City, the venue will be setting a more folky, quiet mood to suit Lightfoot's introspective tunes and acoustically-focused sound.

"I think Traverse City is a great place to present this music, with all the woods and lakes nearby," Fornes says, "and Streeters will be a wonderful venue, as they are planning a cabaret-style floor plan for the show with tables and chairs. It will be a fun night together, with friends."

Mike Fornes' Whispers of the North, Gordon Lightfoot Tribute will take place Friday, August 27 at Ground Zero in Traverse City, with a pre-show "Deep into Dylan" tribute by Acoustic Dynamite. Evening is presented by Oldies 97.5 WCCW. All seats for the 8 p.m. show are on sale at the Ground Zero box office for \$10/\$12 day of show; call 231-932-1300 for more info, or buy tickets online at <http://groundzeroonline.com/buytickets.asp>.