

gordon Lightfoot

Canadian music's favourite institution mounts a fresh assault

By JAMES MARCK



As one of this country's most famous and respected artists, Gordon Lightfoot stays mysteriously distant from his loyal fans.

One might imagine him brooding away in his forbidding Rosedale mansion, the eccentric millionaire, spending his time muttering to himself about his critics and his declining record sales. After all, he comes out only once a year to put on a happy face for his Massey Hall shows.

But in fact, Lightfoot lives in a large, but merely comfortable house, cluttered with the usual accoutrements of family life and the toys of his four-year-old son Miles.

He is clearly well-off, but there is no sign of unusual extravagance. He is hospitable to visitors, but likes to manage his time efficiently. He has, after all, a business to run — the Gordon Lightfoot business.

And he leaves no doubt as to who is the CEO. If there is any one eccentricity Lightfoot possesses, it is his passion for control — of everything from his image and his product to how it's presented.

One archetypal story tells of Lightfoot, upon learning of an unauthorized and poorly produced compilation of his hits, buying up all the copies he could find and furiously taking an axe to them.

As with any old tale, the details have become unclear. But Lightfoot doesn't deny it happened.

"That story," he says with a smile, "originated with my former manager Alexander Mair (now president of Attic Records) and was published in Maclean's magazine. First of all, it wasn't just me, it was he

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GORDON LIGHTFOOT, at Massey Hall (178 Victoria) tonight (Thursday, March 11) to Saturday (March 13) and March 16 to 20 at 8 pm. Tickets: \$23.50-\$29.50. 870-8000

and I together. We had half a basement full of unwanted product and we didn't know how to get rid of it and we had to break it up in order to dispose of it. It was practical. I guess people at that time thought I did it in anger or something, but it wasn't like that at all."

Throughout his career, it's obvious that Lightfoot has done a number of things simply because he can. But he isn't motivated by pettiness.

He's a perfectionist. When his 1986 album, *East Of Midnight* (whose single, *Anything For Love*, was co-written and coproduced by the grand old man of Canadian excess, David Foster), failed to perform as hoped, Lightfoot announced he was through with recording.

Now he's working on a new batch of songs scheduled for release in April entitled *Waiting For You*.

Why the change of heart? Well, it seems that the restless urge to write prompted songs that he felt were good enough to carry the Lightfoot brand.

Responsible position

"When you're in the position of having the responsibility of a new marriage and a new child," he offers, "what I found was that the only time I could work was to get up at three in the morning and work for five hours because it was the only time there was any real peace and quiet around the house."

"I started to get results. I almost got into a method. I did that probably 50 times. You gotta get on a roll, and I got a roll started. The first thing I did was collect all the song ideas I had thought of and get them on cassette so I could pick out the very best ones."

Punching up snatches of his new LP on a portable cassette player, Lightfoot is obviously pleased with the results.

There is a classic "Lightfoot" sound to the new material, so far unfettered by lofty production or gushing strings. (He's producing the album himself with his band's input.) The mixture of songs also reflects a back-to-basics attitude.

There are his "toe-tappers," the

ballads, and the always popular "topical song" — in this case a tune called *Drink Yer Glasses Empty*, about soldiers getting ready for the Gulf war.

Lightfoot's voice is as good as ever, better even than the days when true aficionados swore they could hear the toll that drink and hard living were taking on him.

Lightfoot's drinking days are far behind him now. He doesn't associate with his old bar-buddies and limits his drugs to coffee and the odd cigarette. He explains what prompted the change.

"My sister was working for me at the time and she told me around

participate in the "tribute" trend that has seen Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, Bob Dylan, et al., be feted on record by various artists covering their tunes. Surely a Lightfoot tribute album would be an interesting aggregation of interpretations?"

"Well," he says, "the CBC tried to do a tribute about me and I wouldn't have anything to do with it. We didn't have time, the band or the office — we're a going concern."

And what if a bunch of bands wanted to get together and do a tribute album? Lightfoot pauses and seems slightly uncomfortable. "I'd think I'd rather they wouldn't do that — I don't like surprise parties. Anyone can record a song of mine, but..."

Certainly people have done. Just recently, L.A.-based punk rockers Clawhammer came out with a radical version of *Sundown*, locals the Rheostatics did *The Wreck Of The Edmund Fitzgerald* on their Melville disc and Texas singer Nanci Griffith just covered *Ten Degrees And Getting Colder* on her new LP, *Other Voices/Other Rooms*.

These latecomers aside, Lightfoot's hits have been a staple of instrumental specialists for years. He is one of the most-covered songwriters going.

Still, one can't help wonder how he feels in supermarkets and restaurants about hearing *Pussywillows*, *Cattails* or *Softly* being done by some anonymous string ensemble.

Better coffee

"Do you mean does it make my coffee taste any better?" he asks with a snort of laughter. "No, I just listen to it. I do hear them when they're being played and some of them stand out. Like, to hear *Early Morning Rain done with flugel-horns* kind of makes me feel good. I actually heard that in an elevator once and it was good. I was proud."

But the man who is so sensitive about his songs still stands firm on the issue of collaboration. Nanci Griffith, for one, has expressed an interest in doing a duet with Lightfoot. He says no dice.

"We don't do duets," he says, the "we" referring to the longtime Lightfoot group of guitarist Terry Clements, bassist Rick Haynes, drummer Barry Keane and keyboard player Mike Heffernan.

"There have been opportunities to do duets at other times and we found if you have a certain profile like, say, Kenny Rogers, where you're really gigantic and have

nothing to lose, you're still going to have your crowd after the duet.

"But we're better just to stay away from that. I've been approached by quite a few people and I'm not trying to be arrogant or anything, but there are too many complications."

Lightfoot's greatest pride is in his songwriting and it is to his songs that his audience remains ever-responsive. They come to hear the classics like *In The Early Morning Rain*, *Canadian Railroad Trilogy*, *Alberta Bound*, *Sundown* and his prettiest ballad, *Beautiful* — in short, Gord's gold. And Lightfoot is mindful of their needs, both as a performer and as a pragmatist.

"Our record activity has been a little bit off for the past several years," he admits. "And we're hoping some of that will change, but most of the people come to the shows by word of mouth which is fine."

"We play as many days as the promoter thinks we can handle and that's about equal to a couple of *Maple Leaf Gardens* shows or one at a major American stadium. But this way is a lot more fun."

Lightfoot's career is certainly being carried by his body of work — the "old stuff." Still he claims not to feel pressured by the standard he has established for himself.

Whether or not his new record will win him new fans, the faithful will always be with him.

"Anything that will sustain the duration of the career. I'd like to be playing in the year 2000 and I should be capable of doing that provided the health holds out. That's the one thing we all have that's very valuable."

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



- 1993 (April release) *Waiting For You* (Reprise)
- 1988 *Gord's Gold Volume II* (Warner)
- 1986 *East Of Midnight* (Warner)
- 1980 *Dream Street Rose* (Warner)
- 1976 *Summertime Dream* (Reprise)
- *Cold On The Shoulder* (Reprise)
- 1974 *Sundown* (Reprise)
- 1972 *Old Dan's Records* (Reprise)
- 1971 *Summer Side Of Life* (Reprise)
- 1970 *Sit Down Young Stranger* (Reprise)
- 1968 *Back Here On Earth* (United Artists)
- 1967 *The Way I Feel* (United Artists)

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about 1980 that the booze was starting to get to me. Then the record company got to know about it. The next time I went down there (to Warner Brothers Records in Burbank) they had a chat with me and asked me to go and get some help.

"Through Larry Green, who was the promotions man at Warner Brothers here, they found me a doctor in Toronto and I went to see him and he made me stop drinking. It was stop or else. It was the career or else and the career is as important to me as life itself."

"So I did it in order to survive. And you can see what happened. I remarried, I have a child and a whole new life."

Lightfoot is what one might call a "foxy grandpa," someone who likes to tease the kids with tall tales and half truths, just to keep them guessing. He can also be disarmingly direct, but when the mood strikes him, he veers off whither he will go.

And who's going to stop him? There's nothing contrived or evasive about it, really, just the soul of an artist coming to the surface. A mule won't go everywhere it's led, not because it's stubborn but because it's smarter than a horse who blindly trusts its rider.

Lightfoot has a mulish streak. Take, for example, his refusal to