

Still loving Lightfoot  
Devout fans thrive on aging singer's ability to sing it like it was  
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RECORD STAFF

Gordon Lightfoot performs before a nearly sold-out crowd Friday at Kitchener's Centre in the Square. They came from all over. Fans of Gordon Lightfoot jammed the lobby at Kitchener's Centre in the Square on Friday wanting to know where to park, while exchanging stories of how they'd driven non-stop from as far away as Michigan, North Carolina and Winnipeg. Many wore the determined expressions of zealots. And when the 62-year-old sage of Canadian rail-and-shipping sagas took the stage, the crowd of almost 1,600 devotees burst into sustained applause. Lightfoot, now gaunt and having to work a little harder to produce the pitches, remains nonetheless an icon. He takes his work as writer, composer and songster as seriously as ever. Surrounded by his core band of guitarist Terry Clements, bassist Rick Haynes, keyboardist Mike Heffernan and drummer Barry Keane, Lightfoot seemed too serious at times, offering little in the way of chat. Yet as he plays along on one of the guitars he's chosen for a selection, Lightfoot is still the combination of tight-lipped, tough and romantic balladeer. His way of punching out the text, adding rhythms to the words to enhance the travellin' beat, continues to endear him to fans. That he could on one hand be such a macho figure, and then write and sing a line like "roses are waiting for dewdrops to fall" to a down-home melodic invention worthy of grand opera, gave male fans hope for their own sensitivity and won adoration from women in the audience. Yes, the old vulnerability about Lightfoot that fans initially found appealing remains. However, some of the material he performed, such as Christian Island (did he leave out a verse?) and I Will Make It Up to You, paled in comparison to his earlier and best-loved hits. The applause level rose considerably when he sang Ribbon of Darkness, If You Could Read My Mind, Sundown and, of course, Canadian Railroad Trilogy. The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald, which closed the first half, received tumultuous applause. During intermission, people told amazing stories about their personal connections to Lightfoot. Some remembered fondly the first time they heard him live, many years ago. One man was overheard relating how a great Lightfoot tune and performance of Did She Mention My Name? -- a super blend of tune and sentiment and timing, alas not included in Friday's concert -- gave him the pluck to propose to his sweetheart. Another woman blurted out that Lightfoot had slept on her mother's couch one evening in Kingston. It's obvious Lightfoot's fans just want to connect with him. So, if the once rough-hewn amber baritone's voice is less elastic and less expressive than it was back when, it's his gift of musical storytelling that remains the enigma of Lightfoot -- the paradox of intimate, yet remote; private, yet gushingly romantic. During the two-hour concert, at one point picking up a file-card of his tunes agenda and comparing it to someone's fly-fishing ties, Lightfoot seemed Orillia's golden boy. And if you closed your eyes when he sang his classic Canadian Railroad Trilogy, you could ride right along with him through space, dreams and history, and shunt to a time before weeds had overgrown the tracks. The clanging lines that once linked strangers to strangers were, for a brief and suspended time, revisited. His fans may have moved with the times, but as the huge turnout demonstrated, their hearts are forever set on a past in which Lightfoot played such a strong and eloquent part in defining Canadian identity. Lightfoot surely knows this. Why else would he work so hard to perform, if not to please his many fans? Fans who still cling to him, despite the ups and downs? He went so far as to straighten out for his fans, and if he lost a bit of the sparkle on the way, it turns out that's OK, too. As one guy said at intermission, "I'm just glad he's still alive."