

Mike Strobel

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Fans happy to see Gordon Lightfoot

By MIKE STROBEL

On that awful night, Char Westbrook has a ticket for GG-23 in the right balcony of the Orillia Opera House.

But it will be three years before she takes her seat.

She and other Lighthouse mill about in the warm dusk of Saturday, Sept. 7, 2002, waiting for the doors to open.

When they do, it is a concert hall staffer.

"Mr. Lightfoot is ill," he says.

Soon, TVs have shots of medivac choppers and stretchers and doctors saying dire things.

And the Land of the Lighthouse topples into shock.

First, let's go back to 1971.

Charlene Westbrook, 15, is in her room in Etobicoke. She has the blues. Boyfriend troubles.

She tunes her transistor to CHUM.

If you could read my mind love

What a tale my thoughts could tell

"I was hooked," Char Westbrook, 50, tells me in the study of her Whitby home.

Photos, autographs, mags, ticket stubs, all 20 albums. Even the 45 rpm she rushed out to buy in 1971. Lightfoot signed it on her 45th birthday backstage at Mariposa.

Back to that dreadful September night in '02. When Char gets home from Orillia, the Lighthouse were waiting by their computers for her usual concert report.

She is moderator of corfid.com, where some of Gordon Lightfoot's most loyal fans hang out.

That night, her report is all bad news.

Any real Canadian knows the story:

Lightfoot stricken as he gets out of his car for a sound check at the opera house. Stomach aneurysm. Evac to Hamilton. Surgery. Six weeks of coma.

Stunning comeback. Rehab. New album, Harmony.

Benefit concert for the hospital that saved him, McMaster. Return to Massey Hall, the Church of Gord, Char calls it.

One helluva ride for the Lighthouse. Worse than the booze years.

The Net People, Gordie calls them.

Charlene is their queen.

They hold conventions for every Massey Hall gig and come from around the world. They tour Orillia, where Lightfoot once sang soprano in the church choir. One year, they barbecued at Char's place, jammed with guitars in her basement.

Some have found love. A fan from Britain wed a Jersey gal. The Lighthouse gave them a quilt with Lightfoot themes. Gord signed the middle square.

Some Lighthouse remember what they wore for their first concert. Some can tell what song is next just by how Lightfoot rests his fingers on the strings.

"I keep old CHUM charts with his songs on them," Char says. "How pathetic is that?"

Pathetic? No. Passionate.

And I know that you will never stray

Cause ya been that way from day to day

For such a long, long time

Char sends him cards for his birthday (67 last month) and Christmas. No more Get Well cards, thank goodness.

Last Saturday, this one icy, she finally takes her seat, GG-23 in the right balcony, for Lightfoot's make-good concert.

"Sorry I'm late," says Gordie, and sashes into Spanish Moss.

Let go darlin'

I can feel the night wind call

Later, Rainy Day People, for the local docs and nurses. Triangle, Cotton Jenny, Carefree Highway. Is there a greater folk playlist in Canada than Lightfoot's? Or in the world?

Sundown gets Char's attention. Sexier, sultrier than usual.

"It's the music of our lives," says Char.

And as Canadian as wind on a lonely lake.

"Gord didn't go Hollywood. He didn't take the money and run. He stayed true to being a Canadian."

The illness scared all Lightheads.

"I used to think he'd always be there. That I could keep driving down the Don Valley to Massey Hall, buy his CDs, enjoy his songs.

"Now I know how important it is."

In the dark of the Orillia Opera House, Char scribbles pages of notes as the old man sings, for her report to the world's Lightheads.

She puts down her pen for If You Could Read My Mind. Older, wiser and more gravelly than when she first heard it. But note-perfect.

"You're back," she says. "You're home."

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