

Canadian singer-songwriter Gordon Lightfoot dead at 84

James Brewer
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Gordon Lightfoot was a consummate artist. One of the most notable qualities in his music was empathy for his fellow man. He died in the evening of May 1, of undisclosed causes, in a Toronto hospital.

In late 1975, Lightfoot read of the sinking of the iron ore freighter S.S. Edmund Fitzgerald and the loss of her whole crew of 29 men in Lake Superior. None of the crew or any evidence of what caused the loss of the massive ship was found. According to one interview, Lightfoot felt that the terrible tragedy would be forgotten unless he told the story. Meticulously, he researched it and artfully put it to music. The following year, “The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald” was released to a widespread audience in North America. As told in his lyric, the cause was a mystery.

They might have split up or they might have
capsized
They may have broke deep and took water
And all that remains is the faces and the names
Of the wives and the sons and the daughters

The artist kept in touch with the families of the crew for years. Perhaps at least partly due to the continued popularity of the song, search and investigation efforts continued for decades. Lightfoot would update his lyric in later performances to reject any interpretation of the song that suggested that crew error was a cause of the disaster.

The singer-songwriter was born in 1938 in a small town in Ontario named Orillia. Lightfoot later described the town as having everything needed for a kid growing up. His father managed a dry-cleaning factory and his mother was his first musical mentor. He

was a boy soprano in church, in a barbershop quartet in high school and later joined a rock band as a drummer. His parents encouraged him every step of the way. A documentary on his life, entitled *Gordon Lightfoot: If You Could Read My Mind*, was produced in 2020. It is well worth watching.

At an early moment in his career, he knew that his music had to pay the bills, and he treated his creative work protectively. He was determined to write his music in notation and put himself to the task of learning the needed skills. He wrote his music at a desk. Not only was he enormously talented musically, but his lyrics were poetry. Not a few of his fellow musicians referred to his enormous work ethic. When he completed a song he would submit it for copyright.

In 1958 Lightfoot moved to Los Angeles to attend the Westlake College of Music, studying jazz composition and arranging.

He returned to Toronto, where he worked at a bank and was ready to be promoted upstairs to be a teller when he got an offer to be a choral performer in a show called *Country Hoedown*. Lightfoot’s musical career went through stages. He formed an act called the Two-Tones with a young man named Terry Whelan, whose father was their manager. They recorded an album in 1962. The elder Whelan insisted that they sign a contract splitting everything 50–50, no matter that all the songs were written by Gordon. He had the sense to walk away.

In the early ’60s, Lightfoot found opportunities in England, and also became a part of the folk scene in Greenwich Village in New York City. He earned the reputation as a songwriter with songs like “In The Early Mornin’ Rain,” which was covered by artists such as Ian and Sylvia, Peter, Paul and Mary, and Bob Dylan. Even Elvis Presley recorded it in 1972. He was signed

by Albert Grossman—Bob Dylan’s manager—to a contract with United Artists.

His first album with Grossman, *Lightfoot*, released in 1966, included “In The Early Mornin’ Rain” and, among others, “For Lovin’ Me.” Like most of his work, “For Lovin’ Me,” or “That’s What You Get For Lovin’ Me” was informed by his personal experience—in particular, the breakup of his first marriage. He came to dislike that song, which he considered to be insensitive and chauvinist, and refused to play it in his later years.

In July 1967, Lightfoot was performing in Detroit when the ghetto rebellion broke out. He wrote “Black Day In July” and released it in 1968 on his album “Did She Mention My Name?” A hard-driving song, unapologetically sympathetic to the black population and critical of the decision of the governor of Michigan and the US president to send in the National Guard, many radio stations in the US would not play it. It included the following lines:

The streets of Motor City now are quiet and
serene
But the shapes of gutted buildings
Strike terror to the heart
And you say how did it happen
And you say how did it start
Why can’t we all be brothers
Why can’t we live in peace
But the hands of the have-nots
Keep falling out of reach

For the 1967 Canada bicentennial, the Canadian Broadcasting Company contacted Lightfoot to write and perform “Canadian Railroad Trilogy,” about the building of the cross-Canada railway. His work displayed a special sensitivity to the workers who gave their all to complete the bridges and tunnels and lay the track. He pays tribute to those who gave their lives in the effort.

The 1970s may have been the highpoint of Lightfoot’s career. “If You Could Read My Mind” was released in 1970 and caused his label to re-title his latest album, giving it the same name as the song. In 1974, “Sundown” and “Carefree Highway” were both

released on his album *Sundown* to great popularity. Then “The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald” was released in 1976, making Lightfoot a household name.

He continued to write, record and perform through the ’80s and ’90s, but along with the fame and fortune came life-destroying addictions to alcohol and drugs. He was forced to remove himself from performing in order to kick his habits, doing several canoe trips in the wilds of Canada. He eventually came back to performing, but during a 2002 performance he had an abdominal aneurysm and fell into a coma. After recovering and returning, he had a minor stroke on stage, losing the full use of his right hand.

Almost until the end, however, he continued to hold to a grueling touring schedule.

Lightfoot’s songs remain among the best and most widely covered in the industry. In addition to those previously mentioned, the Clancy Brothers, Judy Collins, Neil Young, Anne Murray, Sarah McLachlan, Johnny Mathis, Tony Bennett and Barbara Streisand are just some of the artists who recorded his music.



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