

A picture and a thousand words

Unforgettable duet

by David Hayes, Toronto Star, July 23, 2006



You can see it all in his face.

Gordon Lightfoot, sitting in the second-floor rehearsal room of his rambling Rosedale home in Toronto, is playing his Gibson Dove, jamming with Bob Dylan, the man who had been his hero, inspiration and, later, his friend. They're playing Dylan's *Love Minus Zero/No Limit* and Lightfoot's eyes are half closed in concentration, his cigarette at a cocky angle.

For his part, Dylan looks like... well, Dylan: inscrutable, absorbed in his own world, the sun to Lightfoot's planet.

The event was an after-party hosted by Lightfoot for Dylan's epic Rolling Thunder Revue, which had rolled into town for a two-night stand - Dec. 1 and 2, 1975 - at Maple Leaf Gardens. Rolling

Thunder Revue had started as a modest tour early in the fall, but gained momentum and critical acclaim along the way, this being an era when rock concerts could still become “happenings,” acquiring heightened significance not for supporting political causes, like famine relief or mobilizing youth to vote, but simply on their own self-importance.

By the Toronto stop, near the end of its run, Dylan had with him Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell, troubadour Ramblin’ Jack Elliot, former Byrds leader Roger McGuinn and beat poet Allen Ginsberg, with illustrious surprise guests added in nearly every city and the shows running between four and five hours.

With the Gardens packed on the first night, Dylan dedicated *Dark As A Dungeon*, an old Merle Travis coal-mining song that Lightfoot thinks he introduced him to in the ’60s, to his friend and gave Lightfoot a prime spot immediately before his finale. (Fair enough for the hometown boy but, this being the imperial Dylan, a sign of respect nonetheless.) Given a hero’s welcome by the crowd, Lightfoot performed three songs: *Sundown*, *The Watchman’s Gone*, and *Race Among the Ruins*, a new one that he would record on his next album, *Summertime Dream*.

This photo was taken at some time that night, or possibly in the wee hours of the next morning. No one can remember, for this was a musician’s after-party during the excessive ’70s, with alcohol and recreational pharmaceuticals flowing. At some point in the evening, Dylan held a tape recorder while Lightfoot sang his *Ballad in Plain D*. It can be heard in the background of a scene in Dylan’s wretchedly self-indulgent 1977 film, *Renaldo and Clara*.

Lightfoot’s friend, Tiny, a six-foot-eight banjo player, was the doorman, making sure the party didn’t get out of control, which it seemed to do around the time Dylan crony and Rolling Thunder emcee Bobby Neuwirth threw his leather jacket in the living room fireplace and the joint filled with smoke.

Roger McGuinn, who today says “the general mentality [of the Rolling Thunder Revue] was that of a bike gang or a pirate ship crew,” remembers a party at Lightfoot’s and something about Neuwirth’s jacket but little else about the evening. Which may echo what they say about Woodstock: if you can remember it, you weren’t there.

Since the mid-1960s, Lightfoot had been the quintessential Canadian folksinger. His songs were covered by Ian and Sylvia, Peter, Paul and Mary, Elvis Presley, Judy Collins, Johnny Cash, Harry Belafonte, Marty Robbins and others. He became notorious throughout North America when *Black Day in July*, an angry song about the 1967 Detroit race riots, was banned by many top-40 radio stations in the United States. Dylan himself would write, “Every time I hear a song of his, it’s like I wish it would last forever.”

By the mid-’70s, Lightfoot was at the height of his songwriting powers (less than three weeks before the party, he had written one of his most iconic songs, *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald*) and at the height of his fame. The success of *Sundown* the previous year—the album sold 1.5-million copies within 12 months, and both the album and title track had been number

one hits in the United States and Canada—had firmly established him as a star, albeit a reluctant one.

Lightfoot has always been the classic brooding artist, uncomfortable as a public figure. He sees himself as a working man, no more, as though he was constructing pine furniture or running a car dealership in his hometown of Orillia rather than creating mythic songs from that mysterious alchemy of music and imagination.

In interviews, a reserved, wary man emerged, someone who, despite the accolades and awards—to date, they include five Grammy nominations, 17 Juno Awards, the Governor General's Award and a companion of the Order of Canada—seemed uncertain he deserved them.. Even today, speaking of Dylan, he says, “He became a mentor for a long time; I think he probably still is to this day.”

He has six children with four women and had a troubled relationship with alcohol until 1982, when he quit cold turkey, suggesting the kind of tumultuous personal life that provides a songwriter with raw material.

He once said, “The effect of my music on my personal life is devastating.” By the late '70s, Lightfoot's style—rooted more deeply in the folk tradition of the '60s than contemporaries like James Taylor, Paul Simon or Dylan—would no longer be the *trend du jour*, but he would retain a faithful following for the rest of his career and continue to write, record and perform, as well as enjoy financial stability from royalties on a catalogue that today numbers about 250 songs. (He owns the copyright to them all.)

In 2002, Lightfoot nearly died when an aorta burst in his abdomen. He lay in a coma for six weeks, and when he returned to consciousness his larynx, the source of his distinctive, burnished oak tenor, had been shredded during surgery. Since then he has been gradually recovering—he appeared at Canada's Live 8 concert in Barrie last year and is on tour through this summer and fall—but he looks and sounds frail, and sometimes he has trouble finding the strength to sing his mighty, seven-minute *Canadian Railroad Trilogy*.

Just about a year before the picture with Dylan was taken, with Lightfoot as close to a pop star as he would ever become, he was interviewed for *Crawdaddy*, a U.S. music magazine. The writer, apparently both charmed and puzzled by her subject's guarded, anti-star persona, wrote: “He is justifiably proud of being Canadian, in the self-effacing, mindless way Canadians have of acknowledging their nationality.”

Look at the picture again: that's our relationship to America in the attentive, focussed Lightfoot and the arrogantly assured Dylan. And that's what we love about Lightfoot: he's as Canadian as a Tom Thomson canvas or the Trans-Canada Highway.