

TURQUOISE mounted in thickish curves of grey silver seemed to shield Gordon Lightfoot's fingers and wrists as he stabbed at the pushbutton telephone. "We're trying to coordinate the evening's activities here," he said. This seemed to involve rounding up a lot of tickets for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and a lot of people to use them. The people, I learned through some concentrated, full-tilt eavesdropping, included one Bob Neuwirth. The bloated Trivia Division of my mind automatically kicked on, and two whirs and a crank later delivered a readout of sorts: Neuwirth had not long ago recorded his own so-so album but was better known as an old pal of Bob Dylan and a somewhat newer old pal of Kristofferson. Lightfoot said a woman's name into the phone then, and then said, "It's Gordon," and then said, "Lightfoot," and then heard he had tapped out a wrong number. I constructed a delayed double-take scenario for someone hanging up a phone somewhere in New York: "Of course, the *Sundown* man!" A wrong number of some stature. One's grandchildren might even be interested.

Lightfoot, since *Sundown* the monster single, "Sundown" the monster album, and a reasonably heavy second hit single, *Carefree Highway*, may turn out to be one of the more enduring household words of the Seventies. *Sundown* has a tip-of-the-iceberg look about it, with the new Lightfoot followers it attracted now happily finding a whole slew of his albums in the catalog—and *If You Could Read My Mind*, at least in the Northeast, has already seen a kind of mini-revival.

"*Sundown*'s a pretty hard act to follow," Lightfoot said, the plan for his evening still sketchy but left hanging. "But due to the fact that there were two hit singles on that album, I got two or three months' grace from Reprise on the next one. Was able to refine it a little more, go in and re-record four or five tunes I'd cut back in November."

The thirty-five-year-old native of Orillia, Ontario, has had hits before, but never like this, and he doesn't know exactly how it happened. "Actually, I'm more interested in making consistent albums, quality albums," he said. "A hit single is usually an accident. You just sit back and watch it take off. At least that's what I did. I had no idea in my wildest dreams a song could take off like that. It sold

over a million copies in very short order. . . . I had, I believe it was, three albums in between "If You Could Read My Mind" and "Sundown" on which there were no hit singles at all. Unless you count something like number seventy-six with an anchor. And I was back into producing albums again. I had my concert trade and everybody was happy, the fans were happy. I was going along



Lightfoot a short decade ago

thinking, well, I'll just keep on making albums and one of these days it will happen again. And it did."

It has him playing in larger places, and worrying about that a little. He is beefing up his sound system, and hiring, for some large gigs, a steel guitar player and his old friend studio guitarist Red Shea to join the regular traveling unit of himself on rhythm guitar, Terry Clements on acoustic lead, and Rick Haynes on bass. In New York's Lincoln Center, Lightfoot interrupted himself in the middle of *Canadian Railroad Trilogy* for what must have seemed to most in the audience a non sequitur: "I'll tell you one thing—I'd rather do four shows here than one in Madison Square Garden."

And *It* has him spending more energy these days trying to counter—or at least straighten out—public assertions connecting his relationships with women with the (usually self-critical) lyrics of his lost-love songs. "Some people are just making a big

deal out of everything," he told me.

*It* has seen him, according to some sources, put on a little weight, but you wouldn't call him stocky, let alone soft. He is somewhat shaggier than he used to be, and he seems looser and more relaxed on stage. "I've been doing it so long," he said, "that the only times I really get nervous are in New York, London, Los Angeles, and Toronto. Something about those really big cities kind of scares you. When I play in New York, I really get nervous. It will always be the Big Apple to me."

But *It* has not brought him closer by any perceptible degree to diving headlong into our politics down here in the States, or into our consuming and quickly consumed preoccupations, stylistic and otherwise, or our fantasies about revolution, or much else we have to offer in the way of fads and fancy stuff. Lightfoot's songs continue to be basic—work songs, travel songs, love songs—and if anything they've grown more personal through the years. "Lately they've been so personal that nobody else sings them," he says. He is steadily and sensibly liberal politically and that's about it. "My reading habits are atrocious," he said. "All I read is the *National Lampoon* and *Time* magazine. The newspapers are so boring. I'm not saying you don't want to know what's happening, but you know—all you have to do is turn on Walter Cronkite for a few minutes and he'll tell you what's going on in the world, and it *ain't* good."

Those new fans digging about in Lightfoot's earlier albums will recall that almost everyone with his kind of folkie image in the late Sixties was trying to work an electric-conversion scheme of some sort, hoping to update to the more lucrative folk-rock image—and those new fans will find nary a whiff of that sort of thing in Lightfoot's late-Sixties work.

"I wouldn't know the first thing about it," Lightfoot said, laughing a wheezing, air-logged old man's laugh. "I just totally ignored it. First of all, I haven't got a rock voice—my voice is much too lyrical. And then I don't want to travel with *any* more people than necessary. As soon as you get into an electronic scene, by George, you've got to get a truck, two or three road men, everything. We have a compact unit here. It's easy to transport it around. The equipment manager goes by himself on a commercial airliner and we go in later on a small