

***Writing Gordon Lightfoot: The Man, the Music, and the World in 1972.*** By Dave Bidini. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2011. 267 pp. ISBN 978-0-7710-1262-4. \$29.99.

Dave Bidini is a critically acclaimed writer, two-time Gemini award winner, and founding member of the hugely popular Canadian band, the Rheostatics. His publications include *Around the World in 57½ Gigs* and *On a Cold Road*, the latter of which was recently nominated for the CBC Radio competition, Canada Reads 2012. His most recent book, *Writing Gordon Lightfoot: The Man, the Music, and the World in 1972*, has been reviewed in major Canadian newspapers, all of which highlight the unusual circumstances from which this quasi-musical portrait was created.

In 1989, Bidini's former band (not the Rheostatics) covered Lightfoot's massive hit, "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald," after having received approval from Lightfoot's manager to perform it. According to Bidini, Lightfoot's manager admitted outright that he would not play the cover for Lightfoot because it would anger him. Out of spite for this refusal to listen to the cover, Bidini later told a music writer that the song was not Lightfoot's original tune, but an old Irish melody. To this day, the Canadian folk music legend refuses to speak to him. The book is a product of Bidini's frustration and is written as a series of letters to Lightfoot. The letters are separated by sections recalling the Mariposa Folk Festival of 1972 (at which Lightfoot performed) and other newsworthy events of that week, such as the announcement of the Canada-Russia hockey teams for the forthcoming Summit Series and the Rolling Stones concerts at Maple Leaf Gardens.

In the prologue, Bidini positions Mariposa '72 as the centrepiece of the book. He offhandedly suggests that it was "maybe one of the most important [events] in Canadian musical and cultural history," (xiii) explaining that the festival was a "starting point from which to talk about your [Lightfoot's] life, without actually talking to you."(xiii) Although this approach is certainly creative, Bidini fails to create a cohesive flow. Instead, he leaves his readers with a hodgepodge of questionably researched history, excerpted interviews with festival attendees, and letters.

The inconsistency between his thesis and his methodology only adds to the confusion. Central to Bidini's purpose is a desire to connect with his idol. However, he reveals in the prologue that he will address Lightfoot as "Gord," a familiarity that suggests arrogance. This bravado is accentuated by the subjective writing style. In fact, the book is more about Bidini than the recipient of his letters. We learn of his first CD purchase, his band mate who had a drinking problem, and his life as a performer. One begins to wonder if the purpose of Bidini's publication was merely promotional. Lightfoot's disdain provides a clever hook and newspapers have responded, including *The Globe and Mail* ("Hey Dave Bidini, Gordon Lightfoot's Just Not That Into You").

Bidini blames Lightfoot for the biographical inconsistencies in *Writing Gordon Lightfoot* and constantly reminds the reader that Lightfoot refuses to speak to him. Many of the "biographical" sections are, as Bidini admits, "imagine[d]," (xix) including sections of creatively written stories envisioning moments in Lightfoot's life (179-181). Bidini even goes so far as to invent conversations Lightfoot might have had with his past collaborators (101-106), his parents (27-28), and himself (189-190). These bizarre digressions, nestled amid extensive pages of information, the sources of which the author fails to cite, cast doubt on

Bidini's credibility and integrity as a researcher. When Bidini does incorporate primary research, it is poorly presented. For example, one section contains quotations from individuals who wrote to Bidini with Lightfoot stories (184-189). The quotations are not interpreted or discussed, but awkwardly inserted in the middle of a "letter." The literature regarding Lightfoot's life is sparse, but Bidini could easily have consulted at least some of the existing resources (beyond Maynard Collins' well-known *If You Could Read His Mind*, which he does quote). They include Alfrieda Gabiou's *Gordon Lightfoot*, Martin Melhuish's *Heart of Gold: 30 Years of Canadian Pop Music*, Douglas Fetherling's *Some Day Soon: Essays on Canadian Songwriters*, and the CBC's online video archives. The volume of information is not vast, but it is available.

Research aside, Bidini's writing prowess is apparent in certain sections of the book. When he focusses on one topic, the writing is well executed and direct. For instance, he writes a fascinating section on the Toronto Rock and Roll Revival; the event, which preceded Mariposa '72, also marked John Lennon's first performance without the Beatles (77-86). However, while Bidini is clever with words, he lacks knowledge of the conventions of biographical writing. Researchers should never blame their subjects for their own shortcomings or insert themselves so prominently into the narrative.

I find it relevant to conclude with the story of my interview with Gordon Lightfoot. In April 2009, I addressed a hand-written letter to "Mr. Lightfoot" to accompany an essay I had written on his famed "Canadian Railroad Trilogy." Written when I was a graduate student in musicology at the University of Toronto, I presented it to him personally after a performance he gave at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. Within two weeks, I was interviewing him over the phone, a spectacular achievement, considering this musician's usual aversion to interviews. Given this, I have often wondered why he chose to reach out, and why he chose to reach out to me. Perhaps it is because I expected nothing in return when I gave him my paper. The letter reflected not only the countless hours I had spent researching his career, but also the respect I had for my subject. In contrast, Bidini's sense of entitlement, beginning with the "Edmund Fitzgerald" cover through to Lightfoot's life story, would explain the lack of interaction for all these years. Since this book ultimately tells us more about its author than its subject, it is recommended strictly as an optional addition to music collections.

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