

LIGHTHOUSE



Lighthouse turned down a chance to play at Woodstock in 1969. Photo: Courtesy of Lighthouse

The group drew on the energy and vitality of rock, the rhythm and brassiness of big band music, and the emotion associated with the best film scores.

And when Lighthouse emerged from the vision of drummer/composer Skip Prokop and co-founder Paul Hoffert to appear on stages throughout the world, the band enthralled critics, delighted fans and changed the Canadian music industry.

"Lighthouse was the most different band anybody had ever put together in the world," Prokop said from his then-Brampton, Ontario home when interviewed in the late '80s. "Did you ever see a 13-piece rock orchestra before or after?"

His question lingered in the air, as you considered some of Lighthouse's innovations: being the first band to record a rock ballet (with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet), touring virtually every region in Canada when few musicians did, combining elements from different strains of music to create fresh hit singles such as *One Fine Morning*, *Sunny Days*, *Pretty Lady* and *Hats Off To The Stranger*.

While the band turned down a chance to play at Woodstock in 1969, fearing that the water supply would be spiked with drugs, it did perform at the famous 1970 Isle of Wight Festival, sharing the stage with such musicians as Jimi Hendrix, Jethro Tull, Joni Mitchell and The Who. Prokop believed Lighthouse had not been given its just rewards at the time we talked with him.

"All that stuff paved the way for what's happening with a lot of Canadian groups now," Prokop said then. "I think that's great, but I know it's going to sound like sour grapes. I guess Paul (Hoffert) and I together realized that in many respects, man, we were absolute innovators. It would have been nice to have at least received some kind of merit for that or recognition. If for no other reason than that my kids could say, gee, that was my dad."

That recognition did eventually come for Lighthouse, which was still touring in 2016, but more on that later.

Prokop said back then that he was puzzled Lighthouse was given little attention on *Heart of Gold*, the CBC-TV Canadian music special of the mid '80s. Or that no member of Lighthouse, especially late singer Bob McBride, "who had one of the most distinctly different, awesomely powerful voices of anybody in North America," was asked to participate in the *Tears Are Not Enough* project (which brought together many Canadian musicians in the mid '80s to record that single to raise money for famine relief in Ethiopia).

It was also puzzling that Prokop, who was a member of two of Canada's most successful rock groups, Lighthouse and The Paupers, wrote many of the hit songs, drummed with every major musician in North America, and played on the *Super Session* album with Al Kooper and Mike Bloomfield, was not currently in the music business at the time of our interview with him.

After leaving Lighthouse, he did some solo work and produced other bands. He was the host of a Christian and contemporary rock radio show for three years and worked in sales for Brampton radio station CFNY and later for radio stations in London, Ontario.

Prokop admitted he wasn't the easiest person to get along with in his Lighthouse days because of the responsibilities he had. He said he had since matured but in the late '80s "it appears to me that nobody's interested in what I've got to offer musically."

Fortunately for fans, that status changed. Lighthouse eventually did reunite and Prokop hoped that performances would coincide with the release of some live Lighthouse music recorded in an earlier reunion at Ontario Place in the early '80s.

"(That tape) sounds better than anything we've ever had the opportunity of putting out," Prokop said. "I know there are still thousands of people out there who remember the band, and who as record listeners would love to have something like that in their collections."

Some former members were out of music in the late '80s, but others such as Howard Shore, who went on to be musical director for *Saturday Night Live* in its first five seasons and has written film scores for many renowned movies such as *Philadelphia*, *The Aviator* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (he's won three Oscars and four Grammy awards) and co-founder Hoffert, continued in music. Hoffert was writing film scores including for the TV mini-series *Hoover vs. The Kennedys*, doing studio work and being executive producer of the annual Genie Awards. He was looking forward to that proposed reunion but wasn't keen on any longer tour then.

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“For me, one of the major reasons not to continue and tour really has to do with the fact that Lighthouse was for me personally more than just a band and a job. It really was part of a socio-philosophical look at life which was very much a part of the late '60s and early '70s, and which were part of, you know, something larger than ourselves.

“It was a kind of movement and a kind of hope, an optimistic look at what society might become. It might have been naïve, but it gave me a lot of good moments.”

Hoffert had something of a change of heart as Lighthouse, including Prokop, reunited in 1992 and continues today, with some new members, to play concerts mostly in Ontario. McBride, who had had a history of drug problems, died of heart failure in 1998, and Dan Clancy took over as lead vocalist. The band toured Canada for its 40th anniversary, and several CDs of their music have been released since our interviews with them. You can find more about the band, including upcoming tour dates, at <http://www.lighthouserockson.com/>

As for recognition, Hoffert, who went on to teach at York University and Sheridan College among other institutions, received the Order of Canada in 2005 and an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from the University of Toronto for his contribution to music and the arts. Original member Russ Little was named Trombonist of the Year in 2007 by the National Jazz Awards.

Prokop received the ArcelorMittal Dofasco Lifetime Achievement Award at the Hamilton Music Awards and his album *Smoothside* won best jazz album in 2012 at those same awards. He stopped touring with Lighthouse in 2014 because of health problems, according to an article in the London Free Press, and in May 2016, announced that he was retiring from music for good. He was planning to write a book about his life.