

Owen Lee brings spark to N.S. Mass Choir at King tribute

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Toronto native Owen Lee will direct the Nova Scotia Mass Choir's tribute to Martin Luther King Jr. on Saturday night at the Rebecca Cohn in Halifax.

The Nova Scotia Mass Choir's Saturday night tribute to Martin Luther King Jr. will honour several historic milestones at the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium, but it will also mark a personal milestone for its new musical director, Owen ('O' Sound) Lee.

The Toronto-born musician and conductor makes his onstage debut with the choir this weekend, for an evening including tributes to the late American poet Maya Angelou and gospel giant Andrae Crouch, and a salute to the north end's Halifax Civilian Emergency Corps (a.k.a. the Home Guard), a Second World War defence force formed to provide police, fire and health services in emergencies.

Lee has been preparing for the concert with the choir since October, as well as special guests like Toronto urban inspirational singer Patricia (Tricia) Shirley, Nova Scotia soul siren Cyndi Cain, Halifax poet laureate El Jones, MC J-Bru and inspirational dancers Alondrea and Asante, and it's been a steep learning curve since he moved to Nova Scotia in June.

Also music director for Emmanuel Baptist Church Meeting Place in Hammonds Plains, Lee recalls learning about leaders like King, Rosa Parks and Malcolm X from an early age but had heard little of Canadian stories like those of the Home Guard or Nova Scotia activist Viola Desmond.

"When I came into this community, I realized how the history was so rich, and that the Underground Railroad led directly into Halifax, with descendants of negro slaves living today amongst us," says the musical son of Jamaican-born parents. "That's an aspect of the show that's amazing to me, because I'm used to honouring people who are known internationally.

"But it's something else to hear a community say, 'We're honouring the Home Guard, men who were at the forefront of guarding Halifax Harbour in case of an attack or a fire, they would be the first ones to find shelter or protection for the public.' We still live in that community and that history continues, that's foreign to me, and it blows my mind whenever I think about it."

Lee is also amazed to think back to when he first arrived in Halifax, with no idea that he would be conducting a Rebecca Cohn concert less than a year later. It all began when he was asked to sit in on an audition day for the Nova Scotia Mass Choir, whose previous musical director, Marko Simmonds, is now pursuing musical opportunities in Toronto.

While playing piano and coaxing aspiring new members through their tryouts, Lee made a positive impression.

"In the midst of it, as I was speaking to some of the auditionees, I could tell some of the executive were looking at me and thinking, 'This boy knows a little bit more than we thought he did!' So the invite grew from 'Can you help us in some capacity?' to 'Can you direct the choir?'"

Completing a bachelor of fine arts in jazz music theory and performance at York

University in Toronto, Lee grew up with the hand-clapping, foot-stomping gospel of performers such as Hezekiah Walker, Fred Hammond and Israel Houghton, with an influence of modern R&B.

With a mission to spread his own wings musically and learn more about Nova Scotia's cultural heritage, Lee hopes to expand the choir's ministry by injecting some of his own diverse influences.

"My intention was to give the choir fresh material they could present, and fuse it with the older gospel tradition as well, so there's a broader reach to both a younger and older audience. Everybody can come to this concert and leave with something; a lot of times, there's a genre preference that appeals to one group of people more than another, but I wanted this one to be across the board, so everyone could appreciate something."

General admission for The Dream Continues: A Musical Tribute to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is \$28, or \$25 for members of groups of eight or more, at the Dalhousie Arts Centre box office (494-3820 or artscentre.dal.ca).

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