

## Soulful tribute to Martin Luther King Jr., Maya Angelou and the Home Guard

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Singer Cyndi Cain performs with the Nova Scotia Mass Choir during a tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Home Guard during a concert at the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium on Saturday. (INGRID BULMER / Staff)

What better way to pull yourself out of a bleak midwinter funk than with the seasoned gospel soul of the Nova Scotia Mass Choir and its annual tribute to the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.?

Saturday night's I Have a Dream concert for a packed house at Halifax's Rebecca Cohn Auditorium offered food for thought as well as fuel for the spirit. It included a tribute to the Second World War Home Guard for north-end Halifax, and segments honouring the memories of poet and activist Maya Angelou and gospel music icon Andrae Crouch,

both of whom passed away in 2014.

It was a lot to take in over the course of three hours, but the concert moved smoothly from one act to the next under the hand of the choir's new director – transplanted Torontonionian, Owen (O'Sound) Lee – and the evening's host, author and educator Afua Cooper.

"How great and pleasant that we can celebrate together as brothers and sisters," smiled Cooper at the outset, noting that the audience's applause resembled "the oil that bubbles in my mother's cooking pot, it reminds me how good that sounds."

As soon as the choir's 41 voices began singing and swaying under Lee's direction, it was clear the ensemble was in capable hands. The young director was a dynamic figure on the podium, moving in time to the music and swinging his arms to conduct the singers with a sense of purpose and precision as they sang a modern hymn by one of his favourite songwriters: Hezekiah Walker's Wonderful Is Your Name.

Its deep groove gave Ken MacKay something to sink his tenor sax teeth into, ably backed by drummer Gary Steed, bassist Dan Parker and keyboardists Silvio Pupo and Ross Billard.

Singing to a live band is also where Halifax's Cyndi Cain truly shines, and she soon had the audience on its feet with an old school gospel footstomper. "If you believe God can do anything, I need you to shout some praise!" said Cain to a chorus of "Amen!"

She kept the feeling clear and pure, going into a slow jam, I'm With You, that she wrote for a friend's wedding, but channelling its message into one of holy devotion and building it up into a torrent of emotion for this occasion.

The tribute to the Halifax's Civilian Emergency Corps, a.k.a. the Home Guard, started out as a history lesson about African Nova Scotians' contributions to the war effort in the 1940s, but became something even more emotional in the hands of Halifax poet laureate El Jones. The corps was made up of men and women assigned to provide first aid and shelter, or fight fires, in a wartime emergency, and given the memories of the Halifax Explosion, no one was about to take any chances.

As Jones pointed out in her spoken word piece, the Home Guard "was never featured in any movies, received any medals or honours, but still stepped forward to do their part," only to see the city they defended bulldoze their friends' and families' homes in Africville two decades later.

"We're here today because of where you went before," intoned Jones, as the wide-eyed and eager faces of brigade members from vintage photos appeared on a screen behind her.

There were also memorable turns by special guests Patricia (Tricia) Shirley – who said she was suffering from a cold, but still had audience members crying out in amazement at the sheer power of her voice – and Halifax rapper J-Bru, whose new song Better Way encouraged parents to be aware of their role in shaping communities, while condemning abuses of power due to bigotry and fear at the cost of black lives. Shirley

was a gripping expression of outward faith, while the latter performer called for a focus on inner strength; together the two made a bigger whole.

The choir's own soloists had a chance to shine too; Joe Colley gave a gutsy, full-bore performance of Souled Out, gliding across the stage as he sang, while Ladies in Blues co-founder Eileen Joyce offered up her own He's Got the Power with smokey-toned flair.

Lee himself proved to have some serious vocal chops of his own, giving a solo piano rendition of Let Go, Let God in which his naturally soulful voice soared and tumbled with ease, delivering feeling that was powerful without being forced. Former director Marko Simmonds is dearly missed, but Lee brings his own new flavour to the choir that should see some interesting shifts in sound in the next months.

One of the evening's most memorable visual moments was a dance piece by North Preston's Alondrea Johnston and Auburn High School student Asante Spivey to the Soweto Gospel Choir's version of U2's King tribute Pride (In the Name of Love). Their movements expressed strength, but also flexibility, reinforcing the civil rights leader's message that you had to be able to bend in order not to be broken.

Or as Jones remarked about King's message as contained in the song We Shall Overcome, "let it use us, let it move us, let it soothe us.

"His mission did not end with his death."

***About the Author*** »

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