



Travel Journal: Northern Ireland

From October 22 to November 3 of 2003, I had the honor of touring in Northern Ireland.

I sang in churches, concert halls, public schools and at informal gatherings. Seattle-based pianist Lisa Bergman traveled with me. Not only did we learn a great deal about the long-standing Protestant Catholic conflict, we had several opportunities to visit with in mixed company with these people. We discovered that music is a powerful tool that assists in connecting our spirits one to another.

On one evening at a Quaker meetinghouse in Belfast, I attended a fundraiser for a young lady who was working with youth in Singapore. There were several musicians there to perform for the gathered crowd. I was asked to sing something and chose the song "I Been In the Storm So Long." This song requires that the audience sing along at several points. The crowd sang enthusiastically, then roared their approval at the end. They understand—they've been in a storm of their own for centuries. They clapped so long that I sang another song for them. This time I chose "Old Man River." The crowd roared their appreciation. After the program, many spoke of Paul Robeson and recalled hearing him sing "Old Man River" when he visited Belfast.

The audience was so electrified by the music, and I experienced a wonderful connection with the gathered musicians. I was asked to lead in the singing of Amazing Grace. This first musical experience in Northern Ireland would pave the way for other fantastic opportunities to join our collective spirits

During my ten-day visit I performed three concerts, two in churches and one in Belfast Concert Hall. I sang from my normal repertoire: spirituals, American song, Broadway tunes and music from Gershwin's Porgy and Bess.

I also visited two elementary schools. The students sang for me, and I sang for them and taught them a few songs. I was so impressed with the young people of Northern Ireland. They were engaged and interested in the music I presented.

Alan Bell also arranged three evening gatherings with other musicians: mostly instrumentalists, but some vocalists. We performed and also visited together informally. At these gatherings both Protestants and Catholics were present. It was a wonderful opportunity to make music together in a region of the world that still experiences underlying tensions.



I also had the honor at the Belfast campus of Ulster University to meet the King of Tory Island (a small island off the coast). The occasion was to present an art exhibit of paintings depicting life on Tory Island. I chose several sing along spirituals to sing for the King and the audience. Much like other performances, the crowd wanted more and experienced a profound connection to the message of the spirituals.

I also appeared on two radio stations to promote the concerts and to be interviewed. One was the local affiliate station of the national BBC. The interview was aired throughout the country. The other interview was on a local Belfast radio station called Downtown Radio. The host of the interview was internationally acclaimed folk singer Tommy Sands. Sands invited Lisa Bergman and me to his home. We plan to stay in touch, as we both have vital interest in promoting peace and reconciliation around the world.

It was a very important visit for me. I am partnered with the people of Northern Ireland. I found there a beautiful people. I have been invited to return in 2005. I want to hear more of their stories and I want to continue to gather in settings where Protestants and Catholics assemble. These gatherings create a space for us to find our common humanity and to connect our hearts to each other.