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## Jully Black adds spirit to Halifax Martin Luther King Jr. tribute

**STEPHEN COOKE THE CHRONICLE HERALD**

Published January 11, 2018 - 6:11pm



R&B performer Jully Black joins the Nova Scotia Mass Choir for its annual Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. tribute concert on Saturday at the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium. (CONTRIBUTED)

Jully Black started 2018 with a period of reflection and battery recharging in Spain. She was there at the invitation of her friend, star soprano Measha Bruegggosman, who's performing at Madrid's Teatro Real, but this week the Toronto R&B queen dives back into Canadian winter in earnest with a welcome appearance with the Nova Scotia Mass Choir in Halifax on Saturday.

"This trip is more vacation than work, but nothing's really work to me anymore," says Black on a trans-Atlantic call. "You can get fired from work, and I'm in this forever. A career is what you're paid for, a calling is what you're made for."

The Seven Day Fool singer has just enough time to fly home, swap out her luggage and head back east to join the choir at the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium for its annual The Dream Continues tribute to Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. It's familiar territory for Black on two counts: She's taken the civil rights icon's words to heart in her newest role as an inspirational speaker, and performing with the choir is a powerful flashback to singing in church every Sunday growing up in Toronto.

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If you go back through her catalogue, Black says it's not hard to tell that spiritual music is a common thread through everything she's done, even if it doesn't seem readily apparent.

"If more people looked at the definition of the word 'gospel,' they'd realize that Korn does gospel, Celine does gospel and Bob Marley does gospel, because it means the good news," she explains. "That's it, it's the good news. So if you're spreading the good news, then you're singing gospel music, but the music business had to create that division and that category.

"I've decided that all of my music has that message, even if I'm singing about the worst heartbreak ever on Earth, there's a lesson in there, in every song I've ever written. My song Sweat of Your Brow is right out of the book of Genesis, but no one knew."

Although she was born a decade after King was felled by an assassin's bullet in Memphis 50 years ago, his words resonated with Black at an early age and blended with her late mother's own words of encouragement. She recalls first learning about him in church, before hearing his history in school or through the media.

"His message of faith, and the importance of the content of your character, I was aware of that as a very young girl and I was able to understand that spiritually," she says.

"I had this idea that we all walk around in earth suits, but there's a spirit that lives inside of us. That was a gift at six years old because I was able to identify that there was something in me, and when I do this it touches those that are looking at me and hearing me."

What amazes Black all these years later is how King's message still resonates, and how it was able to spread worldwide in an age before social media superficiality. Everyone remembers "I have a dream" but what Black hopes events like The Dream Continues concert drive home is that he also had a plan that continues to be reflected in movements for social progress.

"He didn't do what he did to be famous, he didn't do what he did for anything but change," she says. "It was a purpose, it was something he knew that he had to do, and it did cost him his life, but he knew he was called and chosen to do that.

"And he was educated. That's what I also respect about Dr. King. He wasn't a black man screaming at the top of his lungs, he was educated and he was invited into the upper rooms because people from all nations wanted to know what he knew. I'm excited to take that baton, because there's a generation of young people focusing on likes and follows and (they) have this empty shell inside of their souls."

For Black, taking that baton means getting involved in motivational events and organizations for women from all over like From SheRo to SheEO and Empowered in My Skin, designed to encourage participants to take leadership roles in all parts of life.

"Empowered in My Skin came out of sheer necessity," she says of the organization she started with bodybuilder Nkechi Nwafor-Robinson. "It started off as 20 women in a small group, without looking for praise or any sort of validation that this was what Jully was doing or that it was some new platform.

"There was a need in our city, among our friends and our peer groups, where you could imagine a life where you wake up every morning in love with your shape. That was the first burst of conversation, and then came the acronym: Spirituality Health Ability Personality and Experiences. So let's think about the SHAPE of our marriages, the SHAPE of our businesses, the SHAPE of our church, the SHAPE of our children. It's such a universal message, without being about 'thou shalt' and 'thou shalt not.' We're not pushing that down your throat."

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