

THE DREAM CONTINUES

Uplifting mix of music, history at event

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Stephen Cooke has been covering the arts scene at the Chronicle Herald for over two decades.

Not every live performance we attend can be the kind of transformative experience that makes you feel like a changed person when the lights come back up, but the Nova Scotia Mass Choir's annual tribute to the legacy of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. isn't your typical concert.

Every year the choir's The Dream Continues presentation at the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium highlights the multitude of talents found within the award-winning choir itself, presents some of the best and brightest of the community's established and up-and-coming artists, and pays tribute to those Nova Scotian pioneers who exemplify King's message of freedom and equality for all.

This Saturday at 7 p.m., The Dream Continues returns to the Cohn, with guest performer Reeny Smith joining the choir after a busy 2018 that saw the release of her impressive album *WW III: Strength Courage Love*, songwriting trips to Germany and Japan, and a sold-out, year-ending Reeny Smith & Family Christmas event at the Carleton Music Bar & Grill. There will also be a tribute to the civil rights, journalism and public service legacy of Carrie Best and her son James Calbert Best, who were both at the forefront of African-Nova Scotians' movement for equality dating back to the 1940s.

Nova Scotia has a rich legacy of civil rights activists — including the newest face to grace Canada's \$10 bill, Viola Desmond — whose efforts predate Rev. King's rise to prominence in the 1950s and '60s, but the choir's origins are directly tied to the message and goals of the Atlanta-born minister and public figure.

One of the choir's earliest performances was in 1993, at the 30th anniversary of the historic civil rights march on Washington and King's delivery of his impassioned *I Have a Dream* speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. For the choir, *The Dream Continues* is one way to ensure those stories are not forgotten.

"We all know he was an influential civil rights leader, and his mission was to end segregation and promote equality, and that's still relevant today," says choir president Deborah Sangster. "But his message is also reflected by the Nova Scotia Mass Choir's mandate to sing for racial harmony and peace.

"We've been doing the tribute concert ever since that trip to Washington, starting with *Symphony Nova Scotia*, and it's become the choir's signature event."

Since its inception, *The Dream Continues* has been designed to



The Nova Scotia Mass Choir presents its annual tribute to Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., *The Dream Continues*, on Saturday at the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium at 7 p.m. Featured performers include Reeny Smith, *Heart of Worship*, Studio 26 Dance Company and musical director Owen (O'Sound) Lee, plus a tribute to Nova Scotian civil rights pioneers Dr. Carrie Best and Dr. James Calbert Best. **INGRID BULMER • Staff**

provide an enlightening history lesson as well as an uplifting concert, ensuring that audiences leave the Cohn still feeling chills up and down their spines from powerful performances, with the added benefit of insight into the lives of people like Desmond or Rocky Jones, who stood up for human rights.

"Even though I'm a participant in these events, I always learn something new about the contribution African-Canadians have made to this country," says Sangster. "For instance, when we paid tribute to the No. 2 Construction Battalion (in the First World War), it was history I wasn't even aware of."

This year's concert features tributes to the Bests from New Glasgow, who founded the first Nova Scotia newspaper owned and published by black Canadians, *The Clarion*, in 1946, and Pictou County journalist Aleta Williams, who passed away in 2018 at the age of 94.

Their contributions are too numerous to list here, but it's worth noting that in December 1941, five years before Desmond was arrested for sitting in the whites only section in New Glasgow's Roseland Theatre, the Bests were convicted and fined for disturbing the peace when they sat in the same theatre in protest of its racist policies. Carrie Best went

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Deborah Sangster
Choir president

on to become a respected journalist, broadcaster and author, and was commemorated posthumously on a Canada Post stamp in 2011.

Her son continued on with a distinguished career in public service, as the first African-Canadian assistant deputy minister and later high commissioner to Trinidad and Tobago. After his retirement in 1990 he remained an advocate for visible minorities in public service and sports before he passed away in 2007.

"I like to think of *The Dream*

IF YOU GO

Saturday's concert will be preceded by a silent auction in the front hall of the Dal Arts Centre at 6 p.m. Tickets are general admission, available at the Dal Arts Centre box office, 902-494-3820 or online at artscentre.dal.ca for \$28 regular and \$25 for students, seniors and purchases of eight tickets or more.

people an opportunity to have the spotlight on them," says Sangster, who has a specific King quote in mind when she thinks of this weekend's upcoming concert.

She ponders his words, "And yet, we haven't learned to walk the Earth as brothers and sisters," as she prepares for an event meant to give hope and provide "a show of support for all that can be right with the world."

"It got me thinking about how back in the days of the Underground Railroad, Canada was seen as a sanctuary," Sangster says. "And as Canadians it's easy for us to think of this country as a multicultural paradise. However, if you ask a person of African descent, or refugees or immigrants, I think we all discover that all is not well.

"That brings me back to the choir, because we joined together as brothers and sisters in song, to spread the message of unity, and the music is a unifying force. It unites our multicultural, multicultural and multidominational choir."

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Continues as a history lesson wrapped up in harmonious music, song and dance. It makes learning fun," says Sangster of the concert, which will be MCed by CBC Radio host Portia Clark and conducted by choir musical director Owen (O'Sound) Lee.

For many attendees, it will also be their first experience hearing the *Heart of Worship* vocal group formed at All Nations Full Gospel Church and seeing a performance by Dartmouth's Studio 26 Dance Company. "They may not be as well-known, but we like to give