

BELFAST'S ENTERTAINING MUSIC SCENE

From traditional to modern, you'll find it in this UNESCO City of Music

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“We can get tickets to see Van Morrison live in Belfast!” my husband announced one evening about a year ago, his face lighting up. “For his birthday!”

We'd been wanting to visit Ireland, and learning that Northern Ireland's legendary singer-songwriter would be turning 80 and celebrating with a concert in his hometown was all the incentive we needed.

We're not alone, of course, in 'gig-tripping' – planning travel around a live event. Travel experts agree that this isn't just a passing trend. For many Canadians, the event is the reason for the trip – whether that's seeing a favourite artist overseas or travelling to watch FIFA across Canada.

A couple of months later, my husband and I were winging our way to Ireland for an intimate dinner and Big Birthday Blues show at Belfast's five-star Europa Hotel with Sir Van Morrison.

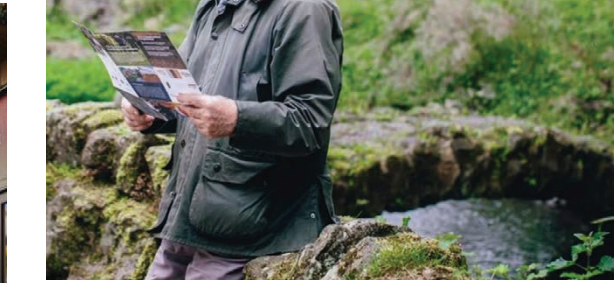
I was curious to see how Belfast had transformed since I visited in 1980 when it was considered a dangerous destination, torn apart by The Troubles – the thirty-year violent struggle between people wanting Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom, and those wishing it to join the Republic of Ireland. I was only passing through then, but vividly remember boarded-up windows, British soldiers in the streets and tension in the air.

Now, Belfast is one of Europe's most compelling cities, partly because of how residents have overcome their tumultuous past. “People come to witness and view that,” says our guide on the Free Walking Tour of Belfast we join on our first morning. “This year alone, from mid-April to mid-October, over 200 cruise ships will visit Belfast.”

That evening, we join 298 other ‘Vanatics’ at the Europa Hotel for a three-course dinner (including birthday cake) and toast Van the Man as he walks on stage in a blue suit and his trademark fedora and sunglasses. His 90-minute show is a joyful fusion of blues, soul and jazz with all our favourites.



(clockwise from top left):
Van Morrison shoe signature.
Van Morrison.
Europa Hotel.
City of Belfast.



This page (clockwise from top left): Commercial Court on Belfast Walking Tour. Van Morrison Trail. Belfast sign outside city hall. Facing page (from top): The Morning Star. Joe and Buzz playing guitar and uilleann pipes. The Watson.

Van Morrison has a reputation for being a little prickly, but a German doctor at our table of eight proudly shows us his leather shoe engraved with Morrison's signature. He met the musician in the hotel earlier and asked for his autograph in a place where he wouldn't lose it!

The next day I delve deeper into Belfast's musical tradition and learn that it's been a UNESCO-designated City of Music since 2021, one of only three in the United Kingdom, along with Glasgow and Liverpool.

Music has been "embedded in the daily lives of its people" from the beginning, notes the UNESCO document, while recent artists such as Van Morrison have made the streets of Belfast familiar to fans worldwide.

Before leaving Canada, I'd signed up for an afternoon session of ceol agus craic (music and fun) with two professional musicians on the Belfast Traditional Music Trail.

Cormac 'Buzz' O'Briain and Joe Campbell-McArdle meet a group of us at The Morning Star, one of the city's oldest pubs in the heart of Belfast.

"We have a very Magpie culture," Buzz begins, explaining that the Irish have borrowed musical styles and instruments from elsewhere over the centuries. "So, we hear a good tune somewhere, and we say, 'That's a good idea.' We bring it back and then we make it our own."

He and Joe launch into an upbeat tune, Joe on guitar and Buzz playing uilleann (ILL-in) pipes – the bagpipes of Ireland. "Just have a listen, feel that pulse," Buzz tells us. "You can tap with your foot, tap on your knee, clap, whatever you like." The music is so catchy and so uplifting that it's impossible to sit still. Soon we're all tapping along as Buzz continues on his pipes and Joe switches between guitar and flute.

But distinguishing between slips, jigs, reels, waltzes, polkas, barn dances, and who-knows-how-many other types of tunes the Irish play, is impossible for the untrained ear. Buzz gives us some clues. For instance, if we

can repeat the words 'black and decker', it's a reel, played in 4/4 time – four beats per bar. Likewise, if we can say 'rashers and sausages' repeatedly, we're hearing a jig.

Their repertoire is impressive, especially since traditional Irish musicians don't read music from a sheet. "Everything is learned by ear," confirms Buzz.

Later, we walk to The Watson, another entertainment venue where dancer Myfanwy Carville joins us. Her shoes are similar to tap dance shoes, but heavier. Traditionally, metal nails would have been banged into them, but now the toes and heels are made with fibre-glass so they're lighter and louder.

Her feet fly while her hands stay mostly still as Buzz plays the tin whistle and Joe joins on flute. Between songs, Myfanwy explains that dancing is about feeling the music and interpreting the rhythm. "So really and truly, our dancing becomes not just a dance form, but also another instrument."

Traditional Irish music experienced a revival in the 60s and 70s and is still going strong. "You don't need amplifiers. You don't need to book a practice space, you know?" says Joe. "You just turn up at your friend's house or in the bar. All you need is your instrument, right?"

And all you need to enjoy a session like this one is to book a tour with Belfast Traditional Music Trail (tickets for 15 years and older are £20.) A session is offered every Saturday, year-round, from 3pm to 5:30pm.

Seeing Van Morrison live may be a little tougher, but he's still touring and performing in Belfast. Check his website for dates. <https://www.vanmorrison.com> You can also walk the Van Morrison Trail, a 3.5km route through East Belfast highlighting places that Morrison knew as a child. Of note, his childhood home at 125 Hyndford Street is being turned into a museum though an opening date has yet to be announced. ■