

GOING TRAVELLING?

Songlines has now profiled the world music scene in 30 cities. Check the archive on www.songlines.co.uk

Despite its troubled past, Belfast's music scene is blooming as Michael Quinn reports

Few European cities have undergone quite so radical a change of fortunes as Belfast has in the past half decade. As political stability begins at long last to consign the darkest days of 'The Troubles' to history, the mighty city has burst back into buoyant life, its once-fixed skyline changing by the day, broken now by a swarm of builders' cranes as major investments in hotels, shopping malls and luxury city-centre apartments spring up on what used to be neglected or bomb-rendered wasteland.

Commerce has replaced conflict in Belfast. Today you'll find the Shankill and Falls Roads, once strictly 'no go' areas and the explosive epicentre of the internecine conflict that scarred the city for nearly four decades, transformed into essential tourist destinations on the city council-sponsored open-top bus tours. And the

most inflammatory of the notoriously sectarian wall murals are gradually being painted over with portraits of local heroes, including footballing legend George Best, who has also posthumously given his name to the city's domestic airport.

And with the newfound commercial confidence, Belfast has learned to breathe a little more freely again, with entertainment high on the agenda and nightlife at the very top as the locals and increasing numbers of visitors determinedly make up for lost time. Where once the city came to a virtual standstill at night, now that's when it truly comes alive.

Hailed in its heyday as "the Athens of Ireland" and "the Hibernian Rio", both accolades alluding to the heady blend of commerce, culture and "craic" – Irish slang for a very good time – that has shaped the always-ready-to-party attitude of Belfast's increasingly

cosmopolitan thrill seekers, Belfast has begun to march – and to dance – to a decidedly different drum in recent years. Although musically, there is little evidence in its burgeoning and vibrant pub culture just yet of the city's substantial Chinese community, its emerging Indian presence, or the recent influx of East European immigrants, the fast-developing profiles of rock music and electronica have yet to threaten the dominance of Irish traditional music. And while bucketloads of money have been spent in recent years on multi-purpose mainstream venues like the Waterfront Hall (£32 million) and the Odyssey Arena (£91 million), it is still Belfast's plentiful pubs that continue to cater for traditionalists and the more adventurous alike.

The free listings publications *What About* and *The Big List* (www.thebiglist.co.uk) offer basic what's-on-and-where information for first timers and familiars alike.



Old and new – Belfast's Victorian skyline with cranes working on construction in the background

VENUES

Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich

A multi-arts venue hosting workshops, lectures, exhibitions and traditional music events aplenty, with an informal, casually welcoming atmosphere that embraces the connoisseur and the novice alike.

216 Falls Road, BT12 6AH, +44 (0)28 9096 4180, www.culturlann.ie

Waterfront Hall

Belfast's flagship concert venue needs almost 2,700 bums on seats to fill its main performance space, so intimacy isn't the first word that leaps to mind. Regrettably it also means that world music events are few and far between, but it can be relied on to house 'star' Irish acts such as perennial favourites The Dubliners and Phil Coulter.

2 Lanyon Place, BT1 3LP, +44 (0)28 9033 4455, www.waterfront.co.uk



The ultra-modern Waterfront Hall – celebrating its tenth anniversary this year

PUBS

The Fly Bar

Located in the churning centre of Belfast's student area, The Fly is usually packed to the rafters once you're past the bouncers. Every Tuesday night it provides the warm-blooded and the physically co-ordinated with an opportunity to better their salsa skills. Classes for every level, from beginners to show-offs, followed for the tireless by a salsa club into the wee small hours.

5-6 Lower Crescent, BT7 1NR, +44 (0)28 9050 9750, www.theflybar.com

The Garrick Bar

One of Belfast's most welcoming pubs for traditional players, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays are guaranteed great nights out, with the public bar offering the chance of traditional music at any time of the day and any day of the week, in an easy-going and welcoming setting.

29 Chichester Street, BT1 4JB, +44 (0)28 9023 1984, www.thegarrickbar.com

The John Hewitt

TV, jukebox and games machines-free, the John Hewitt offers traditional music sessions three nights a week (Tuesday, Wednesday,



The Fly

Saturday) plus the wide-ranging Old Flat Top Music Club on Sundays, which can elegantly stretch from Japan to the Middle East via Louisiana with engaging ease.

51 Donegall Street, BT1 2FH, +44 (0)28 9023 3768, www.thejohnhewitt.com

Kelly's Cellars

A favourite haunt of Belfast's artists, writers and actors (but don't let that put you off), the history-soaked Kelly's Cellars offers nightly traditional sessions for the indefatigable in a setting that boasts vaulted ceilings, whitewashed arches and memorabilia-filled snugs.

30 Bank Street, BT1 1HJ, +44 (0)28 9024 6058

Maddens

One of the city's oldest drinking establishments, Maddens has also been one of its best traditional music venues since the 1980s, with regular sessions, both improvised and organised, on Mondays, Fridays and Saturdays, in a conducive instrument-lined setting that can get a little too popular for comfort at times, but remains an essential destination.

74 Berry Street, BT1 1JE, +44 (0)28 9024 4114

The Rotterdam

Once a hold for prisoners en route to exile in Australia, The Rotterdam retains its old-world ambience with its cramped intimacy and ocean-going paraphernalia adding to its charm. Thursday night traditional sessions boast a relaxed, easy-going atmosphere envied by other Belfast venues.

52-54 Pilot Street, BT1 3AH, www.rotterdambar.com



Paul Harden playing at the Rotterdam bar

DIY CLASSES

Crescent Arts Centre

The does-what-it-says-on-the-tin Belfast Set Dancing and Traditional Music Society deliver a series of eight week-long courses and classes in the city centre Crescent on every aspect of Irish traditional music from tin whistle and uilleann pipe to fiddle and bodhrán-playing alongside solo step and set dancing for newcomers and veterans alike.

2-4 University Road, BT7 1NH, +44 (0)28 9024 2338, www.belfasttrad.com & www.crescentarts.org

RADIO

BBC Radio Ulster, 92-95FM

Caschlár, Saturdays 6-7pm

A regular smattering of world music tracks with an emphasis on easy rather than eclectic listening can occasionally make this Irish-language offering a hit-and-miss experience.

Cúlán, Sundays 6-7pm

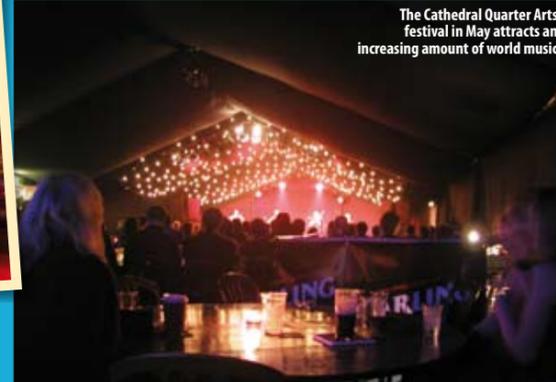
Irish-language programme focusing on Irish traditional music, presented by uilleann pipes-player Robbie Hannan.

Downtown Radio, 1026AM

Country Céilí, Sunday 10-11pm

Popular traditional and new contemporary Irish music showcased on a weekly basis by noted local singer-songwriter Tommy Sands.

The Cathedral Quarter Arts festival in May attracts an increasing amount of world music



FESTIVALS

Belfast Festival at Queen's

Ireland's largest international arts festival is hosted by Queen's University and will have been at the centre of Belfast's cultural life for 45 years this autumn. Its wide-ranging brief can be relied on to draw in world music acts that might not otherwise make it to the city, with the typical 2006 festival having featured *Songlines'* Top of the World award-winners, Anglo-Scandinavian roots'n'reel and song outfit, Swåp, folktronica wizards Tunng and the irrepressible Buena Vista Social Club.

October 19-November 3, various venues, +44 (0)28 9097 1197, www.belfastfestival.com

Féile an Phobail Festival

West Belfast's ten-day August festival was launched in 1988 and, despite early political opposition, has grown into an essential event. Its carnival parade regularly attracts 50,000 while its own radio station, Féile FM, broadcasts in spring and summer. It can be relied to have a solid world music element with visits in recent years from Femi Kuti, Afro Celts, plus Albert Nayathi and Imbongi.

August 5-12, various venues, +44 (0)28 9031 3440, www.feilebelfast.com

Féile an Earraigh Festival

A spin-off from the Féile an Phobail, with a strict emphasis on Irish culture, music and language. Expect everything from traditional *ceilidh* to cutting-edge contemporary to celebrity appearances in a celebratory atmosphere that will leave you convinced that you're Belfast born and bred.

February, various venues, +44 (0)28 9031 3440, www.feilebelfast.com

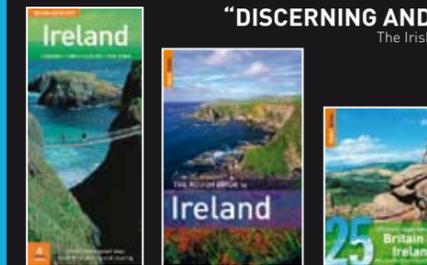
Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival

Now into its eighth year and located within Belfast's new emerging cultural hub, world music has always been a crucial part of the May fest's success. Among this year's offerings are the Jamaican-Cuban collision that is Ska Cubano, Brazilian sensation du jour Marcos Valle, and the inimitable Mazaika and the Polskadots.

May 3-13, various venues, +44 (0)28 9023 2403, www.cqaf.com

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