

The beat of different drums

Dover musician, other artists go to Ireland

By GARRY RAYNO
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DOVER — A cultural trade mission to the United Kingdom and Ireland last month already has paid dividends to a Dover musician and educator, who believes he'll see even more rewards in the future.

Randy Armstrong, of UNU Mondo Productions and a music teacher at Phillips Exeter Academy, was one of six New Hampshire artists and promoters who traveled to the United Kingdom and Ireland with Van McLeod, the Department of Cultural Resources commissioner.

He has made many contacts with other performers, and since has started work with a theater group.

The purpose of the trip was to promote New Hampshire arts.

McLeod had been on a trade mission in November led by Gov. Jeanne Shaheen and used contacts he made then to plan the cultural mission.

The economic results of the November trade mission are projected to be \$394 million over the next decade.

Although the members of the cultural trade mission don't have such high expectations, they do expect to see many artistic and educational exchanges as musicians, artists and actors go back and forth between the countries.

The June trip followed the same path as the earlier mission going from

☆ *Drums*

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Dover musician Randy Armstrong just came back from an eight-day trip to the United Kingdom and Ireland which was sponsored by the New Hampshire Department of Cultural Resources. (Staff photo — Mark Bolton)

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London to Hampshire County, England, and then to Dublin, Ireland, and Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Last week in his Dover apartment, Armstrong said the amount of public support for the arts is extraordinary in the countries he visited.

He told of rehearsal and production space for a theater company paid for by the British lottery, of music collectives subsidized by the Irish government, free tickets on Aer Lingus for artists, regional arts councils and the restoration of an old theater in Portsmouth, England.

The Contemporary Music Center in Dublin houses the manuscripts of contemporary Irish composers, Armstrong said, and makes recordings of the music available to anyone who requests them.

The group had a two-hour luncheon hosted by the Belfast City Council, he said, indicating how important the arts are in that country.

Government there has an understanding that arts and business are integrated, Armstrong said.

In New Hampshire, he said, the arts are more dependent on corporate support.

When the Portsmouth Music Hall or the Capital Center for the Arts

sell out, that helps a lot of businesses because it brings people into those communities, he said.

"Business and culture do go hand-in-hand," Armstrong said.

Before he left, the longtime fusion musician and composer wanted to meet other musicians and performers on the trip. He hoped to collaborate with them in the future both here and abroad.

He didn't have to wait long for that to happen.

The mission's first stop after landing in London was in Hampshire County where he met Roger Watson, who fronts a group that combines traditional English music with music from around the world.

Watson's organization Traditional Arts Projects, connects diverse cultures, Armstrong said, noting Watson's current band includes musicians from North India and Russia.

"I can see exchanges both here and over there between us," he said.

Armstrong said he is hoping to collaborate with a young Irish finger-style guitarist named Colin Reid.

"I'd like to get Colin over here and meet Harvey Reid and Ed Gerhard," Armstrong said, referring to two well-known Seacoast guitarists.

Armstrong, along with Genevieve Aichele of Portsmouth, will work with The Forest Forge Theater Group of Hampshire County on the project "Heading West," about the migration from that county to New Hampshire.

Ms. Aichele, who sings with Armstrong in the group World Tales, is a founder of the New Hampshire Theater Project and was on the cultural trade mission along with Jane Forde of the Portsmouth Music Hall.

Armstrong also hopes at some point to perform at the Belfast Festival, which is one of the largest arts and music festivals in the world.

The festival began in 1962 on the campus of Queens University with backing from the university, the Belfast Arts Council and beer giant Guinness.

This year, New Hampshire Poet Laureate Donald Hall of Wilmot will appear at the festival.

"I certainly would love to perform at a variety of festival and concert venues both with Unu Mondo and Armstrong and Aichele," Armstrong said.

While he met many people who could help to make that possible, he said, "to some degree you have to be patient with the process and develop

the relationships."

The most impressive event Armstrong witnessed was the Belfast Carnival Festival, an outgrowth of The Beat Institute, which artist and musician David Boyd started as a youth arts project.

The carnival evolved into a multicultural project, Armstrong said, with samba-based drumming. Samba is a celebration of life, he noted.

Young and old participate in a parade through the center of Belfast to city hall, Armstrong said.

"It's very symbolic," he said, noting it brings everyone together.

"Boyd decided as an artist he wanted to do this as a celebration of life" in a country with a history of troubles, Armstrong said.

He hopes to help bring some of the artists and musicians he met to this country to perform and also to go into schools and educational institutions as well.

The one stumbling block, as it often is with the arts, is money.

"Certainly on both sides there is the artistic will to do this. The question is if we can get the financial support we need to make it viable," Armstrong said.