



Remember the dream

Let King's praises be sung in new composition

By George Hosker Jr.
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The events that occurred early morning, April 4, 1968, on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, Tenn., would inspire composer Randy Armstrong to see the mountain top.

The Reverend Martin Luther King took his last breaths that day. Gone from his body was the life that dared to challenge the status quo and demand equal rights for all people; gone was the inspired voice, often cracked with emotion, that challenged the inhabitants of the world to love their fellow man; gone, for awhile, was the hope that one day we would truly be a global family free of racism and hatred.

What remains is a legacy that has inspired Lee resident Randy Armstrong to pay homage to King in a new composition which premiered at the Phillips Church in Exeter this past Friday.

The culturally-mixed piece is entitled, 'I Have A Dream'.

"I remember when I heard the announcement (of King's death), I just stood there dumbfounded. Then I began to cry," says Armstrong.

"His speeches were so powerful to me, that even as a teenager I was moved."

The six-minute piece of music is a combination of styles that includes South African rhythms, gospel, and rhythm and blues.

Written originally as an instrumental piece, Armstrong was once again affected by the charismatic King during a documentary, which inspired him to write lyrics, or chants, which were a combination of King's speeches and universal thoughts about eliminating racism.

The song was performed in Exeter by the 40-member Phillips Exeter Academy Gospel Choir led by Michael Belcher. It featured solos by Shelby Smith and the Reverend Robert Thompson.

Armstrong, co-founder and member of the internationally known Do'a World Music Ensemble, and current founder of Unu Mondo!, has spent much of his life breaking down cultural and racial barriers through his music.

"If there is to be healing on the planet we have to go into areas that may not be familiar to us, and what better way for a musician, than to go and listen and observe the music of other cultures," says Armstrong, whose new group's name Unu Mondo! translates into 'one world'.

"Martin Luther King in his actions and his words asked me, and all of us, to take a look and see what we want with our world. We have to examine our own personal prejudices and to eradicate them out of our hearts and minds."

Armstrong first had the idea to write a homage to King a few years ago when his son Kalim memorized a section of King's famous 'I Have A Dream' speech to recite at school.

"Looking at him I realized he was the same age I was when I first remembered Martin Luther King," says Armstrong.

"His speeches were so powerful. I was moved. It was then I realized we were living in a state that doesn't observe his day, and that is what inspired me to write."

Armstrong himself witnessed the ugly face of racism first hand as a boy growing up in Ohio where government forced integration was taking place.

"I was raised around racism in Ohio as I was in one of the very first schools that bused integration took effect," says Armstrong.

"As a musician I started playing in inter-racial groups and I learned that when you are working that closely with someone, there are no racial boundaries.

It became apparent I had received bad information as a child and it has been a quest in my life ever since to eliminate those thoughts out of my mind and heart."

'I Have A Dream' will appear on the new Unu Mondo! album currently being recorded at the Blue Jay Studios in Carlisle, Massachusetts. More jazz-oriented than his work with Do'a, Armstrong looks forward to creating with his new collaborators from Germany and Brazil, as well as, sharing his love for King, and all his global family.

"King demonstrated in a non-violent way, much like Gandhi, how to make changes in the world; that racial harmony must take place for society to survive," says Armstrong.

"As a composer, many of my songs are inspired by the thought that the earth is one country, and that all humanity are the citizens of that country."