

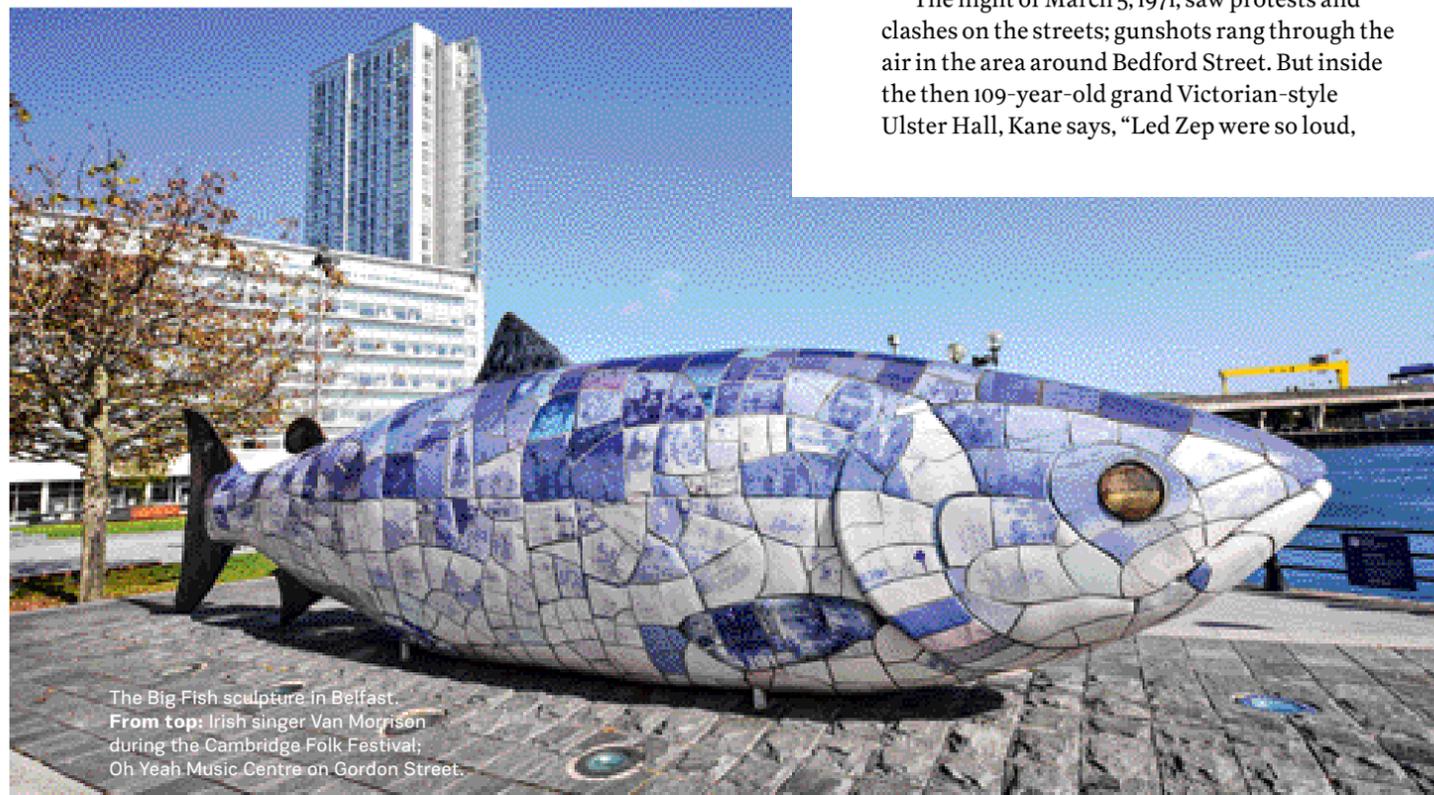
ROCK N ROLL CITY

BELFAST IS A CITY RISING FROM THE ASHES, REDEFINING ITSELF WITH A DISTINCT ROCK N ROLL VIBE. MALAVIKA BHATTACHARYA GETS ON THE ROAD TO A MUSICAL REDISCOVERY.



Irish Buskers performing in the street by the Spirit of Belfast sculpture.

REALIMAGE/ALAMY. OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: GEOFFREY ROBINSON/ALAMY; J. ORR/ALAMY; SHUTTERSTOCK



The Big Fish sculpture in Belfast. From top: Irish singer Van Morrison during the Cambridge Fólk Festival; Oh Yeah Music Centre on Gordon Street.

t's the year 1971. Belfast's Ulster Hall is packed to the rafters. Led Zeppelin takes the stage, and unleashes the all-time classic *Stairway to Heaven*. Outside on the streets, a gun battle rages on.

Forty three years later, I'm listening to local musician Paul Kane tell this story as we wind down Belfast's pockmarked streets on the *Oh Yeah Music* bus tour. Today, the city is a peaceful, happy place, and as we drive past bars that hosted popular musicians such as Jeff Buckley and the leafy homes of stars such as Ruby Murray, the only links to the troubled Belfast of the past are the stories Kane tells us.

"Belfast wasn't a pleasant place to be in in 1971," Kane says. "Soldiers were on the street. It was always grey." The capital of Northern Ireland's image has long been tarnished and disturbed: From the late 1960s up until 1998, Belfast's history was tumultuous and violent, marked by political and religious clashes between the loyalist Protestant majority and the nationalist Catholic minority. The British army frequented the streets; there was widespread rioting, violence, food shortage, and a clampdown on freedom. This 30-year period, known as the Troubles, defined Belfast as a dreary, decrepit, and dangerous capital city.

The night of March 5, 1971, saw protests and clashes on the streets; gunshots rang through the air in the area around Bedford Street. But inside the then 109-year-old grand Victorian-style Ulster Hall, Kane says, "Led Zep were so loud,

they drowned out the gun battle! The crowd went mental. Jimmy Page was a sight -- with his mane of blonde hair, shirt open down to here... and God knows what down his trousers."

And this defines the city's interminable spirit that I soon come to understand and admire. Through wars and riots, upheaval and unrest, Belfast's rock n roll scene has steadily soldiered on. During the Troubles, the music scene existed as an undercurrent in dark dive bars and limited performance spaces; the city birthed legends—Van Morrison, Terri Hooley; and music was the common

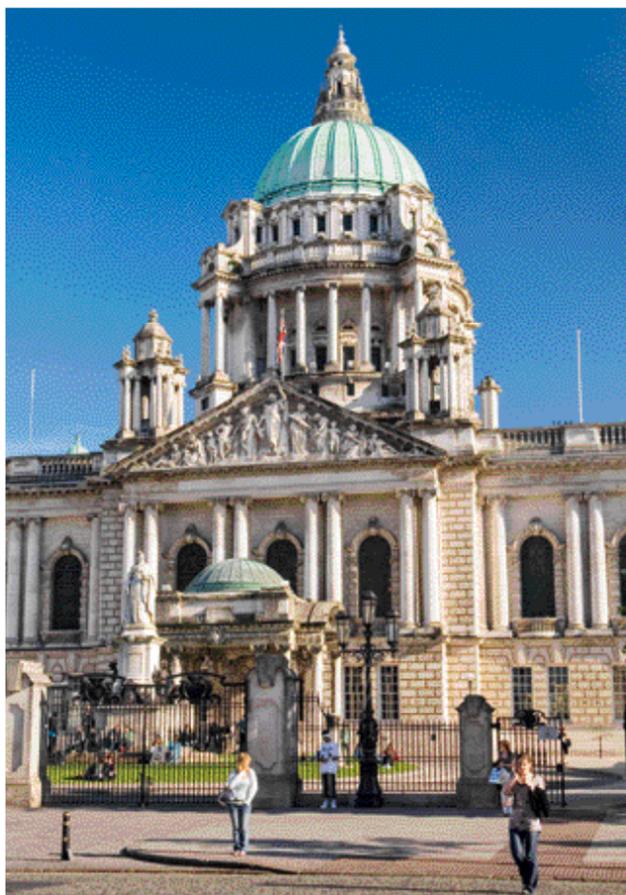
ground, bringing together young people from different, often clashing, communities. Present day Belfast is a city on a cusp, reinventing itself as a cool hub of talent; pushing to the forefront the creative performance scene it has always nurtured, through dedicated music festivals, sleek performance venues, regular gig nights and music centres for young people.

SOUND OF BELFAST

I'm in town during the week-long Sound of Belfast music festival—an annual event that features gigs around the city, music exhibitions, and gives a platform to up and coming young musicians. The vibe here is particularly lively: packed venues like the Oh Yeah Music Centre reverberate with guitar riffs and drum solos; local bars host live acts; and new talent is all around. At the Big Music Project competition at the MAC, teenagers and angst-ridden 21-year olds pull out punchy guitar riffs and soulful acoustic solos on stage, in front of a live audience and record label scouts from across the United Kingdom.

On a Friday night, I stumble across graffiti-plastered walls in the buzzy Commercial Court area. While in cities around the world, graffiti is usually irreverent and anti-establishment, in

Clockwise from left: The Belfast City Hall, one of the finest classical Renaissance buildings in the city; Titanic wall murals at the entrance to The Duke of York pub; The Duke of York Commercial Court; street graffiti in Belfast.



SOMEWHERE ALONG THE TOUR, I WAS HIT BY A WAVE OF NOSTALGIA, AS I STOOD AT 'THE HOLLOW'—THE LOCATION VAN SINGS ABOUT IN HIS MOST FAMOUS HIT *BROWN EYED GIRL*

Belfast, it's all about the music. Grand colourful murals feature iconic Irish personalities. I make a game of spotting my personal favourites—Rory Gallagher, Van Morrison, and actor Liam Neeson.

This street in Cathedral Quarter is undoubtedly one of the city's trendiest enclaves. A hip, young crowd spills out onto the streets post dinner, looking for a drink and some craic (Irish fun). I have to jostle my way into a lively local haunt, The Duke of York. A plaque on the white-washed wall simply declares, 'Snow Patrol first gigged here.' The city boys frequent the bar regularly, and have set up the Oh Yeah Music Centre in an abandoned whiskey warehouse just a few metres away.

IRISH NOTES

Set up in 2007, the Oh Yeah Music Centre offers rehearsal rooms, a performance space, regular music workshops, courses and exhibitions. They also sell second-hand vinyl records and memorabilia from Belfast's punk rock age, including Gary Moore's guitar and autographed photos of Van Morrison.

Belfast's best-known music icon, Van Morrison was born here in 1945. Fourteen years ago, as a sappy teenager, I'd endlessly loop his most popular hit *Brown Eyed Girl*. As the years progressed and my musical sensibilities evolved, Gloria by Morrison-led garage rock outfit Them featured higher on my playlist. More than a decade later, I found myself following the footsteps of Van Morrison's youth. The Van Morrison walking trail titled *Mystic of the East* leads fans through the East Belfast of Van's early years and an area that deeply influenced his work. Locations that were special to him frequently made their way into his lyrics—Hyndford Street, where he grew up, for instance; or Elm Grove Primary School.

ON VAN'S TRAIL

The self-guided, 3.5-kilometre route goes through many such locations; with the use of QR codes, fans can download extracts of songs that feature these areas. Walk down the gorgeous tree-lined Cypress Avenue, bordered by grand houses; step in to the beautiful St Donard's Church, where

six church bells chime every Sunday evening; and spend an afternoon at the expansive Orange field Park, full of Elm trees, fat squirrels, and an amazing range of birds.

Somewhere along the tour, I was hit by a wave of nostalgia, as I stood at 'The Hollow'—the location Van sings about in his most famous hit *Brown Eyed Girl*. It's nothing mind blowing—a little creek winding down through overgrown greenery, surrounded by tall electricity pylons. But standing in this nondescript little hideaway in Belfast, listening to snatches of the song play on a speakerphone, I was instantly transported back to days of endless looping on my walkman. I had stepped into a Van Morrison classic, and it was surreal.

On my last evening in Belfast, I'm at the popular gig venue Mandela Hall. The underground performance space is dark, bathed in a faint red glow from the stage, and bursting with stereotypical black leather clad, goateed, longhaired rocker dudes. It seems like all of Belfast has come out to watch local rock sensation from the 90's, Therapy, headline the finale of the Sound of Belfast festival. It's been a while since I've seen a moshpit form so quickly. After repeated chants of 'Therapy, therapy', the band takes the stage, almost an hour late. Instantly, the atmosphere is electric. Conversation ceases, and all focus in on the stage. This is Belfast. Every single person in the nearly 1,000-strong audience sings along. +

T+L Guide

Getting There

From Delhi and Mumbai, fly to Belfast via London with British Airways.

DO

Oh Yeah Music Bus Tour:

Drive around iconic spots that defined Belfast's music scene—from the Ulster Hall, to East Belfast, and the Waterfront. +44-28/9031-0845; ohyeahbelfast.com

Mystic of the East: Follow the Van Morrison trail through East Belfast locations. vanmorrison.com

Sound of Belfast: The week-long annual music festival features live gigs and competitions and lends a lively air to Belfast. soundofbelfast.com

SEE

Ulster Hall: Watch a concert at the grand hall that's hosted legendary bands such as The Rolling Stones, The Who, and Led Zeppelin. Bedford Street; 44-28/9033-4400

Oh Yeah Music Centre: Regular gigs are hosted here. 15-21 Gordon Street; 44-28/9031-0845; ohyeahbelfast.com

Mandela Hall: The 1000-capacity venue hosts regular gigs and events. mandelahall.com. 77-79 University Road

EAT

Duke of York: One of Belfast's liveliest pubs and a popular local haunt. 7-11 Commercial Court; dukeofyorkbelfast.com

OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DAVID LYONS/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE; DAVID CORDNER/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE; J ORR/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE; KEVIN GEORGE/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE