

## Vic High sets Motown jumpin'

Michael D. Reid, Times Colonist

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When Victoria High School music teacher Eric Emde asked Barbara Hager if she would consider chaperoning her daughter Sarah, then 17, and her bandmates on a trip to Toronto and Detroit two years ago, Hager had no idea what a life-changing experience it would be.

A born storyteller, Hager couldn't resist taking her new digital video camera. Since the Hot Docs film festival was on in Toronto at the same time the Vic High R&B Band would be performing there, she planned on combining business and pleasure.

"From the minute the kids got on the bus, I just had this feeling there would be something special about it," recalled Hager, an Edmonton-born writer who moved to Victoria in the 1990s and is now involved in television production. She also managed bands in Seattle and worked for RCA Records before leaving the music industry to work as an arts administrator in New York.

The trip to Motown's birthplace was more than special. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for several gifted teenage musicians with a passion for rhythm and blues. As unlikely as it seems, they would be mentored by **Martha Reeves**, the Motown legend of Martha and the Vandellas (*Heat Wave*, *Dancing in the Street*).

Inspired by what she saw, Hager decided to chronicle the developing bond between the young Victoria high school musicians and the Motown superstar. The result is *Sounds Like Motown*, a one-hour documentary that airs on Bravo! today at 5 p.m [PST].

A captivating collection of interviews, rehearsals and climactic concert footage bridged by colourful graphics and musical punctuation, *Sounds Like Motown* relives the magical relationship among the band's musical director, his students and their sassy Motown mentor.

Featuring Motown classics like *Heat Wave*, *Dancing in the Streets*, *Quicksand* and *What's Going On*, the film trips down memory lane and colourfully recaps how Reeves accepted Emde's invitation to meet his students during their pilgrimage to Detroit to perform at Northwestern High School. The tension is as palpable as the jaw-dropping talents of the 15- to 19-year-olds -- "my babies," Reeves calls them -- once their idol embraces them in Detroit, where the students also visited the Motown Historical Museum.

Two months later, Reeves, then 63, accepted their invitation to come to Victoria. She conducted a Motown workshop, shared career memories and joined them onstage at the Central Bar and Grill.

*Sounds Like Motown* echoes the youths' hopes and dreams, showcases their talent and features footage of Reeves jamming with her protégés after inviting them to perform with her when she headlined the 2006 Victoria International Jazz Festival at the Royal Theatre.

The film's subjects include vocalists Jena Gogo, Hilary Beckett, Claire Doyle and Kris North (a Marvin Gaye soundalike), guitarist Spencer Kendall and saxophonist Sean Rycroft.

It's fascinating to watch how the whitebread Vic High students, fearing they would be viewed as a "bunch of posers from Canada," gained the respect of skeptical African-American counterparts in Motor City after confidently belting out Motown hits. Succumbing to the Canadians' infectious energy, the Detroit youths impulsively danced up a storm.

"Seeing those two different groups of teenagers bonding through music in that couple of hours was magical," said Hager, recalling a moment matched by the arrival of Reeves. "When Martha walked into the room, it was electric."

The film's most riveting sequence is an organic depiction of the creative process in which Reeves's musical director, Alonza McKenzie, pre-rehearses the nervous students, who were used to singing other arrangements of her hits in different keys.

The film also subtly conveys a message about the importance of school music programs.

Ironically, lamented Hager, Northwestern High School just had its music program cut, although the choir survived.

"There are some kids who probably wouldn't make it through Grade 12 without the music program," sighed Hager. "It keeps them focused."

She considers herself lucky to have had such access because she was known as a "band parent."

With a laugh, she admitted she wasn't even sure if she dared even ask Reeves any questions at first.

"She was probably wondering, 'Why is that mother running around with that camera?'"

The Motown legend has since given the film a thumbs-up, said Hager, whose other credits include the documentary *From Bella Coola to Berlin* and the aboriginal arts and culture TV series *The New Canoe*.

"She basically loved it. She wants to see Motown profiled."

Hager hopes to release a feature-length version, tentatively titled *Motown High*, at film festivals and on DVD.

Meanwhile, Vic High students won't have to wait until 5 p.m. to watch the documentary that sings the praises of its renowned music program. A screening for the student body is taking place in the school auditorium this afternoon.

As for Hager, she'll be uncorking a bottle of champagne during the Bravo! broadcast. "It's time to celebrate. This has been two years of my life."