

Motown High quartet in return pilgrimage

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Published: Monday, April 07, 2008

They're b-a-a-c-k! Almost three years to the day after they first met Martha Reeves, the director and three of the stars of her Victoria-made documentary were on a Motown high last week during a "homecoming" with the legendary soul-shaker in the Motor City.

"It feels like stepping back in time being back with the same people, for the same reason," said Hilary Beckett, who with fellow Vic High R&B Band vocalists Jena Gogo and Claire Doyle and director Barbara Hager experienced déjà vu in Detroit.

They returned for stateside screenings of Motown High, a.k.a. Sounds Like Motown. Hager's documentary recounts a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to the birthplace of Motown by several Vic High music students and their subsequent musical mentorship by Reeves, best known for her Motown megahits Heat Wave and Dancing in the Street.



The director and three stars of Motown High reconnected with Motown diva and Detroit city councillor Martha Reeves, left, and revisited the Motown Museum, where the photo of the Vic High R&B Band was taken in 2005.

Joe Traver, Reuters; Arrow Productions

Although the film made its official U.S. premiere Saturday at the Garden State Film Festival in Asbury Park, N.J., students at Detroit's Northwestern High School, where the Victoria students performed in 2005, got a sneak preview Friday.

"I felt it was really important to show it in Detroit first," Hager said over the phone. She and her film's musical stars had just dined with Reeves at a chic Italian restaurant and were on a walkabout eating gourmet ice cream.

Reeves, 67, took time out from her hectic schedule as a musician and Detroit city councillor to hang out with them. "I was there again when I watched the movie," the Motown diva said between nibbles of Amaretto cherry with mint chocolate and butter pecan ice cream. "The enthusiasm and musicianship and wonderful experiences all came back."

She said she felt proud of her protégés and honoured they chose her to be a part of their lives. "We're good friends now," she declared. "We've got a kinship and love of music, so we're partners forever." Her dream, she said, is to get everyone to love the music as much as she and her Motown contemporaries do. "This is about different generations coming together. It's never really happened before."

Hager was gratified her film had such an impact on Northwestern. "The choir teacher, Connie Malabed, had one of her classes watch it and then gave them a quiz," she said.

The Motown High delegation's itinerary included a return visit to the Motown Historical Museum. They also reconnected with Alonza McKenzie, Reeves's musical director who runs a program for inner-city youth called the Be Bop Society. They caught up with McKenzie at a benefit concert to help Detroit athletes get to the Olympics. "There's so much civic-mindedness here," Hager observed. "Musicians supporting the athletes!"

They also visited an "unbelievable" highlight -- the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History. Hoping for an official Motown endorsement, Hager admits she was nervous about meeting the director of the Motown Museum, since she's the grand-niece of Motown founder Berry Gordy. "It's scary because she's connected to Motown royalty but she seemed enthusiastic."

Gogo had another reason to feel delirious in Detroit. She had just spent a week in New York, where she reunited with Irina Pantaeva, the Siberian supermodel and humanitarian she met and became fast friends with at this year's Victoria Film Festival. Pantaeva took the young musician out on the town and introduced her to contacts at Manhattan's prestigious Ford modelling agency. "It was unreal," Gogo recalled. "Irina's a blast. Besides being so fabulous, she's so giving. "Pantaeva introduced Gogo to her husband and son and took her to the glitzy New York premiere of the new Demi Moore jewel heist flick *Flawless*. They also had their photos taken together on the red carpet.

Gogo was also photographed at Ford's and interviewed by heads of the agency's "women's and celebrity" departments. "They said they were pleased with me," said Gogo, who had never considered modelling as a career. She hinted a fashion trip to Japan was an option but said she isn't going to rush into anything. "I'm taking it step by step. It's tempting to jump onboard but you have to think things through."

Meanwhile, Hager hopes buzz generated for *Motown High* in Detroit, where she also shot footage for "DVD extras," will help land an offshore broadcast deal. "It usually takes about six to eight months," said Hager, whose film was being pitched as she spoke by sales agents gearing up for MIPTV, the international conference for buyers and producers of small screen product being held in Cannes this week.