

FOR TODAY'S schoolchildren, how would the ascent of Barack Obama to the presidency really resonate?

Obviously, everyone would mark this as a most historic occasion, the first time a man of color had achieved the highest leadership post in the land. But would young people be able to put this landmark into true, historic context and cause for celebration, contemplating the depths of discrimination and the many battles for civil rights that were waged for this day of justice and equality to finally prevail?

In Philadelphia, the answer is, "Yes, we can, can, yes we can," thanks to "Get It From the Drums," a unique, multi-media book and CD package put together by local author Wynne Alexander.

Used in about 60 Philadelphia public junior high and high schools, the package makes it a mission to "Wake Up Everybody" to the history and growth of the civil-rights movement and such other grass-roots activist causes as feminism, environmentalism and the anti-war movement.

And it does so, intriguingly, by connecting the causes to protest soul, rock and folk music. More specifically, to enlightening songs from artists like Marvin Gaye ("What's Going On"), Janis Ian ("Society's Child"), Nina Simone ("Mississippi Goddam") and James Brown ("Say It Loud — I'm Black and I'm Proud") that rallied the downtrodden and rattled the establishment.

"So many students find the history of the civil-rights movement to be 'old-head' stories," noted Dennis Creedon, chief of the School District of Philadelphia's Office of Creative and Performing Arts, who commissioned Alexander to write and package the mixed-media project. "But when you contextualize the movement through the music of the times — much of which they've never heard — it brings the curriculum to life. They realize these were real struggles with real people who gave their lives to gain their civil rights."

The book and disc are used, said Creedon, "in eighth-grade social-studies classes, in high-school American history classes as part of constitutional-rights discussions and also in music-composition classes."

Wading in

Starting with its title and cover art, the book reminds us that music has been used as a positive force for protest and empowerment since the Revolutionary days that created these United States, when rebel Colonists



**MULTI-MEDIA
BOOK/CD
PACKAGE PUTS
PRESIDENTIAL
RACE IN CONTEXT
FOR PHILLY KIDS**

The rights PERSPECTIVE

Wynne Alexander, a longtime staffer at WDAS radio, used music to help teach the history of civil rights and other movements.

marched into combat to the beat of a drum.

During the era of slavery, run-aways took aid and comfort from gospel songs such as "Wade in the Water" and "Follow the Drinking Gourd" that were actually guarded messages on how to avoid capture and find the way north (in the latter, by looking for the Big Dipper in the night sky).

In her breezy-reading, fact-filled book, Alexander suggests that the use of music as a tool for populist protest and change skyrocketed in the 1960s and '70s — an era she witnessed from a unique insider's perspective.

Alexander's grandfather, Max Leon, owned WDAS-AM and EM radio; her father, Bob Klein, was general manager of the stations.

"DAS-AM was the loudest and proudest voice of the African-American community, with a signal that came in especially well in North Philadelphia. Before it likewise aligned with that culture, WDAS-FM functioned in the late 1960s as Philadelphia's first full-time underground rock music station, with long-haired hippie DJs making hits of protest songs such as the Chambers Brothers' "Time Has Come Today," also featured in Alexander's book and disc compilation.

While her first love was music (which she still pursues, crafting piano-based songs with symphonic ambitions), Alexander jumped in to the trenches in 1974. Just shy of 19, she joined the DAS news staff as an anchor and reporter (heavy on the investigative beat), roles she'd maintain for a decade as the only woman and one of just two Caucasians on the team.

"We had a very vibrant news department, with seven full-time reporters, numerous stringers and two networks at our disposal."

GET IT FROM THE DRUMS

A collection of photos and recordings of the music of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. by Wynne Alexander



ALEXANDRO A. ALVAREZ / Staff photographer

Councilwoman Alvarez Blackwell (left) helps honor Alexander in City Council on Oct. 30. Her book is at left.

she recalled. "But we couldn't really 'rip and read' wire copy, because the news services weren't covering black events, didn't recognize a black power structure.

"So people like [the] Rev. Leon Sullivan, Dr. [Martin Luther] King and Judge Raymond Pace Alexander [no relation] had to be met and put on the air as newsmakers. And both reporters and DJs regularly punctuated the news copy with music, using songs like the Isley Brothers' "Fight the Power" or Stevie Wonder's "Past Time Paradise" as a commentary on something that we'd reported that was racially backwards and disgusting."

Finding the beat

In 2004, when Creedon persuaded Alexander to take on "Get It From the Drums," she said she "had to work backwards." Her first mission was to gain rights to songs so she could print full lyrics in the book and press up original artist performances on a special compilation CD teachers play in the classroom.

"I started with a wishlist of 35 to 40 of my fa-

vorite songs that I knew that were crucial then," said Alexander. Using old connections and her considerable gull-tripping skills, she reminded contacts that "for years, the industry has been bemoaning the lack of music education in the schools."

In the end, she persuaded major labels such as EMI and Warner Brothers, and heirs to the estates of Gaye, John Lennon ("Imagine") and others to ante up multiple tunes for free — "which was unprecedented" — then built her text and time line around those hits.

She also got noted composers and producers such as Philadelphia International Records' principal Kenneth Gamble, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Janis Ian and Pete Seeger to sit still for interviews, included in the textbook, about the times and circumstances in which their protest songs came together.

Jan's controversial song about an ill-fated interracial romance, "Society's Child," came out the same year the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a Virginia law barring co-habitation of interracial couples. Mere coincidence?

Seeger and Sainte-Marie suffered government blacklisting, having been labeled as "communist" or "socialist" (sound familiar?) for speaking their minds in song.

"It's important," said Creedon, "that students see how much these artists really put themselves on the line. Also, that they realize protest is a democratic American right. Not that we want to agitate negatively, but we want to believe in a better opportunity for all."

Another sign the times they are a-changing: Philadelphia City Council hauled Wynne Alexander into chambers last Thursday ... to give her a special commendation.

Introduced by Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell, the document honored Alexander's "impressive career as a journalist, author, composer, civil rights activist and international recording star."

Most especially, it praised her for "the accomplishments of her ground-breaking new book," which school-curriculum planners in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere are studying with interest.

"In my acceptance, I ended my remarks with, 'Go Barack,'" Alexander shared with a laugh. "Then everyone came up to shake my hand. The Republican councilmen were actually among the most enthusiastic."

Yep, it's really looking like the start of a brand-new day. Go, Wynne. ★

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On discs & online, singers doth protest just enough

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New protest-minded musical recordings aiming to make this a better world are grabbing our attention this election day.

OBAMA'S TEAM: Hidden Beach Records is already touting "Yes We Can: Voices of a Grassroots

Movement" (A-) as a Grammy contender. An unprecedented array of artists from the worlds of rock, soul, hip-hop, blues, gospel, folk and country have contributed songs of patriotic hope and awareness to this project funded by the Obama/Biden campaign.

It's as much a souvenir of this historic election as it is a fund-and-consciousness-raiser. The

most effective cuts — like John Mayer's "Waiting on the World to Change" — mix the singer's challenges with snippets of speeches from Sen. Obama and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that resonate with the same message: With the right ideas and spirit, we can make a better life for everyone.

Also jumping out for me were Lionel Richie's gospel-choir-fu-

eled original, "Eternity," John Legend's intimate solo voice and piano performance of U2's "Pride, In the Name of Love," and the hip-hop-flavored "Promise Land" from Malik Yusef, Kanye West and Maroon 5's Adam Levine. Other contributors include

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