

History band hits all the right notes



Steve Missal, a Somerset resident as well as a former drummer for Billy Idol and Ted Nugent, is the front man and drummer for American Stories Through Song.

(STAFF PHOTOS: BOB BIELK)

Presentation of story and song engaging to students, teachers

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EDUCATION WRITER

TOMS RIVER — A U.S. president made a presentation Wednesday to about 1,000 area fifth-graders at the Ritacco Center.

The president apologized for not bringing his wife — she was out shopping, and “she loves shoes.” He mentioned how great it was to be back in New Jersey. Because state voters did not choose him, the president figured he should talk to legislators in Trenton.

The president? None other than Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln’s appearance was part of Swedesboro-based American Institute for History Education’s history concert at the center on Old Freehold Road. The band American Stories Through Song played its mostly original creations, while two screens displayed music videos related to each song.

“History can be fun and fabulous,” Steve Missal told the assembled pupils from Manchester, Seaside Heights and Toms River elementary schools.

Missal, a Somerset resident as well as a former drummer for Billy Idol and Ted Nugent, is the front man and drummer for American Stories Through Song, a self-described “history band” sponsored by the American Institute for History Education. Missal is also the social studies and

BEHIND THE NEWS

Learning history through music is not a new concept. In 1976, as America was celebrating the bicentennial, ABC-TV broadcast offshoot episodes of “Schoolhouse Rock!” about history. Short cartoons addressed topics such as the Declaration of Independence and women’s rights, put to song. At the University of Pittsburgh’s Center for American Music, the Voices Across Time project was created to help teachers use songs to supplement lessons not only in social studies, but in language arts and music.

character education supervisor for the Plainfield school district.

“We read books about history and derive songs from them,” said Richard Lindsey of Hastings, N.Y. “The songs suggest themselves.”

“We discover history and bring it to kids,” Missal said.

Besides Lindsey and Missal, American Stories Through Song consists of Kinny Landrum of



Above: Fifth-graders from Susan Autenrieth’s class at Silver Bay Elementary School perform Wednesday with the group American Stories Through Song at the Ritacco Center. Left: “Abraham Lincoln” was part of Swedesboro-based American Institute for History Education’s history concert.



Sleepy Hollow, N.Y. — who, with Missal, wrote the majority of songs — and the Rev. Stefanie Minatee of Union, a vocal music teacher at Plainfield High School. Minatee also wrote and sings songs about the civil rights movement for the band.

“The complete story of the civil rights era has not been told. I’m hoping to bring my gifts (to the band), and bring light to that period,” Minatee said.

In addition to that period, American Stories also covered the role of Benedict Arnold during the American Revolution, Theodore Roosevelt and related topics such as the sinking of the USS Maine and manifest destiny, the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, and Elvis Presley. A group of Silver Bay Elementary School students

helped with singing about the Underground Railroad.

“It’s all a part of history,” Landrum said.

A CD of the songs performed and a lesson book are available to teachers as a supplement to the presentation. The lesson book provides background to the songs, in addition to suggested student activities. A second CD with nine new songs is forthcoming.

The Toms River Regional school district received a three-year, \$997,307 grant to improve results as well as to increase rigor in American history courses as part of the James Madison Liberty Fellowship, created by the American Institute for History Education. Part of the program involves creating traditional, though innovative curricula.

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“This (American Stories Through Song) is a part of that grant,” said Michael O’Connell, American Institute’s project director liaison.

“They (the band) did a program for us last June at a summer institute, and the teachers present felt that the experience should be extended to all fifth-graders. We brought them to Toms River to do just that,” O’Connell said.

“This multimedia presentation of story and song actively engages students and teachers to appreciate not only the role of music as a primary source in teaching national and state standards, but also provides a unique way to celebrate our rich cultural origins, demonstrating the power and strength in our nation’s diversity,” Missal notes on his Web site.

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ON THE WEB: Visit www.app.com/tomsriver and click on this story for links to Steve Missal and the American Institute for History Education.