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REVIEW

What: Martha Reeves with the Vic High
R & B Band and The Midnights

Where: Royal Theatre

When: Friday June 23, 8 p.m.

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One of Victoria's most remarkable music projects is an unlikely collaboration between a Motown star and a local high school.

Martha Reeves's appearance at JazzFest International on Friday night marks a historical high point for the Vic High R & B Band. The group, led by ambitious music teacher Eric Emde, linked up with the Detroit star last year, culminating in a show at the Central Bar and Grill.

This time the collaboration was bigger and better, with Reeves and her neo-Vandellas (the Vic High R & B Band) joining forces at the grand old Royal Theatre.

Now almost 65, Reeves was in reasonably good voice and extremely high spirits, sashaying in a sequined white gown and sporting jumbo earrings shaped like musical notes.

What was most amazing, however, is how well these high school musicians held their own in such a setting (they were also joined by their professional mentor band, The Midnights). Buoyed by a cheering crowd, no doubt stacked with family and friends, the teens proved that even white-bread Victoria can produce would-be Motowners so well-rehearsed and convincing, even Berry Gordy might do a double take.

The show started off with a few Midnights/Vic High R & B tunes, including a convincing take on Stevie Wonder's Superstitious, sung well by keyboardist Duncan Meiklejohn. Then Reeves walked on to take over lead vocal duties, declaring: "I'm so proud to be working with these youngsters and this wonderful band."

The expected trip down memory lane ensued, with baby boomers responding enthusiastically to chestnuts both minor (Come and Get These Memories) and huge (Jimmy Mack, Heatwave, Nowhere to Run and Dancing in the Streets).

At this stage, Reeves voice has a metallic, trebly gloss that may have surprised those who remember her easy, sultry tone from the old recordings. Her singing style has become stylized and overwrought, with a tight vibrato. This didn't serve her particularly well on a rather wonky interpretation of Ellington's Mood Indigo (which benefited from a fine Gene Hardy saxophone solo) or Heatwave.

Nonetheless, Reeves still had plenty to offer. Notable offerings included a gossamer interpretation of God Bless the Child, Jackie Wilson's Higher and Higher (a literal interpretation with oodles of upper register pole-vaults) and the still dangerous-sounding Nowhere to Run. The best was saved for last. Reeves and

her young collaborators made Dancing in the Street an ecstatic house-party, with concert-goers boogying in the aisles.

One would never know the Vic High teens had only a day or two to rehearse with Reeves, who flew in from Detroit mid-week. An ever-changing chorus of female back-up singers revealed tight harmonies and sharply rehearsed dance moves that would have done The Supremes proud. Young soloists -- guitarists, trumpeters and a precociously talented sax player -- acquitted themselves with professional aplomb.

Young lead singers belted out classics like Marvin Gaye's What's Going On and Love Train with finesse and more than a soupçon of soul.

Obviously, the word that Vic High has become Motown North has reached other parts of Canada. A film crew from the Bravo channel filmed the show, compiling footage for a future television documentary.

In a pop culture universe peppered by angry hip-hop and irony-laden indy rock, it was refreshing to watch these teens. Motown was always famous for its class and utmost professionalism, and the hard-working Vic High crew have obviously taken both qualities to heart. Equally impressive was Reeves's generous and supportive approach, which -- combined with careful coaching from Victoria teachers and musicians -- has reaped tremendous results.

"These babies have done it!" declared Reeves at one point. And so they have.

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