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CIVIL RIGHTS MUSICAL LETS 'FREEDOM' SING

DAVID HINCKLEY

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Joe Coleman swears he doesn't know how it happened. All he did was get on the phone to talk about writing a song to honor the 93rd birthday of social pioneer and civil rights activist Dr. Dorothy Height and the next thing he knew, he was planning a musical encompassing the whole 20th-century struggle for freedom and equality.

"In 45 minutes," he says, "we went from a song to a presentation to skits to a full musical."

Incidentally, Coleman, the lead singer with a Platters group, had never written a musical.

But now he has, and "If This Hat Could Talk: A Musical Celebrating the Unsung Heroes of the 20th Century Civil Rights Movement" launches a 10-city tour tonight at the Apollo Theater with shows running through Saturday. Height is expected to attend many of the performances.

Based on Height's book "**Open Wide the Freedom Gates**" and adapted to the stage by George Faison, who won a Tony for choreographing "The Wiz," "This Hat" focuses on women who helped propel the civil rights movement. "There's a void in that part of history," says Coleman. "Many of the women have not received the credit for their work."

Height's life of civil rights activism includes organizing the annual Black Family Reunion Celebration. Along the way, she became a close associate of leaders from Dr. Martin Luther King to A. Philip Randolph.

This show looks at the movement "through her eyes," says Coleman. One of the early production numbers, built around the song "I'm Living in a Negro World," dramatizes the Harlem Renaissance and Height's first exposure to large numbers of "colored people" when she arrived from small-town Pennsylvania to study at NYU.

Because the show is honest about history, it's not all happy stories. But a constant sense of hope is communicated through the music, from ragtime and boogie-woogie through jazz, gospel, pop and rhythm and blues.

"I wanted to include it all, because this is a history of the music, too," says Coleman, who met Height through his wife, Vanessa Weaver Coleman. The Colemans are the executive producers of "This Hat."

"Over time, a lot of our history slips away," Coleman says. "That's why you have kids today who think Malcolm X is a letter on a baseball cap. We want a show that entertains people, but also shows them there is greatness in their lineage."