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Sandy Wilbur, a Woman Who Is Making a Difference

February 18, 2016 by [Deborah Harkins](#)



Sandy Wilbur is a forensic musicologist—a sort of musical private eye. She spends her workdays evaluating whether Composer A has (or hasn't) taken passages of Composer B's copyrighted music. Sometimes she has to make her case in court, as she did most recently on the side of Pharrell Williams and Robin Thicke in the "*Blurred Lines*" v *Marvin Gaye* [case](#). We described the expertise and capacity for painstaking research needed to do this detective work a few years ago, in our [profile](#).

We also offered a glimpse of the creative and joyful part of Sandy's workday—the part where *she* gets to write the music. This is an update on the project she began a few years ago called "Learning History Through Music"—to inform American students, through music, about critical moments in their country's history that still resonate so powerfully today.

It's no secret that American children—and adults—don't know much about history. In 2011, *The Manchester Union/Leader* reported on a *Newsweek* poll of randomly selected adults: "Only 30 percent knew that the Constitution is the supreme law of the land; 43 percent did not know that the first ten amendments constitute the Bill of Rights; and two-thirds could not identify America's

economy as capitalistic or market-based.” Only 62 percent could pass the simple citizenship test given to immigrants, though 90 percent of immigrants pass it.

“I strongly believe that in order for kids to learn history, we’ve got to make it relevant and contemporary and from a kid’s point of view,” Sandy says. “Funny thing is, as a kid I didn’t care about history. It didn’t have any relevance to my life. It was only when I was adult that I realized, ‘Wow, if we’re going to keep this democracy, we’d better understand it and be a part of the process. Music is something kids relate to, and seeing kids in a historical context can help make it relevant. Then discussing how these historical moments resonate today really helps kids understand how important these principles are.”

Sandy’s passion for getting schoolchildren informed about, and proud of, their country’s democracy sprang from an experience she had in her fifties. “I got involved in a political situation that was extraordinarily important to me—preserving nature and wildlife,” she says. “There was going to be mass destruction of wetlands, birds, bats, important wildlife habitat, and wildlife corridors. There were strong beliefs on both sides of the issue. I was opposed to this, but I’d never had a situation where I had to stand up and passionately defend something in a room where some people would consider me their enemy because I did so—never had to talk in front of a group that booed me. I was so dismayed by what I found, and so passionate about opposing it, that I thought, as Churchill once said, ‘So you have enemies? Good. That means you’ve stood up for something, sometime in your life.’

“The more I researched this particular subject, the more I understood about politics, laws, and corporate power. I realized how special interests and corruption are a natural result when the majority of people are not involved in our democratic process. I very quickly realized that our kids (our future leaders) must learn the basics and founding principles of our democratic way of life so that they can be engaged at an early age and be lifelong participants. That is where ‘Learning History Through Music’ came from—my passionate belief that ALL citizens—We the People—need to be engaged in the process for democracy to survive.”

So when a social studies teacher asked Sandy to write a song that would help students learn the Preamble to the Constitution and still be relevant to the rest of the curriculum, she was eager to take on the job. “The Preamble sums up who we are and what we stand for as a country,” she says. “It’s so aspirational, I wanted it to be ingrained in schoolchildren’s minds:

‘We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.’

The anthem she came up with was surprising: In the middle, after the melody framing the Preamble, the song switches to rap. “I knew I wanted a contemporary song—not something old-fashioned, because that’s what the kids would like,” she says.

She was right about that: kids like the song. Many of the kids learn it by finding it on YouTube. So far, it has garnered 391,000 views; been sung at the opening sessions of the Vermont Legislature; sold to parents and teachers for use in hundreds of schools, public and private; and generated feedback like this, on Sandy’s [website](#): “This song is amazing! It helped my [sic] learn the Preamble in about an hour.”

“Everyone wants to do the rap part,” Sandy says. “The girls fight over the fact that the boys get to do it. They learn it just as well.”

Into the rap section Sandy loaded an explanation of how the three branches of our government work; this was not easy to put to a melody. She then hired Leon Pendarvis, co-musical director of the *Saturday Night Live Band*, to arrange the song. She wanted average elementary school kids to do the singing and rap parts, and auditioned over 150 elementary school kids before finding a fifth grade rapper and four third-grade girls to record the song. Having worked extensively with professional children in New York City, Sandy was blown away when she heard these four girls sing. “Their music teacher, Erin Reilly, had been a professional singer, and taught them from first grade how to really sing—at a professional level.”



From left to right: Audrey Anglum, Maddie Greene, Malachi Best, Katie Kelly, and Carrigan Boynton.

That was the beginning of Sandy’s music-history project. In the next two years she created two more stirring anthems, one with sixth-grader Malachi and the girls as fourth graders: “[Four Score and Seven Years Ago](#),” which incorporates part of the Gettysburg Address and teaches about the Civil War, Lincoln, and equality for all Americans; and “[She Still Carries a Torch](#),” about the Statue of Liberty’s welcome of immigrants, sung by the girls as fifth graders. Sandy feels passionately that these historical moments have great relevance today in a country of immigrants facing an ongoing immigrant crisis, a country with ever-widening inequality.

She is searching for other historical moments that have relevance today, and is always happy to hear feedback. In fact, she has received a great deal of feedback from teachers and students alike, some of which informed the videos in both “Four Score” and “She Still Carries a Torch.” Having found both the cinematographer and video editor from Ken Burns’s production company, she created, at teachers’ request, three video versions for these two anthems, one with the kids in the studio interspersed with relevant historical footage; another that is documentary only, with the full sung song so kids can sing along and learn the song; and one with the instrumental version so kids can perform the song while the video is playing simultaneously.

Teachers also asked that she provide a full package for schools to use across the curriculum. Her recently completed 96-page book *Learning History Through Music* fulfills that request. In addition to three sections, each of which contains historical highlights, core-aligned lesson plans for fourth through eighth grades, lyrics and sheet music for the songs, she has included all eight videos and three CDs with both instrumental and sung versions of each anthem.

How can schools use the songs to teach history? They can buy, for a special price of \$59, this entire book /package. Teachers can also buy some of the individual items online. Her dream is to get the backing of a corporate sponsor, so that all at-risk public schools can have the book/package (which they cannot afford even at this very low, below-cost price). Parents or PTA groups can also buy the book/package and donate it to their school of choice. Sandy donated her time, energy, and finances to undertake this project and feels strongly that this is something that would truly benefit both education and our democratic process.

During this election year, Sandy has had many requests from campaign organizations to use “We the People,” including an inquiry from a representative of one of the top-ranked presidential candidates. She turned the requests down, because she wants this song to represent all the people, not just those related to one party, ideology, or political persuasion. However, since it has touched so many people, Sandy would be willing to offer the song free (with her approval; contact info@sandywilburmusic.com for permission) to appropriate educational, nonprofit, and social and broadcast media outlets that share Sandy’s desire to have a better-informed electorate.

WATCH VIDEO OF KIDS IN STUDIO PERFORMING

“WE THE PEOPLE” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIf7uFAKkJc>

“I have learned so much from the teachers and students who have found these materials online and given me feedback,” Sandy says. “The book is the final step. I learned from teachers that they wanted something for the whole school...so the songs can be used by English teachers, social studies and history teachers, principals, whoever . . . not just music teachers. They can show the videos that come with the book, so the students in the whole school can get engaged, learn more about these important subjects, and start dialogs across the curriculum.”

They learn, and the inspirational words stay with them. As anyone who has ever sung a song knows, any message that comes with a melody stays engraved in memory over decades. “That was the idea—to get it ingrained. Kids come to me years later and sing the songs for me,” Sandy acknowledges with pride. “They can’t get it out of their heads.”

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By Deborah Harkins

What IS musical plagiarism? Is a particular number of notes, strung in a certain order, the giveaway? Sandy Wilbur, forensic musicologist, says no; it’s more complicated than that.