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Singing, and Rapping, for Their Rights as Adoptees

By CYNTHIA WOLFE BOYNTON

TWO musicians have written and recorded a song they hope will revive a bill that would open private adoption records. It has languished in the State Legislature for six years.

The song, by [Darryl McDaniels](#) and [Zara H. Phillips](#), is called "I'm Legit," and it mixes the rap of Mr. McDaniels — also known as DMC of the pioneering hip-hop group Run-DMC — with the rock of Ms. Phillips in support of legislation that would give adult adoptees access to their original birth records. Similar legislation is being considered in nine other states.

New Jersey state senators passed the bill in March 2008 on a vote of 31 to 7. If the Assembly does not act on it before the current session ends in January, the measure will be defeated by default, as was the case in 2004 and 2006.

New Jersey is one of 42 states that require a court order to open sealed adoption records. Eight states allow access, including New Hampshire and, most recently, Maine.

"We want this song to educate, to advocate, to take on a life of its own," Mr. McDaniels said during a recent recording session with Ms. Phillips at [Chung King Studios](#) in Manhattan.

Both Mr. McDaniels, who lives in Wayne, and Ms. Phillips, an English singer-songwriter who lives in Montclair, were adopted as infants.

"People who aren't part of the adoption community don't know about the issues, the pain, the emotions that can come from not knowing where you come from," said Mr. McDaniels, 44, who in 2007 won an Emmy Award for the documentary "[DMC: My Adoption Journey](#)."

"Knowing who you are is about health, happiness — a human right," he said.

[State Senator Diane B. Allen](#), a Republican from Burlington County, said New Jersey's existing law is a "discrimination against civil rights." She blames pressure from organizations like the [New Jersey Catholic Conference](#) for the delay in the bill moving forward.

Critics of the bill said a change in the law would essentially break a contract with women who believed their privacy would be protected.

"It's as simple as this: Women who gave up their babies 20, 30 years ago were told that their information would be kept private," said [State Senator Anthony R. Bucco](#), a Morris County Republican. "If we changed

the law now, we would be going back on our word. That's not right."

Mr. Bucco and the New Jersey Catholic Conference have proposed establishing a state registry that — similar to services private agencies already provide — would allow adoptees and birth parents to exchange medical, contact or other information via an intermediary.

"We firmly support medical records being made available to adoptees, but the confidentiality that was assured birth mothers in closed adoptions has to trump adoptees' desire for information, even though we understand that desire," said Patrick R. Brannigan, executive director of the Catholic Conference. "We're not uncompassionate."

But Ms. Phillips, 44, and others who support the bill say the compromise does not provide all they want.

"Growing up in England, I always saw the United States as being so far ahead," Ms. Phillips said, adding that British law has long allowed unlimited access to birth records in adoptions. "But with this, America is really behind. When I heard how backward things are here, all I could think was, 'Are you kidding?'"

Along with the release of the "I'm Legit" single this month will be a music video that includes footage from 2008 adoption rallies in Trenton and Montclair, which both Ms. Phillips and Mr. McDaniels attended.

Their hope is that others who support the New Jersey bill will use the song and video to help advocate for open birth records nationwide.

The two also plan to perform the song in Cleveland this month at the nonprofit [American Adoption Congress](#)'s annual conference. There, Ms. Phillips will also screen "Roots: Unknown," a documentary about adoption she made with the help of her husband, Jonathan Phillips, a filmmaker.

The film won an award as best Home Grown Documentary at the 2008 Garden State Film Festival.

Ms. Phillips also wrote an adoption memoir, "Mother Me," which was published last year by the [British Association for Adoption & Fostering](#).

"I never set out to be an adoption activist, but the more I get letters and feedback from people, the more I realize that I need to keep at it, though it can be really hard," Ms. Phillips said. "I grew up as a pretty messed-up teen, using drugs and alcohol and making a lot of bad choices because of the deep sadness I felt about not knowing where I came from.

"But I feel that if I share my story, I can help other adoptees and adoptive parents dealing with kids who are acting out. I think every adult adoptee owes it to today's kids to share their stories."

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