



# SAMUEL JAMES TELLS THE STORY OF TINY BILL MCGRAW

2020-2021  
AUDIENCE  
GUIDE

## ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE

Tiny Bill, a little Black boy, doesn't like being small. His grandfather takes Tiny Bill under his wing and teaches him - and the audience - about his musical heritage and that size isn't everything, especially if you can make a big sound!

*The Story of Tiny Bill McGraw* is a story with music and song that Maine musician Samuel James wrote, composed, performed, filmed and edited. He wrote it to share his artistry through a virtual form (since we can't gather for performance) as well as to provide more history about and experience of African American music and song for young people. The title of the story - the character's name - comes from another one of his songs.

### IN THIS GUIDE

About the Performance  
Reflection Questions  
What to Know & Activities



Here are some questions to think about as you watch and listen to the story.

- What is the story of Tiny Bill McGraw?
- What instruments are used throughout the musical performance?
- What moments of the performance stick with you? What moments did you enjoy? Why?

### SUPPORTED BY:



# REFLECTION QUESTIONS

An important part of watching and responding to art is to reflect on what you saw, how it made you feel, and what connections it makes to the world. Use these reflection questions after each chapter or at the end of all three.

## Chapter 1

1. What moments of the performance stick with you? What moments did you enjoy? Why?
2. How was Tiny Bill feeling? What was wrong? What did he do about?
3. How does Grampy try to help Tiny Bill? What does he teach in to do? Why?
4. Grampy tells Tiny Bill, “Not too long ago, without any permission... People who looked like use were forced into submission. We were held in bondage against our own volition. And we survived in the worst conditions. And a way we survived to eventual abolition was creating beauty through musical composition.” What historical circumstance is Grampy talking about?
5. When Tiny Bill is having a bad day he talks to his Grampy. Is there someone in your life that you can talk to when thing are challenging or when you have things to celebrate?

## Chapter 2

1. What did Grampy teach Tiny Bill how to play in this chapter?
2. “..we escaped the night through the wind and the rain traveling over dangerous terrain called the Underground Railroad, the miraculous campaign.” What was the Underground Railroad? Why does Grampy call it the Freedom Train?
3. Who is Harriet Tubman? Why didn't white people like her?
4. What big sound is Tiny Bill able to make by the end of Chapter 2? How does he feel about this?
5. The music that starts at 9:45 is a train song. How does it sound like a train?

## Chapter 3

1. Tiny Bill McGraw doesn't like being tiny because he feels like he is different than everyone. His Grampy helps him understand everyone has something unique about them and all that uniqueness is what makes our world interesting. Our world would be so boring if everyone was the same, thank goodness we are all different. What makes you unique?
2. What are the different sounds that Grampy can play on the guitars? How does he describe some of the different types of playing? How do they sound different?
3. By the end of the story, Tiny Bill learns about how he can use music to make a big sound. What are other ways you can make a big sound?



# WHAT TO KNOW & ACTIVITIES

This section includes more information about the art form, the artist, and its themes. Each topic also comes with activity ideas to dig deeper or engage more after watching the performance.

## WHO IS SAMUEL JAMES?

Samuel James is a Maine musician, a singer, a songwriter and a storyteller. With a voice of grit and gravel, roots musician James sings with an authenticity lost in time. A modern guitar master, James' skill has a depth and range that seems impossible for a man with only two hands. An award-winning songwriter, one of the world's most innovative guitar players, and a Moth-featured storyteller, James brings all of this to his amazing stage show. A live performance by Samuel James is part theater concert, part stomping-on-the-porch dance party and part stand-up comedy. He was born the last in a long line of performers including dancers, story tellers, choir singers, jazz pianists, and porch-stomping guitar thumpers dating back to the 1800s.

Get to know him online at: <http://www.therealsamueljames.com/>



## ACTIVITY: ME, A PLAYLIST

Samuel shared a few of his favorite songs below. The combination of all these songs paint a musical portrait of who he is. Pick 5 songs that paint a musical portrait of who you are. Why did you pick these songs and how do they represent you at this moment? You can discuss the music, the beat, the lyrics, the feeling it gives you, a moment in your life that it connects to.

### Samuel James's Playlist

- [Bill Withers - Harlem-Cold Baloney](#)
- [Tobe Nwigwe - Try Jesus](#)
- [Fugees - Fu-Gee-La](#)
- [Dawn Penn - No, No, No](#)
- [Sade - No Ordinary Love](#)

## WHAT INSTRUMENTS ARE IN THE PERFORMANCE?

Grampy and Tiny Bill uses a number of different instruments throughout the story. Hand claps, finger snaps, harmonica, bango, acoustic guitar, resonator guitar, and piano.

**Hand claps and finger snaps:** The body has been used as a musical instrument for thousand of years. African American music incorporates these because when Black Americans were enslaved it was at times illegal for them to own instruments or play music. Using the body as an instrument was resourceful way to be able to get around these rules.

**Harmonica:** The harmonica is a wind reed instrument. It makes sound when air is blown or sucked through the holes.

**Bango:** The bango is an instrument from Africa. The body of the instrument was first made from a gourd and today is made from a small drum. There is a longer neck that comes off of the body that is strung with strings. It is played by strumming or plucking the strings with one hand and pressing down on the strings at the neck with the other.

**Guitar:** Guitars a very popular stringed instruments, played similarly to the banjo. Historians believe that guitars might have originated in ancient Egypt. From there it moved to northern African and the area now known as Spain, and then beyond.

**Resonator Guitar:** When Grampy teachers Tiny Bill about Delta and Foothill skills he is playing a resonator guitar. These guitars were designed differently than an acoustic guitar so that their sound was louder and could be heard over brass and percussion instruments. You can see that James is wearing a metal tube over one of his fingers on this left hand. This is called a guitar slide and it allows him to change the vibration and pitch of the strings.

**Piano:** A piano makes noise the black and white keys are pushed down. Inside the piano this pushes a small padded hammer up to hit a string. Each key hits a string that is a different length and thickness and therefore is a different note. Most pianos have 88 keys and 220 strings. As Grampy mentions, in African American history the piano is often associated with church. A piano was hard to move and expensive so it was not something everyone had access to - instead they were in shared community spaces where people would gather to play and sing.

## ACTIVITY: MAKE YOUR OWN INSTRUMENTS

- Make a guitar with a cardboard box and rubber bands of different thicknesses or stretched to different amounts to create different sounds. Place a pencil underneath all the rubber bands on one end, similar to the bridge on a guitar.
- Create drums by stretching a piece of fabric, leather, or paper over the top of an empty can and tap it to create percussion instrument. Use different sized cans, different materials as covers, or by stretching the material over the top to create different sounds.
- Create shakers using two paper cups taped together at the wide ends. Fill them with beans, rice, or other small objects. Experiment with different amounts to create different sounds.
- Check out National Association for Music Educators: <https://nafme.org/diy-instruments-ideas-and-lesson-plan-examples-for-teachers-on-a-budget/>

What instrument did you create? What instrument family does it belong in? Why? How does your instrument make different sounds? How did you have to problem solve and be creative when creating your own instrument?

## WHAT IS AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC AND SONG?

Black people in American are responsible for many deep and influential musical traditions and genres. Samuel James builds on the tradition of Black and other blues and folk musicians – both nationally and within his own family.

### THE BLUES

The blues is a genre of music that is characterized by a style of rhythm, lyric, and a few instruments including the banjo, guitar and harmonica. However, like all genres of music it shares a lot of history with and influence on other genres of music. Historians believe that the blues originated in the American South influenced by “field hollers” (a way that enslaved Black people communicated in the plantation fields). This music and song played by Black men and sung by Black women became more widespread and popular in the early 1900s. Some of the first famous blues musicians include Blind Lemon Jefferson and Mississippi John Hurt. During the Great Migration (1914 – 1918) when many African Americans left the south and moved north, the blues moved with them. The blues influenced rock music and remains an important genre of music today.

#### Samuel’s Picks of Influential African American Music in the Blues/Folk Genre

- [Mississippi Fred McDowell – Shake ‘Em On Down](#)
- [Jessie Mae Hemphill – Train, Train...](#)
- [Ray Charles Play the Slow Blues in Madrid](#)
- [Nat King Cole – Tea for Two](#)
- [Etta James – Something’s Gotta Give](#)
- [Sister Rosetta Tharpe – Didn’t it Rain?](#)

**Here are a few resources that provide historical and cultural information on African American Music.**

[“African American Song.” The Library of Congress,](#)

[“Musical Crossroads: African American Influence on American Music.” Smithsonian Music, 15 Dec. 2018](#)

[“Roots of African American Music.” Smithsonian Music](#)

[“Celebrating Black Music Month.” National Museum of African American History and Culture, 1 June 2020](#)

### ACTIVITY: FREEZE DANCE

Cue up and play different excerpts from different songs and dance/move to match the tempo, pitch or dynamic of the music. Before you move think about how you would move your body differently to show each of these. This is also a good way to practice opposites. Have them dance until the music stops and then freeze. Repeat with the next song.



## ACTIVITY: COMPARE AND CONTRAST USING MUSICAL ADJECTIVES

Compare and contrast two songs in the playlist. Use the musical elements vocabulary below to talk about them.

- **Timbre:** Tone quality (bright, dark, brassy, reedy, harsh, noisy, thin, buzzy, pure, raspy, shrill, mellow, strained)
- **Pitch:** High or low sounds
- **Texture:** Different sounds (or instruments)
- **Tempo:** Fast or slow. Does this change throughout the piece?
- **Dynamics:** Loud or quiet. Do these change slowly or quickly?

## WHAT IS A TRAIN SONG?

At the end of Chapter 3 Grampy plays a train song. A train song is a tradition of songs that sound like a passing train. They start slow and soft, speed up and get louder, and then fade away – like a train passing by.

The train has a lot of historical significance in American history starting in the 1830s. Much of it was built by enslaved Black people who were not paid at all and Chinese and Irish immigrants who were paid very little. The work was incredibly hard and dangerous. It created a great amount of wealth for the white men who pushed for it to be created. It was built on land that was stolen by the U.S. government from Indigenous people around the country. The railroad also allowed for people to move around to different cities and states much more quickly, allowing some people more opportunity and freedom. During the Great Migration (1914-1918) many African Americans that left the south to move north took the train. Many Black men also worked on the railroads as Pullman porters – they set up the sleeping berths and served passengers on the overnight trains. In 1925, these men were the first group of Black workers to successfully unionize as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Many of these men also became important organizers during the Civil Rights Movement.

When the train was just beginning to be built, there was another railroad operating – the Underground Railroad. This was a network of secret routes and safe houses that enslaved African Americans traveled, mostly at night, to get to the northern parts of the United States or Canada where they would be considered free. People who helped these men, women and children escape and who wanted all Black people to be free were known as abolitionists. Harriet Tubman, who was born into slavery but escaped, is known for the many trips she made through the Underground Railroad helping hundreds of African Americans make it to a safer place to live.

Maine has its own history with the Freedom Trail. Check out a map of important locations in Portland here: <https://www.mainehistory.org/PDF/walkingtourmap.pdf>

## BOOKS TO CHECK OUT ABOUT AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE TRAIN

- *Before She Was Harriet* by Lesa Cline-Ransome & illustrated by James E. Ransome
- *Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad* by Ellen Levine & illustrated by Kadir Nelson
- *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* by Deborah Hopkins & illustrated by James Ransome
- *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* by Faith Ringgold
- *Overground Railroad* by Lesa Cline-Ransom & illustrated by James E. Ransome
- *The Great Migration: Journey to the North* by Eloise Greenfield & illustrated by Jan Spivey Gilchrist

## WHAT IS STORYTELLING?

Storytelling is the art and craft of telling stories orally. It is one of the oldest art forms known to humans and predates written language. The Wabanaki peoples in Maine use storytelling as an important part of how they pass down knowledge about their creation stories as well as how to take care of and live off of the land on which they live. In many cultures, storytelling is also a form of entertainment – providing the listeners with the chance to feel a variety of emotions and learn about something new or different. Storytelling is powerful when it is able to give people a chance to tell a story that allows others to connect and understand each other better. How does the story of Tiny Bill McGraw help you understand yourself and others better? What is the history of storytelling in your family?

## HOW DO YOU TELL A GOOD STORY?

There are many techniques for telling a good story. Often storytellers write their stories down first in order to find the right flow and length. They revise the story many times to make it just right. They use many literary or poetic devices such as simile, metaphor, alliteration or rhyme to help deepen the story's meaning. Samuel James uses simile and rhyme throughout the story of Tiny Bill McGraw. It is not just the words that matter in storytelling. It is also the way the performer uses their voice - its pace, pitch, tone, and dynamics to help create and deepen the mood and emotions of the story that is being told.

## ACTIVITY: SIMILE HUNT

Ask students to find the many similes that James uses throughout the story. Discuss what types of images and mood they help create in the story. Then invite them to pick one of the similes and modify it in a couple of ways, or create their own. (e.g. “as mad as a bumblebee” “as mad as a wet cat” “as mad as a hurricane”). Next, invite them to show the simile using their bodies in two frozen statues. For example, the first pose would be the emotion (mad) and the second statue would be what it is being compared to (bumblebee).

Check out our explanation of Statues here. [https://portlandovations.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/FY20\\_Ovations\\_Arts-Integration\\_Theatre-Vocab\\_Web3.pdf](https://portlandovations.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/FY20_Ovations_Arts-Integration_Theatre-Vocab_Web3.pdf)

## ACTIVITY: TELL YOUR OWN STORY

What story do you have to tell? Here are some great resources to get students retelling stories and telling their own stories.

- [Tell Us a Tale: Teaching Students to be Storytellers \(Scholastic\)](#)
- [The Art of Storytelling \(Mensa for Kids\)](#)
- [Stories: Legacies of Who We Are \(TEDEd\)](#)
- [Master the Art of Storytelling \(TEDEd\)](#)
- [TED Talks on Storytelling:](#)

## ABOUT PORTLAND OVATIONS

Founded in 1931, Portland Oventions produces dynamic performing arts events including classical music, jazz, opera, dance, theater, and Broadway. We believe that cultural enrichment should be high quality and accessible to all. Oventions collaborates with other nonprofit organizations, education systems, and the business sector to promote lifelong learning while celebrating the power and virtuosity of the performing arts. We bring the exhilaration of the performing arts into our communities with free events as part of Oventions Offstage, connecting artists and audiences. Join us at unexpected “art happenings,” classroom workshops, masterclasses, community discussions, and pre-performance lectures to explore together the relevance and connection of the performing arts to our lives.