

Samuel James Tells the Story of Tiny Bill McGraw



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Use this guide to help your students anticipate, investigate, and reflect upon your live performance experience. This guide is geared toward teachers of grades K - 8

Samuel James Tells the Story of Tiny Bill McGraw includes 3 videos that are each around 10 minutes in length. You can watch them all at once or you can spread them out over different classes. This guide provides some resources to introduce the videos and then some lesson ideas to extend students' learning based on the content of the performances.

IN THIS GUIDE

- 3** Introducing the Performance
- 4** Reflection Questions
- 5-9** Essential Questions & Activity Ideas
- 10** About Portland Ovations
- 11** Student Response Form
- 12-13** Teacher Response Form

Educators, we invite you to share with us what you did in your classroom around this guide or the production. You can email scoleman@portlandovations.org or reach us via [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#).

We want to hear and see what great learning is happening in your classrooms.

INTRODUCING THE PERFORMANCE

Before you watch the videos it is helpful to introduce the artist and the performance.

Tiny Bill, a little Black boy, doesn't like being small. His grandfather, Grampy, 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 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.

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?

We don't get to watch performance these days because of the pandemic but I hope you are all able to sit back and enjoy this experience as if you were in a theater.



AFTER THE PERFORMANCE

Reflection Questions

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 it?
3. How does Grampy try to help Tiny Bill? What does he teach him 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. “What’s going on with you?”, he asks. Who is someone in your life that you can talk to when things 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 through 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 9:54 is a train song. How does it sound like a train? (See page xx for more information on train songs.)

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?

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS & ACTIVITY IDEAS

This section includes more information about the art form, the artist, and its themes. Each question also comes with a lesson idea to extend students learning and engagement after watching the performance. These activities can be altered or scaffolded based on grade level.

WHO IS SAMUEL JAMES?

Samuel James is a 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 (Suggested for grades 3 - 8)

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. Write about why you picked these songs and how all together they represent you, at this moment. Be sure to be specific in your writing explaining in detail why you chose each song. You can discuss the music, the beat, the lyrics, the feeling it gives you, a moment in your life that it connects to.

Ways to share: Create a Spotify playlist, use Google Slides and embed the music video in each slide.

Samuel James's Playlist:

Bill Withers - Harlem-Cold Baloney: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDaOEfpwWO>

Tobe Nwigwe - Try Jesus: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFUOPTsykeU>

Fugees - Fu-Gee-La: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPIb9HoOCxs>

Dawn Penn - No, No, No: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4vJvZPpM>

Sade - No Ordinary Love: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=au8rHGvvt8>

WHAT INSTRUMENTS ARE IN THE PERFORMANCE?

Grampy and Tiny Bill uses a number of different instruments throughout the performance. Take time with students to identify each of these instruments

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 African 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 long 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 are very popular stringed instruments, played similarly to the banjo. Historians believe that the guitar 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 when 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 (Suggested for grades K – 8)

See a few ideas below or ask your school's music teacher.

- 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 - Blues, Jazz, Gospel, R&B, Hip Hop and more. Samuel James builds on the tradition of Black blues and folk musicians - both nationally and within his own family.

The Blues

The Blues are a genre of music that is characterized by a style of rhythm, storytelling, 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, 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: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=64T6ugyWXAA>

Jessie Mae Hemphill - Train, Train...: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QniNWSHXDRY>

Ray Charles Play the Slow Blues in Madrid: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIGoqv8zIRE>

Nat King Cole - Tea for Two: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBXhjmTZiOE>

Etta James - Something’s Gotta Give: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OueyaMoUU4>

Sister Rosetta Tharpe - Didn’t it Rain?: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9a49oFalZE>

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

- “African American Song.” The Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197451#:~:text=The%20merging%20of%20African%20American,of%20musical%20styles%20in%20the.
- “Musical Crossroads: African American Influence on American Music.” Smithsonian Music, 15 Dec. 2018, music.si.edu/story/musical-crossroads.
- “Roots of African American Music.” Smithsonian Music, music.si.edu/spotlight/african-american-music/roots-of-african-american-music.
- “Celebrating Black Music Month.” National Museum of African American History and Culture, 1 June 2020, nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/celebrating-black-music-month.

ACTIVITY: FREEZE DANCE (Suggested for grades K - 5)

Cue up and play different excerpts from different songs and have students dance/move to match the tempo, pitch or dynamic of the music. Before you move invite students to think through how they would move their bodies to show each of these. This is also a good way to introduce, teach or extend opposites. Have them dance until the music stops and then freeze. Repeat with the next excerpt call out what you want them to show in their movement - tempo, pitch or dynamic.

ACTIVITY: COMPARE AND CONTRAST USING MUSICAL ADJECTIVES

(Suggested for grades 2 - 8)

Compare and contrast two songs in the playlist. You can do this through discussion, through a worksheet chart, or through a writing assignment. Use musical elements vocabulary to discuss 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 ends of Chapter 2 and 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 for their labor 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 and their families 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. It 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 riding in segregated cars. 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.

In the early 1800s, 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. It was very dangerous and dependent on a network of abolitionists - people who helped these men, women and children escape and who wanted all Black people to be free. Harriet Tubman, a Black woman who was born into slavery but escaped, was one of these abolitionists. She is known for the many trips she made through the Underground Railroad helping hundreds 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-Ransome & 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? Do you have a 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 - it's pace, pitch, tone, and dynamics to help create and deepen the mood and emotions of the story that is being told.

ACTIVITY: METAPHOR HUNT (Suggested for grades 2 - 5)

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 metaphor 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

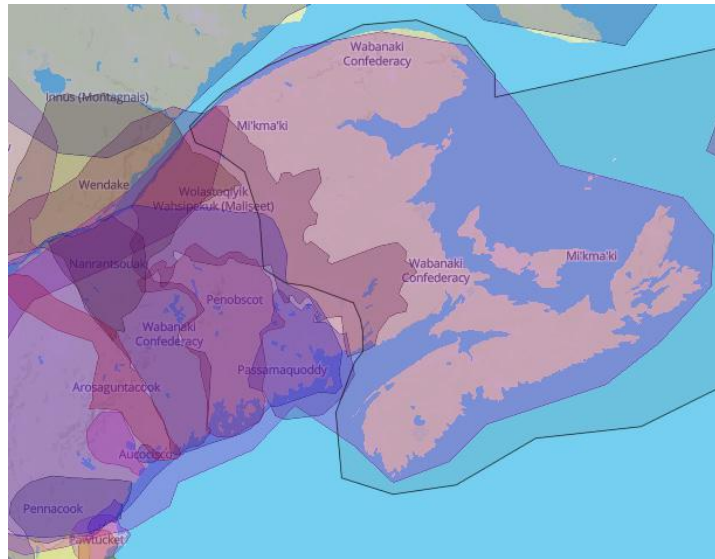
ACTIVITY: TELL YOUR OWN STORY (Suggested for grades 3 - 8)

Here are some great resources to get students retelling and telling their own stories.

- Tell Us a Tale: Teaching Students to be Storytellers (Scholastic): <https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/lesson-plans/teaching-content/tell-us-tale-teaching-students-be-storytellers/>
- The Art of Storytelling (Mensa for Kids): <https://www.mensaforkids.org/teach/lesson-plans/the-art-of-storytelling/>
- Stories: Legacies of Who We Are (TEDEd): <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/stories-legacies-of-who-we-are>
- Master the Art of Storytelling (TEDEd): <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/we-can-help-you-master-public-speaking-chris-anderson>
- TED Talks on Storytelling: https://www.ted.com/playlists/62/how_to_tell_a_story

PORTLAND OVATIONS

Founded in 1931, 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.



Native-Land.ca

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Portland Oventions acknowledges that the places where we gather, dance, and sing is ancestral Wabanaki land. We will to pay respect to the Abenaki, Maliseet, Mi'kmaq, Passamaquoddy, Penobscot - and their elders past, present and future.

We can't wait to gather with you all again soon!



Created by Sarah Coleman
Designed by Katie Day
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We want to know what *you* thought about the performance. You can write your answers below or draw a picture on the back of this page. Thank you!

PERFORMANCE: *SAMUEL JAMES TELLS THE STORY OF TINY BILL MCGRAW*

SCHOOL NAME: _____ **TEACHER NAME:** _____ **GRADE:** _____

NAME: _____ May we use your name if we share your comments as promotion? Yes__ No__

What did you enjoy about *Samuel James Tells the Story of Tiny Bill McGraw*. Why?

What was something that you learned, discovered or felt through watching *Samuel James Tells the Story of Tiny Bill McGraw*.

Would you recommend *Samuel James Tells the Story of Tiny Bill McGraw* to others? Why or why not?

What types of performance would you like Portland Oventions to offer in the future? (Feel free to share what type of art you are interested in (theater, dance, music), what cultures you might like to see, what topics the art might connect with, or specific artists.)

MAIL RESPONSES TO: Portland Oventions 400 Congress Street #17573 Portland, ME 04112-8573
EMAIL SCANNED RESPONSES TO: offstage@portlandovations.org

Please take a few moments to fill out this survey following your viewing of *Samuel James Tells the Story of Tiny Bill McGraw*. You can also [fill it out online here](#). Your response provides valuable insight on the impact, accessibility, and relevancy of the School-Time Performance Series and will allow us to improve and strengthen the program. Thank you.

PERFORMANCE: *Samuel James Tells the Story of Tiny Bill McGraw*

TEACHER NAME: _____ **GRADE(S) OF STUDENTS:** _____

SCHOOL NAME: _____ **CITY/TOWN:** _____

EMAIL ADDRESS: _____

1. When and how did you share this performance with your students? (e.g. We watched it together in the classroom or students watched it at home on)

2. From your perspective as a teacher, how would you rate *Samuel James Tells the Story of Tiny Bill McGraw*?

- Excellent Very Good Good Fair Poor

3. What made this a valuable experience for your students? (If it wasn't, what can we do better?)

4. What made this a valuable experience for your students? (If it wasn't, why not, what can we do better?)

- I wanted my students to experience the performing arts.
- The performance topic fit with my curriculum goals.
- The flexibility of the performance fit our schedule.
- The ticket price was affordable.
- Other (please specify):

5. How did these videos connect to or enhance your curriculum?

6. Did you use the Educators Guide or other virtual resources provided by Portland Ovation before or after watching the videos?

- Yes No

7. Why or why not?

8. What improvements could we make to the educational resources to serve you and your classroom better?

8. How would you rate the following components of attending the School-Time Performance?

	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor
Reserving & paying for tickets	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Communication about how to access the performance and resources	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Watching the virtual performance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Utilizing the virtual resources	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

9. What types of performances would you like to bring your students to in the future? (Feel free to share art forms, topics/themes, specific artists, etc.)?

10. A number of generous individuals and organizations make it possible for Portland Ovation to offer these School-Time Performance tickets at extremely discounted rates. Is there anything you'd like them to know in terms of your experiences or its impact on your students?

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