











# 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 - 3.

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The great thing about the arts is that they can often evolve to meet their context. That means that many of the activities shared are flexible to a lot of different contexts depending on how you choose to frame them in your class. We know you all are experts on your classroom and students, so we invite you to use these lessons and activities as guideposts and adapt them to fit your classroom management style, range of student ability, and time constraints.



**Educators**, we invite you to share with us what you did in your classroom around this guide or the production. You can email **eschildkret@portlandovations.org** or reach us via <u>Facebook</u> or <u>Instagram</u>.

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



# **Introducing the Performance**

It is often helpful to share some context with your students before they attend a live performance. Read below for more information on the performance you're coming to see.

## **About the Performance**

Ashley Bryan's artful children's book comes to life in this joyful concert for young audiences created by Georgia's Alliance Theatre. Join Blackbird and his fantastic feathered band for a high energy concert of funk and soul music based on the beloved Maine author's Coretta Scott King Award-winning book, *Beautiful Blackbird*. Featuring original music composed by Eugene H. Russell IV (who will also be performing on stage) and stunning costumes designed by Lex Liang, the Beautiful Blackbirds will have you on your feet clapping along with their funky rhythms as they celebrate the uniqueness of each of us.







# **About the Company**

Eugene H. Russell IV (Love Bird) is an Atlanta native, Tennessee State University alumnus, and proud Girl Dad. An accomplished musician/composer whose single "What If" can be found on all streaming platforms, Eugene IV recently co-wrote the music for *The Boy Who Kissed the Sky* which was co-produced by the Alliance Theatre & Seattle Children's Theatre. He's currently working on the music for a hip-hop musical about John Lewis with Theatrical Outfit. His regional theatre acting credits include *East Texas Hotlinks* (True Colors Theatre Company), *Dutchman* (Nebraska Repertory Theatre), and *Before It Hits Home* (St. Louis Black Rep), for which he received the prestigious Woodie King, Jr. Award. Film/TV appearances include Disney's "Secrets of Sulphur Springs" and the upcoming Netflix film *Six Triple Eight*. Keep up with Eugene at www. eugeneiv.com and on social media at @theeugeneiv.



Alexandria Joy (Fly Bird) [she/her] Joy, is an ATL native and is thrilled to be returning as Fly Bird. Regional: *RENT* (The Atlanta Opera), *Natasha Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812* (Horizon Theatre), *The Incredible Book Eating Boy, The Boy Who Kissed The Sky, Beautiful Blackbird LIVE!, Naked Mole Rat Gets Dressed: The Rock Experience* (Alliance Theatre), *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical* (Aurora Theatre), *Mother of God: A New Musical* by Christian Magby and Christian Albright, *Heathers: The Musical* (Actors Express), *Spring Awakening, HAIR, Ragtime* (Serenbe Playhouse), *Ella Enchanted* (Synchronicity Theatre), *Jekyll and Hyde* (Atlanta Lyric Theatre). TV/Film: Lovecraft Country. 2018-2019 Apprenticeship Company (Serenbe Playhouse). Education: BFA at Valdosta State University. Special thanks to her husband for his love and support. IG: @missalliejoy



Ali Barr (Blackbird) Born in Philadelphia, Ali was raised primarily in New York City. He lived and traveled extensively throughout Africa, Europe and the Middle East. He was exposed to jazz, classical music, and African drumming since birth, and began playing the trumpet when he was eight years old. He received his first instruction on the trumpet under the tutelage of Jerry Gonzales, leader of the Fort Apache Band. Ali played percussion instruments from when he was able to stand, under the guidance of his father, Dr. James Barr, a percussionist/Flutist, and the acclaimed master drummer, Bobby Crowder. Ali continued to play throughout his school career. He attended Temple University in Philadelphia earning a Bachelors degree in Marketing. There he began serious study of the trumpet with Robert "Boysie" Lowery (Clifford Browns' teacher), and Johnny Coles.





While in Botswana, he studied briefly with Hugh Masekela, a close family friend. Along with Masekela, Ali has played with bassist Milt Hinton, Jerry Gonzales, Jamaledeen Tacuma, Zhane, Duane Eubanks, Julie Dexter, Orrin Evans, Wadud, The Common Ground Collective, Dionne Farris, and a host of jazz greats. He has recorded and performed extensively with Grammy nominated Russell Gunn, the legendary Roy Ayers, JamaledeenTacuma, Takana Miyamoto, the Ogya World Music Band, The Royal Krunk Jazz Orkestra, and The American Spiritual Ensemble. Ali continues to be a called upon trumpeter and percussionist locally in Atlanta as well as a performer for major music festivals worldwide.

**Brandon A. Thomas** (High Bird) pro guitarist and musician based in Atlanta, is an accomplished artist known for his work with renowned acts across various genres. With an extensive discography, he has contributed to projects for artists like Ne-Yo ("Year of the Gentlemen"), T.I. ("King"), and Monica ("New Life"). Brandon has collaborated with top producers such as Chuck Harmony, Rico Love, and Justice League. He has performed with a diverse range of artists, including Lalah Hathaway, Raheem DeVaughn, and Angie Stone, showcasing his versatility and talent. Connect with Brandon on all social media at @brandonathomas

**Xavier T. Jones** (Low Bird) Xavier Jones began his musical journey playing drums for his hometown church in Atlanta. After graduating from North Springs High School and attending Kennesaw State University, this multi-instrumentalist began growing his resume by performing, producing, tracking records for various artists. He has been a member of Atlanta jazz-fusion group Anonymous Da Band for ten years and now works full-time as an international musician.



# **What To Expect**

#### The Performance

- The performance is 60 minutes long
- This staged version of *Beautiful Blackbird* takes Ashley Bryan's words and uses them as lyrics for songs to create a concert.
- The five performers are dressed as colorful birds inspired by the book. You'll see Low Bird, High Bird, Fly Bird, Love Bird, and of course, Blackbird.

#### The Sound

- The performance includes original funk and soul music performed live by guitarists, drummers, and singers.
- You can listen to the songs you'll hear on stage on Spotify here: <a href="https://open.spotify.com/playlist/61E2lYqcbCd26biZhzqitl">https://open.spotify.com/playlist/61E2lYqcbCd26biZhzqitl</a>

### **The Lights**

• The performance uses simple theatrical lighting, including bright colors.

#### Resources

- Plan your visit to Westbrook Performing Arts Center: <u>portlandovations.org/about/accessibility-westbrook-performing-arts-center/</u>
- Learn more about accessibility at Portland Ovations: <u>ortlandovations.org/about/accessibility/</u>





# **Being an Audience Member**

An audience member is a part of a larger community – an audience – and you all work together to create your theater experience. Audience members play a special and important role in the performance. The performers are very aware of the audience while they perform. Sharing their hard work and joy with you is one of the best parts of being a performer. Each performance calls for different audience responses. Lively bands, musicians and dancers may desire audience members to clap and move to the beat. Other performers require silent focus on the stage and talking from the audience can be distracting. A theater is designed to magnify sound and even the smallest whispers can be heard throughout the auditorium. Blackbird and his band highly encourage clapping and and singing along at the parts of the performance that you enjoy.

As you enjoy the show, think about being a part of the performance.

- What are the differences between attending a live performance and going to a movie or watching television?
- What are some different types of live performances? How many can you name?
- What kind of responses might an audience give to different types of performances?
- What are the different cues that a performer will give you so that you know how to respond? For example, might they bow or pause for applause?



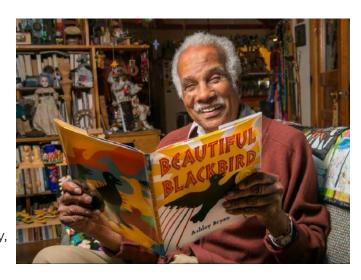
The interior of the Westbrook Performing Arts Center



# **Essential Questions**

# Who is Ashley Bryan?

Ashley Bryan was a renowned artist, writer, storyteller, and humanitarian. He published more than 50 books, most of them for young people. Born in 1923, Ashley was raised in the Bronx, NY. He wrote his first book at the age of 5 for his Kindergarten class. At seventeen, he entered the tuition-free Cooper Union School of Art and Engineering, having been denied entry elsewhere because of his race. Drafted out of art school into the segregated US army at age nineteen, Ashley preserved his humanity throughout World War II by drawing, stowing supplies in his gas mask when necessary. After the war, Ashley completed his Cooper Union degree, studied philosophy and literature at Columbia University, and then went to Europe on a Fulbright scholarship.



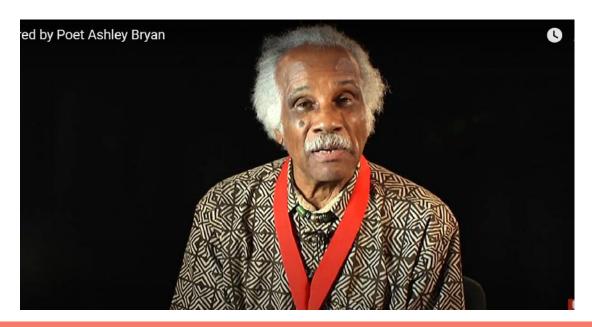
Throughout his career, Ashley taught art at several schools and universities in the United States. He retired in the 1980s to Maine's Cranberry Isles as professor emeritus of Dartmouth College. *Beautiful Blackbird*, published in 2003, is perhaps his most well-known and beloved book. He continued to write, create art, and publish books throughout his life. He passed away in February 2022.

Ashley's books won numerous awards and honors, including the Coretta Scott King—Virginia Hamilton Lifetime Achievement Award, Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal, and the New York Public Library's Literary Lions award. Libraries, children's rooms, and literary festivals are named for him all over the United States and in several countries in Africa. Works like *Beautiful Blackbird* sing out Ashley Bryan's philosophy that connection is what matters most. In Ashley's own words, "At every moment I strive for connection. If you are in the moment, you are stretching out to reach that which you recognize in others. That's my secret."

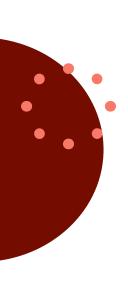




# Watch Ashley Bryan!



WATCH: Be Inspired by Poet Ashley Bryan





WATCH: Ashley Bryan read Beautiful Blackbird



# Why did composer Eugene H. Russell IV choose Funk music for *Beautiful Blackbird Live*?

Composer and music director Eugene H. Russell IV calls the music in *Beautiful Blackbird Live!* "funky soulful family music." When setting out to create the music for *Beautiful Blackbird Live!*, Russell wanted the music to reflect the rhythm and spirit of the book. "I wanted something that grooved that was fun enough for the kids but funky enough for the parents," he said in an interview with Alliance Theatre. Russell decided that what the show needed was music that went beyond traditional children's music and musical theater. It needed Funk. According to Russell, "When you look at the book that inspired *Beautiful Blackbird Live!*, the book by Ashley Bryan, the rhythms are obvious. And the colors as well. There's something about the colors that said funk to me, as well as the rhythm of the language."

When he began composing *Beautiful Blackbird Live!*, Russell started with Ashley Bryan's words. He focused on the rhythm and story of Bryan's poetry, creating music that moved in the same way, following the rhythm of Bryan's words and writing musical lines that rose and fell with the story. In an interview, Russell described his process as a journey following Bryan's words:

"It's fun because you get to say, 'Okay, let's see where this piece takes me!' Often, if you kind of get out of the way as the composer, songs will write themselves. And I don't mean that literally; I wish it was that easy! But if you keep yourself out of it and keep the stories centered, then the story will inform you of what the sound should be, and it will only make sense. I'm like, 'Oh my goodness, of course, that makes sense! Of course this should be in 5/4 time! Of course this needs this instrument or that instrument, because that only makes sense!"

From: The Color of Rhythm in the Air by Sally Henry Fuller, Alliance Theatre, March 26, 2021



WATCH: Music video for Beak and Wing



### What is Funk Music?

Funk is a rhythm-driven musical genre born from Soul music by black musicians in the 1960's. Here is a brief history of Funk:

- James Brown creates the funk beat: In the early 1960's, James Brown developed his signature rhythm with his band, the Famous Flames. He called the beat "playing on the one," a rhythm that emphasized the first downbeat of the measure.
- Funk's popularity spreads: Several dedicated funk bands emerged by the late 1960s, including Sly and the Family Stone and Parliament Funkadelic's George Clinton.
- Funk's heyday: Funk rose to peak popularity in the 1970s and 1980s. Chaka Khan emerged as the "Queen of Funk" with her band Rufus. Rick James released the funk hit "Super Freak." Michael Jackson released the hit record "Thriller" in 1982, which included the funk-inspired hit single "Billie Jean." Numerous musical groups embraced elements of funk, like strong downbeats and bass-centric grooves.
- Funk influenced other musical genres: Just as it rose from Soul, Funk influenced other musical genres, including Hip Hop. Rap and hip hop artists like Dr. Dre used Funk beats and sampled Funk songs in their work.

As you watch *Beautiful Blackbird Live!*, listen for the key characteristics of funk music: Syncopated rhythms that include strong downbeat accents followed by long lines of short notes and beats, and strong bass lines.



WATCH: Chaka Khan and Rufus perform "Sweet Thing" in 1975



WATCH: James Brown perform a medley of "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag" and "I Got You (I Feel Good)" on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1966



# PRE-PERFORMANCE LESSON ACTIVITIES

Here are some ideas for lesson activities that expand on the essential questions, topics, and themes of *Beautiful Blackbird Live!*.

## Book List: Beautiful Blackbird Children's Book Festival 2024

The following books were selected for the 5th Annual Beautiful Blackbird Children's Book Festival. The book list features titles for a wide range of readers. Share the books at their reading level with your students to deepen their understanding of the themes explored in *Beautiful Blackbird*.

- 1. The Adventures of Aku, adapted and illustrated by **Ashley Bryan,** is a story within a story, when the jealous Spider Ananse steals a ring from Aku, Aku's dog and cat join him on many adventures to retrieve it.
- 2. Beat the Story-Drum, Pum Pum, adapted and illustrated by **Ashley Bryan**, is a collection of Nigerian folktales set alongside Bryan's vibrant woodcut illustrations
- 3. Beautiful Blackbird (Board Book), adapted and illustrated by **Ashley Bryan**, is a Coretta Scott King Award-winning a tale from the Ila-speaking people of Zambia. Featuring Bryan's iconic cut-paper artwork, readers of all ages are able to explore the appreciation of one's own heritage and beauty.
- 4. The Ox of the Wonderful Horns and Other African Folktales, adapted and illustrated by **Ashley Bryan**, features five folktales from Ghana, Angola, and South Africa in this delightful, boldly illustrated picture book.
- 5. When I Wrap My Hair, written by **Shauntay Grant** & illustrated by **Jenin Mohammed,** is both an act of joyful recognition and a demonstration of how knowledge is passed through generations.
- 6. Something, Someday, written by Amanda Gorman & illustrated by Christian Robinson, is a timeless message of hope. With intimate and inspiring text and powerfully stunning illustrations, this book reveals how even the smallest gesture can have a lasting impact.
- 7. My Name is Sangoel, written by Karen Williams & illustrated by Khadra Mohammed, tells the resilient and inspiring story of Sangoel and his family's journey as refugees relocating to the United States.
- 8. Ellen's Broom by Kelly Starling Lyons & illustrated by Daniel Minter, is a story of a young girl's love for her family during the time of Reconstruction.
- 9. Frizzy by Claribel A Ortega & illustrated by Rose Bousamra, is a heartwarming and gorgeous middle-grade graphic novel that shows the radical power of accepting yourself as you are, frizzy curls and all.
- 10. Swim Team: A Graphic Novel by **Johnnie Christmas** is a splashy, contemporary middle grade graphic novel that details the trials and tribulations of overcoming one's fears through the lens of the main character Bree and her relationship with swimming.



## **ACTIVITY: Drawing Songs**

Practice active listening with this drawing activity.

#### Materials:

Songs from Beautiful Blackbird Live! Posted by Alliance Theatre on Spotify Paper

Crayons, markers, or color pencils

### Procedure:

- 1. Play a song from the *Beautiful Blackbird Live!* Studio album. Any of the seven songs work well for this activity (or you can use multiple songs). Invite students to listen carefully to how fast and slow the song moves, and how high and low the music goes.
- 2. After listening, ask students to describe the song in simple words like fast, slow, high, low, smooth, rough, etc. Write these words up on the board as inspiration for art.
- 3. Hand each student a piece of paper and a drawing implement and prepare to play either the same song or a new song. This time, invite students to draw what they hear on the page. Students can use lines, blocks of color, shapes, etc., to mimic the qualities of the music. For example: if the music goes high, students may want to draw a line that climbs up the page. If the music sounds very smooth and quiet they might choose to draw smoother shapes, or cooler colors. If it's loud and fast, they might choose to draw more jagged shapes or warm colors. This is an opportunity for students to use their creativity to draw what they hear.
- 4. After listening and drawing, invite students to share their art with a neighbor. No two pieces or art will be the same! What do these drawings have in common? How are they different?
- 5. Invite students to share their observations and their art with the whole class.

### Reflection

- How did you choose what to draw as you were listening?
- How was your art similar to the art your classmates created? How was it different?
- Why might we all have different interpretations of the same song?
- How can we use these same skills when listening to live music?





### **ACTIVITY: Narrative Pantomime**

Narrative Pantomime is a drama strategy that invites students to imagine and pantomime a character's physical and emotional journey within a story, as narrated by a teacher. This strategy can be used to expand students' background knowledge of the events in a story (both factual and emotional) through a specific character's point of view. In this case, it's a great way to introduce and familiarize students with some of the stories they will see on stage.





#### Materials:

Open space

Beautiful Blackbird by Ashley Bryan (Available at Portland Public Library!)

#### Procedure:

- 1. Read through the story once as a class in a circle on the floor. Encourage students to listen actively and pay attention to the characters they encounter in the story.
- 2. Invite students to find their own space in the room where they have enough room to move and won't be distracted.
- 3. Explain to students that you're going to read the story again and invite them to imagine and act out what they hear silently, as if it is happening to them. Encourage students to consider all their senses as they act out the story.
- 4. Read the story slowly, giving students time to complete their actions.

#### Reflection

After students have had an opportunity to complete their narrative pantomimes, gather back together as a class and discuss the story and students' interpretations. Some questions you might consider are:

- What do you remember most from the story? What did you see/smell/touch/taste/hear?
- What are some feelings the character had in the story? Why did they feel that way?
- What do you think happens next in the story? OR What could you add to the story?



# POST-PERFORMANCE LESSON ACTIVITIES

### **Post-Performance Discussion Questions**

- 1. What did you notice about the performance?
- 2. What instruments did you see and hear?
- 3. How did the musicians work together while they performed?
- 4. What were some similarities you noticed between the songs? What were some differences?
- 5. How was the performance you saw similar to the book Beautiful Blackbird? How was it Different?
- 6. If you were to create a performance based on the book Beautiful Blackbird what would you include?

## **ACTIVITY: Body Percussion**

This activity pairs onomatopoeic words with sound effects to create increasingly complex musical phrases.



#### Materials:

Room for a circle

### Procedure:

- 1. Gather students together in a circle, sitting or standing. Explain that you will be using different parts of your bodies to make music together like a band.
- 2. Demonstrate the activity by choosing a body part to move and a sound to accompany it. For example, you may bob your head and say "boing boing." Invite the students to copy your sound and movement.
- 3. Invite a student to create a sound and movement. Have the class join the sound and movement together.
- 4. Link the two sounds and movement together, starting with the one you created.
- 5. Repeat the process by inviting another student to create a new sound and movement, have the class join, then link all three together.
- 6. Steadily build your music by adding new sounds and movements until everyone has participated. Try and keep a steady beat throughout the exercise.

### Reflection

- What did you notice about the sounds and movements we created together?
- What strategies did you use for creating your sounds and movements?
- What strategies did you use for remembering all the sounds and movements in order?
- Where else might we use these strategies in working and playing?



## **ACTIVITY: I Am Me Self Portrait**

Reflect on the show by creating individual self portraits that celebrate all the things that make everyone in the class unique.



#### Materials:

I Am Me Worksheet (Page 18)

Art supplies such as crayons, markers, construction paper cut into shapes, glue, glitter, etc.

#### Procedure:

- 1. Encourage each student in the class to think about what makes them special or unique. What would they like others to see, hear, or know about them?
- 2. Hand each student an I Am Me worksheet, and invite students to choose 3 things that make them special or unique to highlight. Write those qualities on the page.
- 3. Design a self portrait on the worksheet that shows those qualities.
- 4. Once portraits are complete, consider staging a gallery opening by hanging portraits in your classroom and inviting students to tour the gallery examining each portrait.

#### Reflection

- What do you notice about the portraits we created? What stands out to you in these works of art?
- How did you decide which to include in your self-portrait?
- What are some things we have in common, based on these self-portraits? What are some things that are unique to each of us?



# **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

- Visit the Beautiful Blackbird Children's Book Festival's Website: beautifulblackbird.com/
- Check out the Beautiful Blackbird Children's Book Festival Educator Toolkit: beautifulblackbird.com/educators-toolkit-2022/
- Learn more about Ashley Bryan, his philosophy, and his work at the Ashley Bryan Center: ashleybryancenter.org/index.html
- Read about composer Eugene H. Russell IV's process of creating *Beautiful Blackbird Live!*: encoreatlanta.com/2021/03/26/feature-the-color-of-rhythm-in-the-air/



# I Am Me Worksheet

My Name is:	
3 qualities that make me unique areand	· · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·
My Self Portrait:	



# **ABOUT PORTLAND OVATIONS**

**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. Ovations 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 Ovations 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.

## Land Acknowledgment

Portland Ovations' programs are presented on Wabanaki land, home of the Maliseet, Mi'kmaq, Passamaquoddy, Abenaki and Penobscot Nations, their elders past and present, and future generations.

We encourage you to learn more and take action in support of Maine's Indigenous communities through the following organizations

#### Abbe Museum

Maine's premier museum dedicated to indigenous history and culture. Their mission is to inspire new learning about the Wabanaki Nations with every visit.

#### Maine-Wabanaki Reach

A Native-led non-profit that supports the self-determination of Wabanaki people through education, truth-telling, restorative justice, and restorative practices in Wabanaki and Maine communities.

Created and written by Dr. Liz Schildkret
Designed by Katie Day
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# STUDENT RESPONSE FORM

We want to know what thought about the performance. You can write your answers below or draw a picture on the back of this page. Thank you!							
PERFORMANCE Beauti	iful Blackbird Live!						
SCHOOL NAME	TEACHER NAME:						
	May we use your n	share your comments					
What did you	<i>tiful Blackbird Live!</i> did you	like that part					
t was something th	at you learned during the performance?						
What would you like to	tell other kids about Beautiful Blackbird	d Live!					
to share what type of a	ance would you like Portland Ovations to rt you are interested in (theater, dance, topics the art might connect with, or spe	music), what cultures you					

MAIL RESPONSES TO: Portland Ovations 120 Exchange St Portland, ME 04101 EMAIL SCANNED RESPONSES TO: offstage@portlandovations.org



We want to know what thought about the performance.

Draw a picture of a part of Beautiful Blackbird Live that you liked. Thank you!

Please scan and email to offstage@portlandovations.org or mail to Portland Ovations 120 Exchange St Portland, ME 04101



ERFORMANCE Beautiful Blackbird Live!

# TEACHER RESPONSE FORM

Please take a few moments to fill out this survey after you attend the performance You can also 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.

TEACHER NAME	GRADE(S) OF STUDENTS
SCHOOL NAME:	CITY/TOWN:
EMAIL ADDRESS:	
From your perspective as a te $\Box$	acher, how would you rate <i>Beautiful Blackbird Live</i>
. What made this a valuable ex	perience for your students? (If it wasn't, what can we do
was your primary reaso	n for choosing to bring your students to Beautiful Blackbird
<ul><li>□ performance</li><li>□ date and time</li></ul>	experience the performing arts. with my curriculum goals. performance fit our schedule.
<ul><li>□ he ticket price</li><li>□ ther (please specify):</li></ul>	
How did this live performance	e connect to or enhance your curriculum?
Did you use the Educators Guthe performance	uide provided by Portland Ovations before or after
Why or why not?	



# TEACHER RESPONSE FORM

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

Reserving &			
paying for tickets			
Communication			
performance			
Arrival at the			
Departure from			

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

A number of individuals and organizations make it possible for Portland Ovations 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?