

# Alliance Theatre

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*institute*

**Study Guide**

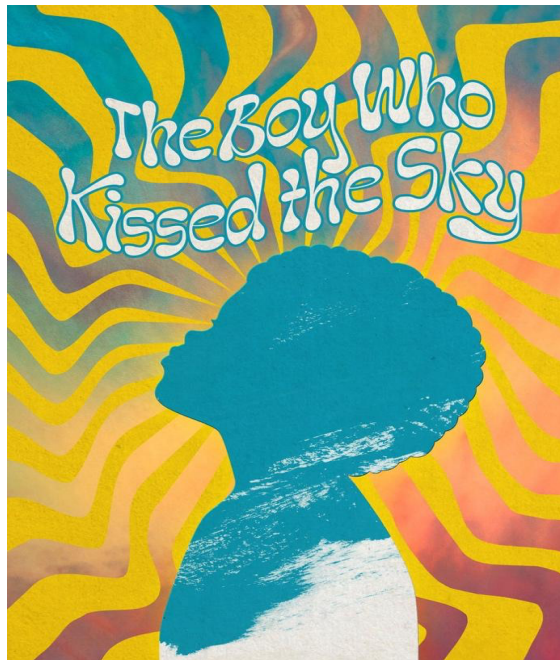
## ***The Boy Who Kissed the Sky***

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**Directed by Tim Bond**

**Book by Idris Goodwin**

**Music by Eugene H. Russell IV and Divinity Roxx**

**April 1 – 16, 2023**

**Coca-Cola Stage**

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Cedric Lamar and Brandon L. Smith in Seattle Children's Theatre production THE BOY WHO KISSED THE SKY  
Photo by: Truman Buffet Photography

# Georgia Standards of Excellence

## *Grades 2-6*

### **English Language Arts**

- ELAGSE5RL2 Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.
- ELAGSE5RL3 Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).
- ELAGSE5RL7 Analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text.
- ELAGSE5W8 Recall relevant information from experiences or gather relevant information from print and digital sources; summarize or paraphrase information in notes and finished work, and provide a list of sources.
- ELAGSE5SL1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 5 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

### **Social Studies**

- SS5H6 Describe the importance of key people, events, and developments between 1950-1975.

### **Music**

- ESGM4.CN.1 Connect music to the other fine arts and disciplines outside the arts.
- ESGM4.CN.2 Connect music to history and culture.

### **Theatre**

- TA4.CN.1 Explore how theatre connects to life experience, careers, and other content.
- TA4.CN.2 Examine the role of theatre in a societal, cultural, and historical context.



Cedric Lamar in Seattle Children's Theatre's production  
THE BOY WHO KISSED THE SKY  
Photo by: Truman Buffet Photography

# Synopsis



The cast in Seattle Children's Theatre's production THE BOY WHO KISSED THE SKY  
Photo by: Truman Buffet Photography

In the beginning of the play, the Boy is home alone for most of the day while his father, Mel, is working long hours. He has a big imagination and loves listening to music, playing his broom guitar, and drawing. The Boy is visited by his neighbor, Mrs. Newton, who asks about the Boy's mother. He misses his mother, who he does not see very often. Suddenly, one of the Boy's drawings comes to life, and he meets his new, imaginary friend, J. Sonic. J. Sonic and his band, the Feedback, teach the Boy about music and the bustling Central Area of Seattle.

The Boy wants to return home to wait for his mother, Donna, who says she might visit, but ultimately, never comes. J. Sonic returns and travels through time with the Boy so he can learn more about his family. They watch the Boy's grandparents perform on a vaudeville stage, and they see the Boy's parents fall in love before Mel is recruited to serve in the military. This gives the Boy a taste of his own history that he has never known before.

After their time traveling journey, Mrs. Newton gives the Boy a real guitar. He wants to write a song but doesn't know where to start. In fact, he doesn't know *how* to play the guitar yet. This sparks the third adventure! The Boy time travels with J. Sonic to learn about "The Blues." He takes the Boy to meet famous musicians, Muddy Waters and Koko Taylor, and music professor Dr. Rachel Murphy teaches the Boy about the blues and how to find inspiration and write lyrics. The Boy continues to miss his mother, learns how to play his guitar, and writes his first song.

*What do you think happens at the end of the play? Make a prediction!*



# Who is Jimi Hendrix?

Jimi Hendrix was an American musician who is famous for creating the modern electric guitar sound. *The Boy Who Kissed the Sky* is inspired by his early life and musical influences.



Hendrix is from Seattle, Washington and was born on November 27, 1942. He is famous for playing the electric guitar. His music fused blues, rock, jazz, and soul to create a unique sound. In addition to his African American and Irish roots, he had a grandmother who was part Cherokee, and according to his sister, Janie, this heritage influenced his style.

## **Fun Facts about Jimi Hendrix:**

- He was left-handed, and because he didn't have a left-handed guitar growing up, he played his guitar upside down when learning the instrument!
- His birth name is Johnny Allen Hendrix, and it was changed to James Marshall Hendrix, in honor of his father and late brother.
- Jimi had four brothers and sisters, but they are not characters in the play.
- Jimi only released three albums in his short-lived musical career.
- Paul McCartney from The Beatles recommended that the organizers of the Monterey Pop Festival invite Jimi to perform. This performance gave Jimi his big break, and his music became more popular afterwards.



# Meet the Playwright: Idris Goodwin

## What is a playwright?

A playwright writes the story and dialogue of a play, as well as many of the stage directions that the actors and directors follow to tell the story for the stage.



## Who is Idris Goodwin?

- Idris was born in Detroit, Michigan, and he currently lives in Seattle, Washington (where *The Boy Who Kissed the Sky* takes place!).
- He was recognized as one of the most-produced Theatre for Young Audiences playwrights of 2019/2020.
- He earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Film, Video, and Screenwriting at Columbia College Chicago, a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and did graduate work at the University of Iowa Playwrights Workshop.
- Idris won the 2021 Steinberg Playwright award, which is given to ten outstanding early to mid-career playwrights.

## Fun Facts About Idris Goodwin:

- He used to be a rapper before he became a playwright, and his music is on Spotify.
- The first play Idris ever wrote was called *Braising* in 2001.
- His play *And in This Corner... Cassius Clay* received the 2017 Distinguished Play Award from The American Association of Theater and Education.
- His first picture book, *Your House is Not Just A House*, will be published in 2024.
- Idris serves as the Artistic Director of Seattle Children's Theatre, where *The Boy Who Kissed the Sky* had its world premiere in Fall 2022.

# Meet the Composers



## **What is a composer?**

A composer is someone who writes a music piece for theatre, television, radio, film, computer games, and other areas where music is needed.



### ***Who is Eugene H. Russell IV?***

Eugene H. Russell IV is a musician, composer, singer, and actor from Atlanta, Georgia. He is a recipient of the prestigious Woodie King, Jr. Award for his lead performance in "Before It Hits Home" with St. Louis Black Rep. Eugene's performances haven't been limited to stages and screens. This award-winning actor has also been heard on radio as a voiceover artist, vocalist, & saxophonist. He composed the music for the Alliance Theatre's productions *Beautiful Blackbird* and *Sit-In*. It is this wide range of artistic experiences that's responsible for Eugene's flexible, grounded approach to the work. Eugene is a proud graduate of Tennessee State University and an even prouder native of Atlanta.



### ***Who is Divinity Roxx?***

Divinity Roxx is a multi-hyphenate Grammy nominated musician, recording artist, and composer who is celebrated for her ability to inspire others with her infectious grooves and memorable lyrics. Her career as a bass-player skyrocketed after attending a bass camp led by the legendary Victor Wooten where she was invited to tour with the 5-time Grammy award winning virtuoso three months after the camp. After touring with Victor for five years, she toured and performed with Beyoncé as her bassist and Musical Director. She was also a featured soloist on tour and composed original music for the I...AM Sasha Fierce tour and DVD. She has appeared on countless television shows including The Grammy Awards, *SNL*, *Good Morning America*, *Ellen*, and more, with personal highlights including a special performance at The White House with President Barack Obama, and an appearance on the hit TV show *Soul Man*.

# Character Analysis

<b>Character Name</b>	<b>Character Traits/Descriptions</b>
Boy	The Boy is the main character. He is determined, imaginative, and excited. He loves drawing and playing music, even if his instrument is a broom!
J. Sonic	J. Sonic is the Boy's imaginary friend who helps him discover his love of music and learn more about his family. He is upbeat, inspirational, and motivated and is the leader of the band, The Feedback.
Mel	Mel is the Boy's father. He is confident and hardworking, taking many jobs to provide for his family. The Boy travels back in time to watch his parents fall in love and learns about how his father fought in World War II.
Donna	Donna is the Boy's mother. She is adventurous, unable to sit still, and a free spirit. As a result, she is not always present in the Boy's life.
Mrs. Newton	Mrs. Newton is a nosy neighbor who owns the boarding house that the Boy lives in. She gives the Boy an electric guitar.
The Feedback	A musical band that serves as a shape-shifting acting ensemble. J. Sonic is their bandleader.
The People with the Clipboards	They are social workers, and they routinely check in on the Boy's living situation to make sure that he is healthy and happy. (See page 14-15 for more information.)
Grandma and Grandpa	The Boy travels back in time to watch his grandma and grandpa as vaudeville performers. They are entertaining and musical, but they must move to Canada to continue performing.

# Setting Study

This play takes place in Seattle, Washington in the 1950s. Here's more about the music, clothes, and technology from that time period!

Seattle is the largest city in the state of Washington and is the northernmost major city in the United States. (It's about 100 miles from the Canadian border!) It is known for its frequent rain, but it is also famous for its musical history and vibrant music scene.

In the 1950s, the relatively new technology of television began to compete with motion pictures as a major form of popular entertainment. Famous television shows included *I Love Lucy*, *Leave It To Beaver*, and *Father Knows Best*.

Rock and roll, a new style of music which drew inspiration from African American blues music, embraced themes popular among teenagers, such as young love and rebellion against authority. Elvis Presley was one of the most famous musical acts!

The population of Seattle changed in the early 1900s and especially after World War II. Tens of thousands of African Americans moved to Seattle for jobs and other opportunities. They brought their culture with them, which included musical styles that had originally developed in black communities in the South and Midwest, like jazz and blues. Between 1918-1951, 24 jazz clubs existed along Jackson Street, starting the careers of performers, including Ray Charles. In the 1950s, new musical traditions combined with older ones to create a fusion of jazz, swing, and rhythm and blues.



Seattle in the 1950s. Credit: Livabl

## Fun Fact:

Did you know that under the streets of Seattle's Pioneer Square neighborhood, there is an entire network of subterranean hallways, corridors, and basements? The ruins of shops, hotels, and houses are still standing today.



# Theme

Themes are main ideas or underlying meanings a writer explores in a literary work. The theme of a story can be conveyed using characters, setting, dialogue, plot, or a combination of all these elements.

Theme	Line of Dialogue	Meaning
<i>Music is for everyone</i>	KOKO TAYLOR Nah... music is for everyone. That's the great thing about music. Don't matter where you come from...	Music brings people together in indescribable ways. No matter what you're listening to, it is a language everyone can understand.
<i>Broken but never bad</i>	THE BOY Broken but never bad One string at a time One Note then the next	Everything in life has value. You've got to take the good with the bad and make the best with what you've got.
<i>Enough to go around</i>	THE BOY No, I'm drawing "Enough to go around." I figure if I can draw you and you show up, that must mean maybe... maybe this will show up too.  J.SONIC Enough to go around? What's that look like?  THE BOY A better place - a bigger house, with a big lawn, one our own. My daddy cuts everybody else's lawn, comes home and we don't even have one. I'm going to draw "enough to go around." Because that was what they always said - "there's just not enough to go around."	Sharing is caring, but not everyone has access to everything they need. You can't always get what you want, but you can always dream what you want.

# Exploring the Music

## Elements of Music

- **Dynamics** – loud vs. soft
- **Pitch** – high vs. low
- **Timbre** – the quality or color of the sound
- **Form** – the order and arrangement of the parts of the music
- **Rhythm** – how long or short a sound is

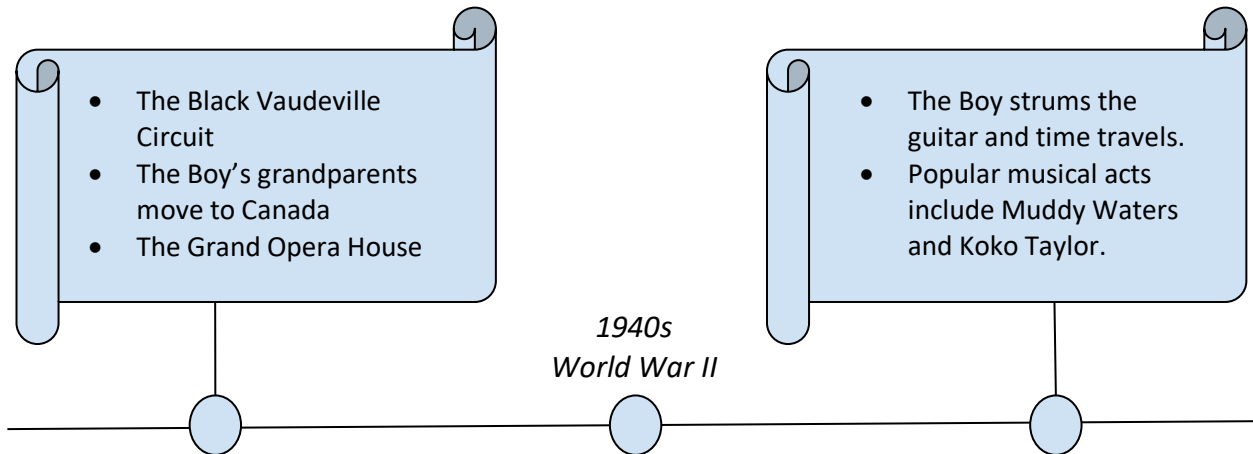


*What elements of music do you hear in “The Boy Who Kissed the Sky?”*

Music Style	Description	Song Examples
Blues	Blues is the originator of rock and roll. With roots in African American spirituals and work songs, it is a type of music that expresses a variety of feelings (sadness, joy, etc.) The tempo can be funky, upbeat, or slow. It usually has a message or story with call-and-response chants.	<a href="#">W.C. Handy - <i>St. Louis Blues</i></a> <a href="#">Pete Johnson - <i>Rocket Boogie</i></a> <a href="#">Big Mama Thornton - <i>Hound Dog</i></a>
Rock and roll	Rock and roll is mostly upbeat, rhythmic music with instruments like guitars (electric and bass) and drums. Like the Blues, this music style tells a story or has a message.	<a href="#">Bill Haley and His Comets - <i>Rock Around the Clock</i></a> <a href="#">Elvis Presley - <i>Hound Dog</i></a>

# Time Jumping through History

*In the play, the Boy travels to different time periods to learn more about his family.  
Here is a timeline on the places they traveled and the knowledge he gained about his family.*



Early 1910s  
The Black Vaudeville  
Circuit



Koko Taylor

- The Boy's parents meet.
- The Boy's father (Mel) leaves to serve in WWII.
- The Boy's mother (Donna) finds out she is pregnant with him.

1950s - The Blues



Muddy Waters

## The Black Vaudeville Circuit

- Vaudeville is a comedic theatrical performance that brings separate, unrelated groups together to perform on the same night.
  - Examples of performers could be musicians, singers, dancers, comedians, trained animals, magicians, and more!
  - The performance would travel on a “circuit,” or a tour route. This plan helped to keep the show organized as it traveled from city to city.
- In the play, the Boy travels back in time to see his grandparents perform as part of the Black Vaudeville Circuit.
  - African American entertainers created dance, music, and theatrical performances between the 1880s and early 1930s.
  - These acts incorporated elements that were unique to American black culture and spread them to both white American society and other countries, like Canada.
  - Because of racism, black performers faced many challenges and often were not accepted into the white circuits of performances.
  - As a result, Black Vaudeville Circuits, like the one featured in the play, developed to give black entertainers opportunities to perform.

## Popular Musical Acts Referenced in *The Boy Who Kissed the Sky*.

Name	Biography	Song Examples (Not Featured in <i>The Boy Who Kissed the Sky</i> )
Muddy Waters	Muddy Waters was an American blues singer and musician who is known as the “father of modern Chicago blues.”	<a href="#"><i>You Need Love</i></a>
Koko Taylor	Koko Taylor was an American singer who used Chicago blues, electric blues, rhythm and blues, and soul blues. She had rough, powerful vocals and was known as “The Queen of the Blues.”	<a href="#"><i>I Am a Woman</i></a>
Dr. Rachel Murphy	Dr. Murphy was a music professor who loved the blues, jazz, and core genres of music. She understands music from a scholarly perspective. Or one could say, she’s a “fan girl!”	N/A

# Family Dynamics

The Boy deals with a lot of tough situations, including his dad working hard to pay the bills and his mother not always being present.

Mel, the Boy's father, takes care of the Boy and works many jobs. They do not have a lot of money, and to make sure that the Boy is healthy and happy, the "People with Clipboards" sometimes visit their home.

The People with Clipboards are social workers. Social workers help the poor, children, people with disabilities or serious illnesses, or the elderly. These characters are concerned for the Boy's well-being. However, their frequent visits make the Boy feel uncomfortable or frustrated. He is worried that if they think he is unsafe or unhealthy, then, the People with Clipboards will take him away from his father.

Here are the questions that the People with Clipboards ask the Boy in the play:

*THE PEOPLE WITH THE CLIPBOARDS:*

*(trading back and forth line for line)*

*Hello!*

*Hello there.*

*Are you here alone?*

*When did you last eat?*

*What time does your father usually return?*

*How often do you bathe?*

*Must get awful lonely.*

*We can take you somewhere safe.*

*Some place with other little boys who're like you.*

*We can take you—*

*We can take you--*

One reason that the People with Clipboards visit is because the Boy's mother, Donna, is not well and does not live with them. Or as the Boy describes it in the play, "She has an appetite too, but not for food. For something that tears up her insides. But she can't stop. Even though she knows it's not good for her." The Boy feels scared, ashamed, and embarrassed because of his mother's absence. Sometimes, Donna says she might visit the Boy, but she never comes. He understands that she's sick but that only makes him miss her more. As a result, the Boy feels sad and lonely.



Towards the end of the play, the Boy and Donna talk about their relationship.

*THE BOY*

*How come you never came to see me?*

*DONNA*

*I wasn't well.*

*THE BOY*

*Neither was I*

*DONNA*

*I know you feel alone. But you're not. You're going to bring so much to this world. And everybody knows.  
Your dad, your neighbors, your friends---they all feel it*

*THE BOY*

*Why didn't you?*

*DONNA*

*You're a lot like me. You see the colors. I did too. But I chased them too  
far, ran along that rainbow, looking for redder red, bluer blue, greener  
green--til they weren't enough---and before I knew it everything went black.  
But I should have been chasing you.*



Aishé Keita and Brandon L. Smith in Seattle Children's Theatre's production THE BOY WHO KISSED THE SKY  
Photo by: Truman Buffet Photography

## **Pre-Show Discussion Questions**

1. What do you know about Jimi Hendrix?
2. Can something be “broken but never bad?” Why or why not?
3. When the Boy is confused or anxious, he likes to sketch or draw, and when he wants to dream, he plays his guitar. What do you like to do when you have big feelings? What activities make you feel comforted or safe?
4. What do you know about your family’s history? What stories have your family members shared with you about their interests, experiences, etc.?
5. In the musical, the actors sometimes play multiple characters. What technical elements (i.e. costumes, lighting, set) will help the audience know that they are a new or different character?
6. What are the elements of music (pitch, dynamics, rhythm, timbre)?

## **Post-Show Discussion Questions**

*Engage in a discussion as a class or use these questions as journal prompts.*

1. The Boy receives a guitar and claims that it is his most prized possession. He believes his guitar will help him accomplish his dream of becoming a musician. What is your most prized possession, and how does it support the dreams you have for yourself?
2. The Boy’s father asks, “Is it better to be king for just a night or a knight every day?” How would you respond? Why or why not?
3. In the beginning of the play, Boy dreams for “enough to go around.” What does he mean? Does his opinion change by the end of the play?
4. The Boy discovers he has a support system with his father, his neighbor, and friends. Who is your support system? How do they support you and your dreams?
5. The Boy learns that “every family got their own sound.” How would you describe your family’s sound?
6. In the play, Boy travels to different places and time periods. What technical elements of the play (costumes, sets, lighting, etc.) allow him to time travel? How do you know when they are in a new place?
7. How did the performers use the four Tools of the Actor in the musical (body, voice, imagination, concentration)?
8. How did the performers use the elements of music when singing (pitch, dynamics, rhythm, timbre)?

# **Sketch**

The Boy likes to draw pictures of outer space and musicians. In the play, J. Sonic and the Feedback even come to life! Draw something from your imagination that you would like to see come to life.



# **“Sounds Like the Blues”**

## **How to Write a Blues Song**

### **Step 1: Select a topic and write a “hook.”**

What gives you “the blues?” Choose a topic that causes you to have deep feelings and emotions. In the play, Dr. Rachel Murphy encourages the Boy to write a song about “the thing you want but can’t get.” The Boy wrote his first song about the thing he wanted most in the world - a guitar. But he didn’t have all six strings yet, which made him a little sad. This *feeling* was the inspiration for his song, *All the Kids*.

What’s something you want most in the world but can’t get? Write it as a blues song!

Once you have your topic, how can you capture that idea with one phrase? This line will be the “hook” that you can repeat throughout the song, like a chorus! (Ex: “They shine, We shine.”)

### **Step 2: Brainstorm and create the verses.**

Brainstorm every aspect you know, think, or wonder about your topic. Then, take all your ideas and put them into verses. You can rhyme the ends of each verse, if you want.

Optional: Most blues songs follow an A-A-B pattern. A song with this pattern will have a verse that is repeated one time (A), and then, the second verse or chorus (B) will respond to the first verse (A).

### **Step 3: Determine the sounds.**

Decide which sounds (instrumental, vocal, or other) would best support your theme and song. Create a simple rhythm or melody for one (1) verse and your hook. You do not have to use instruments; you can use your voice, clap your hands, or stomp your feet!

### **Step 4: Give it a try!**

Sing your song out loud and see how it works! Make edits, as needed.

# “Write It as a Blues”

**TOPIC:** Choose a topic that causes you to have deep feelings and emotions. Ex: What’s something you want most in the world but can’t get?

**HOOK:** Write one phrase that summarizes your topic. You will repeat this line throughout the song.

**BRAINSTORM:** Write down every aspect you know, think, or wonder about your topic.

**VERSES:** Use ideas from your brainstorm to write a four-line verse about your topic.

1)

2)

3)

4)

**SOUNDS:** Which sounds (instrumental, vocal, or other) would best support your theme and song?

**PRACTICE:** Sing your HOOK twice, and then, sing your verse to follow an A-A-B format!



# Sources

- [Jimi Hendrix](#)
- [Idris Goodwin](#)
- [Divinity Roxx](#)
- [Eugene H. Russell IV](#)
- [Seattle in 1950s](#)
- [Social Workers](#)
- [Koko Taylor](#)
- [Muddy Waters](#)
- [Blues Music](#)
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Brandon L. Smith and Adam Washington in Seattle Children's Theatre's production THE BOY WHO KISSED THE SKY  
Photo by: Truman Buffet Photography