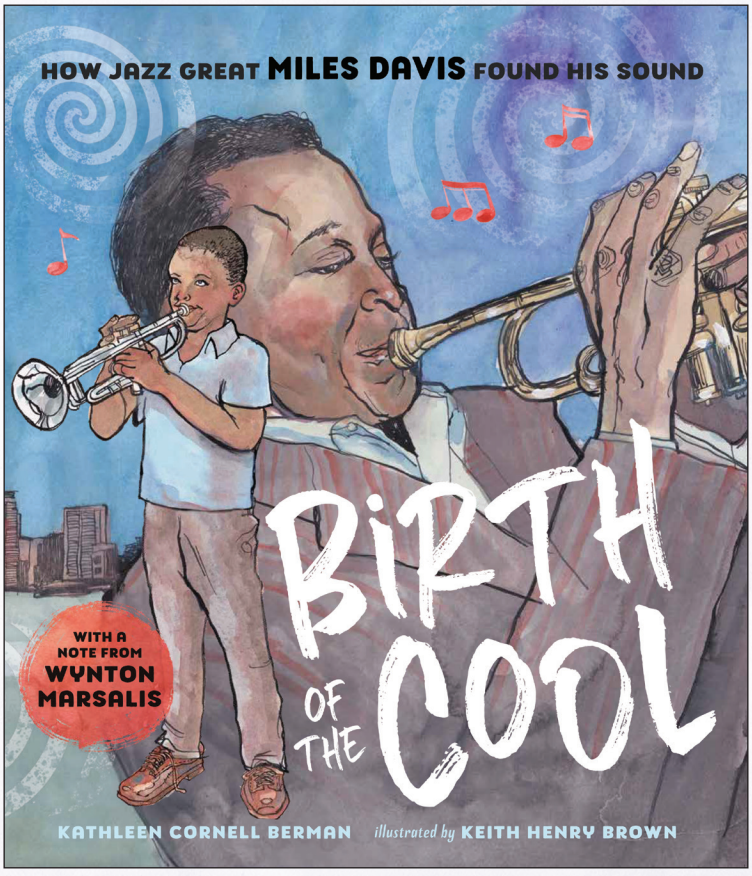
CLASSROOM GUIDE

BIRTH OF THE COOL

HOW JAZZ GREAT MILES DAVIS FOUND HIS SOUND

Written by **KATHLEEN CORNELL BERMAN**
Illustrated by **KEITH HENRY BROWN**



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INTRODUCTION

KATHLEEN CORNELL BERMAN fell in love with Miles Davis's music when she was just ten years old. Her debut picture book beautifully captures her appreciation of his life and work. Written in smooth, lyrical language and illustrated by **KEITH HENRY BROWN** with soft, soulful watercolors, this book is a work of art to be shared in libraries and classrooms everywhere.

Readers of all ages will celebrate the early life of Miles Davis and his growth as a musician. Through the book, they will begin to gain an understanding of the process that took him from a boy who loved music to a legend in the music world. Within the poetic writing style is a thorough timeline of the path that Davis took in his childhood and his early career, as well as a peek into the inspirations he drew from throughout his life.

Birth of the Cool offers a wide range of learning possibilities. For younger learners, it introduces Miles Davis in a vividly unique way by using art and language together. For more mature readers, it adds depth and texture as a source of biographical information. Through rich discussion and interdisciplinary activities, all ages will enjoy learning about the musical life of Miles Davis.

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ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- **What is nonfiction?**

- **What is lyrical poetry? Explore the use of lyrical poetry to tell this story.**
  - Why do you think author Kathleen Cornell Berman chose to write the story this way?

- **What were the struggles that Miles faced during his life?**
  - How did he respond to each of the challenges? How do you think this may have influenced his music?
  - Have you ever faced a similar challenge? How did you respond?

- **What are the sounds from Miles's childhood that may have influenced his musical appreciation? Search through the book to find the references to sound.**
  - Which ones are musical? Which ones are not?
  - How does this help the reader understand Miles as a child?

- **What is Bebop? Use context clues to begin to understand this term. Then, do research to learn more.**
  - Why is this important to the story of Miles Davis?

- **Why does Miles's father say, "Don't be like the mockingbird"?**
  - Does Miles follow his father's advice? Why or why not?

- **How is Miles's music different from other jazz musicians?**
  - How do you think his path—the ups and downs in life—contributed to the unique sound he created?

- **Explore all of the ways that Miles learned to play music. There are many different ways described in the book.**
  - Do you think the variety of learning that took place influenced his style of music? How?

- **The author uses the words "scientist" and "invent." Explore how these words are used to describe a musician.**
  - What does it mean to call Miles Davis a "scientist of sound"?

- **Find all of the adjectives that describe Miles Davis's music.**
  - How do they help portray him as a person and an artist?
  - Which is your favorite adjective, and why?

- **How did illustrator Keith Henry Brown capture the essence of Miles Davis's life?**
  - How do the illustrations in the book enhance your understanding of his life?

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ACTIVITIES

JAZZ-PIRATION

Invite readers to listen to Miles Davis's album *Birth of the Cool*. While the music plays, encourage students to show how the music makes them feel through drawing, abstract art, writing, poetry, movement, etc. Accept and celebrate all forms of expression! Be sure to have art supplies and space available for them to reflect in a way that is meaningful to them. After the class has had time to experience the music, discuss the results:

- How did each person feel?
- Were the feelings the same or different throughout the group?
- What ideas did the music inspire?
- How did the feelings change as each piece changed?

Don't forget to include your own impression of the music to share with the group. This combination of art and music is sure to spark some interesting discussion!

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7
Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

BIOGRAPHY BLITZ

Kathleen Cornell Berman wrote Miles Davis's biography in free verse. Davis's music and Berman's text have a similar tone: free, colorful, and full of feeling. Biographies can be in many different forms. Explore this genre and the ways that authors write them to reflect a person's life, accomplishments, and struggles.

- How does the form of the biography match the subject?
- How does an author decide the tone that will fit best?
- What form do you think would best represent your life story and the beautiful subject of YOU?

Partner everyone in the group and ask them to interview each other. Once the interview is complete, invite the pairs to separate and create the biography of their partner. Offer plenty of planning and work time (thinking, drawing, brainstorming, conferencing, and revising) and have them consider which form matches best with their peer's life details. Conclude the activity by asking partners to reveal their biography to their partner first. Did the author of your biography capture YOU?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.5
Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

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POWERFUL PICTURES

Explore the relationship between a story and its illustrations. *Birth of the Cool* has watercolors that enhance the reader's understanding of the life of Miles Davis. The use of pictorial storytelling dates back to early cave wall paintings. Throughout the years it has evolved into a purposeful way to bring print to life.

Read the text from the first page of the book without revealing Keith Henry Brown's illustrations to your students. Ask the class to draw the images that come to mind while they listen. Once their artwork is complete, show the illustration of young Miles that the illustrator created. Discuss how the audience's art is the same. How is it different? This powerful visualization exercise will showcase the way art and text work together.

Invite readers to make a connection to the illustrations in *Birth of the Cool* by sharing their favorite picture book. Encourage them to analyze the use of the art and how it enhances the story. How did the art impact how you visualized the story?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7
Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

AWESOME ONOMATOPOEIA

Consider the role that sounds played in the life of Miles Davis. This story references numerous times and places that Miles noticed sounds in his world. How did these sounds shape his love of music and jazz?

Onomatopoeia is a literary device used by writers to add sound to their work. It makes it more interesting and can really help the reader "hear" the story. As you read, have students add onomatopoeia to the story wherever the author mentions sounds that Miles hears. What do you think the riverboat sounded like to Miles? What did he hear when he was on the farm in Arkansas? These simple additions to the story can make it come to life in a new and different way.

Students can continue their study of sound when they go home. Invite them to choose a time that they will sit and listen for a period of time, list the sounds they hear, and turn them into a lyrical poem—a great chance to practice using onomatopoeia. This can be done in a backyard, on a step or a living room chair, at a busy breakfast. Sounds are everywhere!

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.5
Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

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REPRODUCIBLE/WORKSHEET

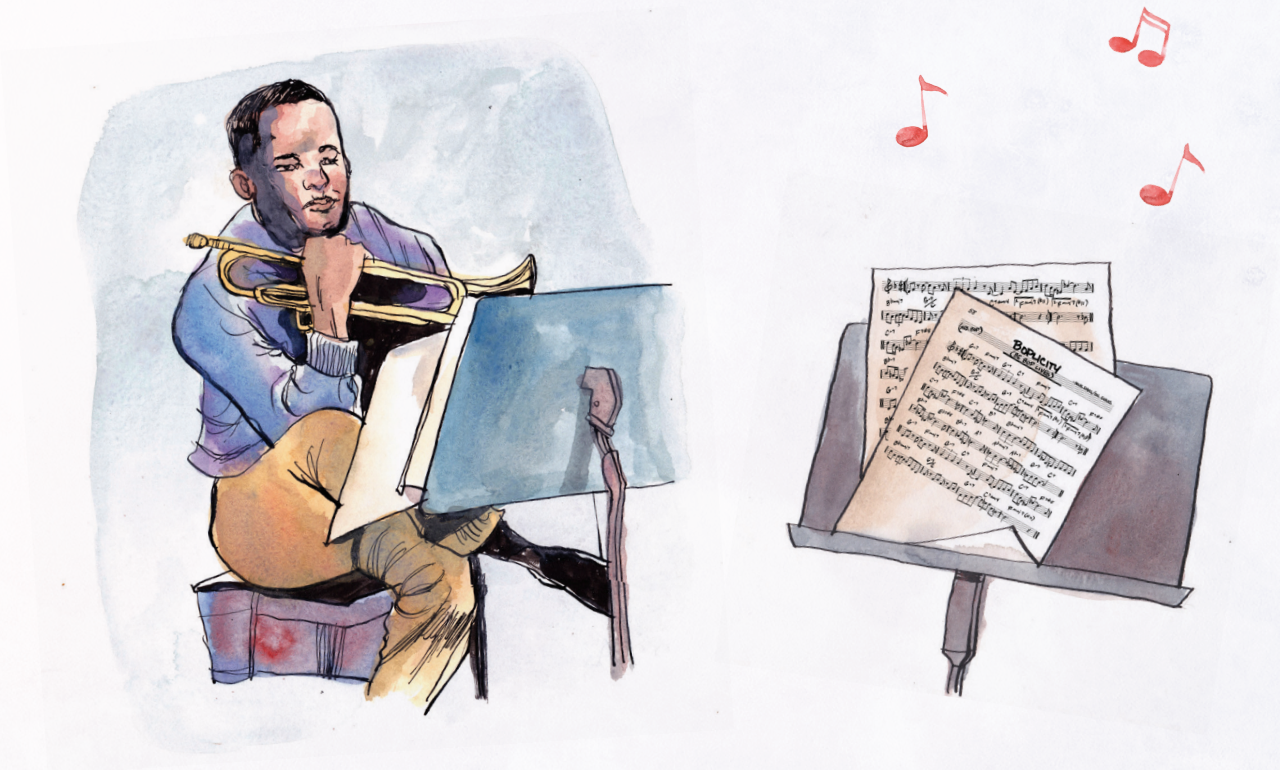
INCREDIBLE INSTRUMENTS

There are so many amazing musical instruments! *Birth of the Cool* will inspire you to really listen to the smooth sounds of jazz and examine how the sounds affect our emotions!

Explore different instruments with your students and the unique sounds they make. A trip to the music room, a music museum, or sound clips (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eetAWZTvOQ0) of each instrument will make this exploration fun and meaningful.

Using the worksheet below, have students sort the instruments by category and think about which emotions might match the instruments (e.g., sad = saxophone) and why they feel this way. This activity may even inspire a brand new musician!

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2
Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.



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Name: _____ Date: _____

INCREDIBLE INSTRUMENTS

DIRECTIONS: Cut and paste each instrument into the correct category.

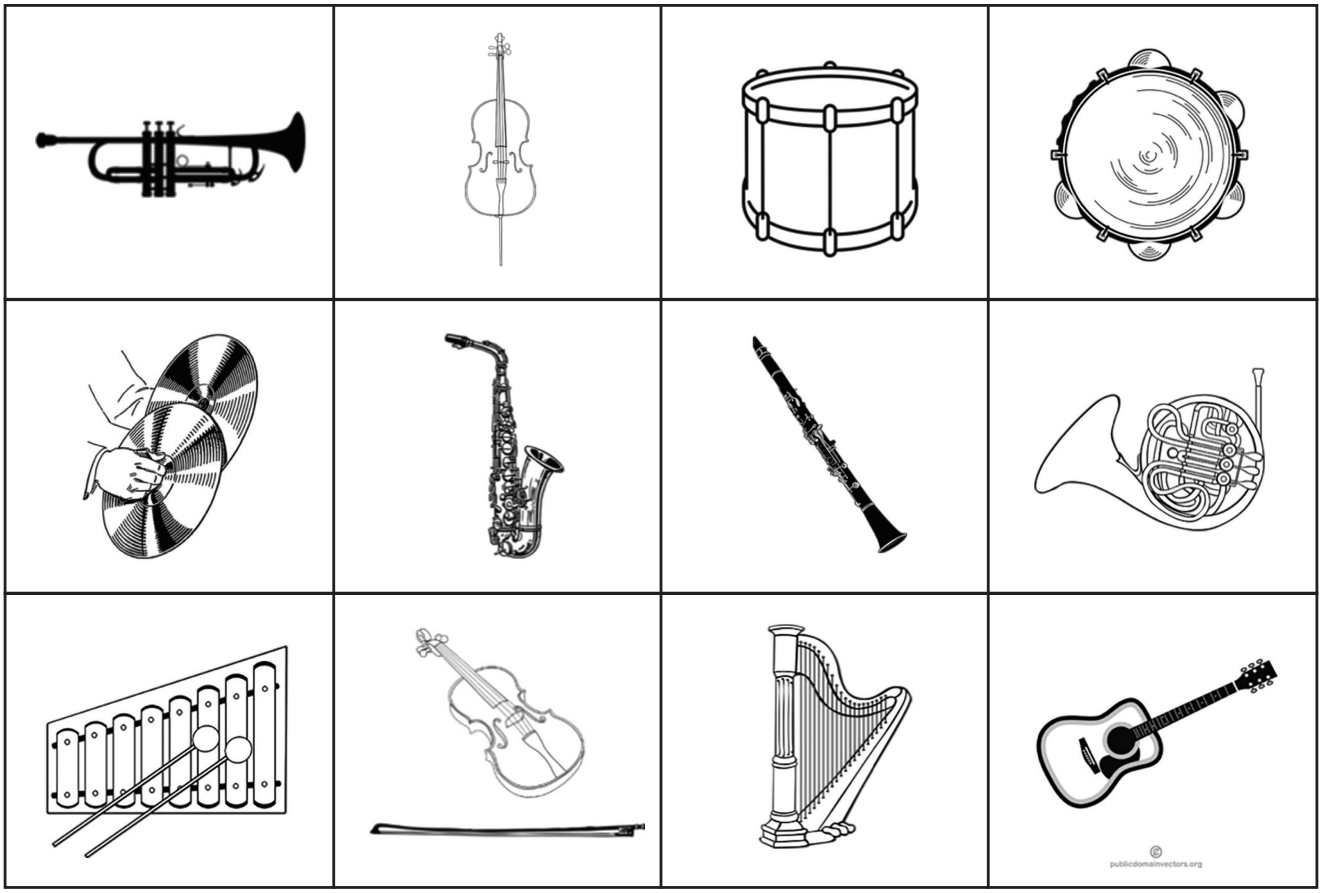
PERCUSSION
WOODWIND
BRASS
STRINGS

My favorite instrument is _____ .

It makes me feel _____

_____

_____ .



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