



# HOW SWEET THE SOUND

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## TEACHING TIPS

*How Sweet the Sound* takes readers on a journey through African American musical traditions, beginning on the plains of Africa and extending to the streets of America. Featuring references to famous musicians, songs, and extensive back matter, the picture book offers readers of all ages ample opportunities to explore the richness and significance of the African American musical tradition.

### FOR YOUNGER READERS:

Readers are asked to “listen to the kaleidoscope of ragtime rhythms,” a type of piano music popular in the early 1900s. Explain to students that a kaleidoscope is a tube-shaped toy that uses mirrors to create beautiful, colorful patterns when rotated.

**ACTIVITY:** Show students the illustrations accompanying the jazz spread, read the pages following them, and play a jazz or ragtime musical selection for them. Have them discuss the sounds they hear and how those sounds make them feel in their bodies. Then, using instructions available on the internet, lead students in developing their own kaleidoscopes using cardboard tubes, glue, cardstock, mirrored sheets, or foil.

*How Sweet the Sound* features several instruments important to the Black musical tradition, including drums, the kalimba, and the fiddle.

**ACTIVITY:** Find and play recordings of African drummers, kalimba, and fiddle players for students. Find opportunities for students to attend a live performance of musicians who play the instruments where possible. As students listen to the recordings or live performances, invite them to mimic the sounds in harmony with the sounds and dance and move their bodies to the beats and rhythms they hear. After they have finished, discuss how the music made them feel.

### ACTIVITIES FOR OLDER READERS:

*How Sweet the Sound: A Soundtrack for America* includes many songs and musical genres that have been important throughout American history. Consider the songs they and their family members love and listen to. What additional songs would they add to the soundtrack? Why are songs important to them? What should listeners notice as they listen to the music?

*How Sweet the Sound* takes its title from the lyrics of the famous gospel hymn, “Amazing Grace”, which was written by an English slave trader who later became an abolitionist. Read more about the song in the back matter of the book and listen to the lyrics of the song. After listening, why do they think the author chose lyrics from this song as the book’s title? How does the song speak and relate to American history?

Charly Palmer’s beautiful and bold artwork, which includes illustrations of famous musicians and everyday people, helps bring the text to life. Choose and listen to at least one song mentioned in the book and have students draw an illustration inspired by the music. Present their finished picture to their classmates, explaining the song and the image they have drawn.

### ADDITIONAL LEARNING:

Encourage students to take their knowledge further and explore complementary digital resources such as the interactive Timeline of African American Music developed by Carnegie Hall: <https://timeline.carnegiehall.org/timeline>, where they can read about more African American musicians and listen to musical selections.



Teaching Tips, created by Mahasin Abuwi Aleem, MLIS.