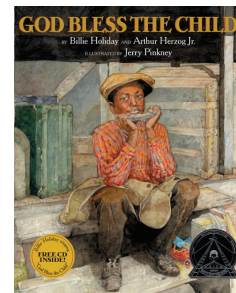


God Bless the Child

By Billie Holiday and Arthur Herzog Jr.
Harper Collins Publishers, 2004



Black History Month is always a challenge for me—not because some would call me “white” and disregard the sliver of Native American and African American blood that runs through my veins. Nor is it difficult for me historically. I was living in Pascagula, Mississippi, during the years 1962 to 1964. They were tumultuous at best. My own family stories are about my parents fighting for the rights of African Americans.

No, Black History Month is difficult for me because it is so important to address as an educator and music teacher. Without jazz, blues, reggae, and spirituals, our musical landscape would be dull indeed.

The history of African Americans in this country is vast and varied. It is both tragic and triumphant. It spans such a long and tortured time that it can hardly be contained in a mere twenty-eight days.

So when I find a book I can use that accurately depicts African American life from that era without undue sentiment, I am thrilled. Jerry Pinkney's version of the Billie Holiday and Arthur Hergoz Jr. ballad “God Bless the Child” is just such a book.

Most educators are familiar with his vast body of work. He has illustrated everything from *Three Little Kittens* to *Rikki Tikki Tavi* to *Aesop's Fables*. His retelling of Little Red Riding Hood gives permission to a new generation of young ladies to see themselves as heroines in the great fables of life.

What makes this particular book so special is the detail to historical accuracy on every page. Jerry Pinkney used his own vast collection of historical photographs for inspiration as he crafted a pictorial journey through this haunting song. In his “Afterword,” he addresses the hours of research spent on collecting, studying, and choosing images to illuminate this text.

I can hear the haunting melody of this song as he lets us glimpse the daily life of the sharecroppers in the deep South and their reliance on community. His pictures detail the despair and fear faced by the families that make it north in search of a fresh start and a new dream.

In every face, we see the tenacity and strength of people who have suffered yet survived. We feel the bone-breaking weariness of a long day working in the fields. And then we are rewarded to

see the joy of the community coming together, making music, and dancing in the dirt.

This book allows me to share a small part of African American history with my students, whether it is during the month of February or anytime I start my jazz and blues unit.

While the original Billie Holiday version of the song isn't published with the book, it is worth acquiring as an accompaniment to this beautiful publication. Gladys Knight has recorded a stronger, more powerful version of “God Bless the Child” that I use to explore the differences in singing styles and how the message can change with the artist.

As the last lines of the song fade out in my imagination—“God bless the child that's got his own!”—we are given the hope of a young man sitting in school, learning about Jean Baptiste Point Du Sable and claiming his right to a free and public education! ■

Holly Deuel Gilster has been teaching music using an Orff Schulwerk approach for more than thirty years. She has published a book of listening maps for the elementary classroom teacher called Learning to Listen, Listening to Learn Vol. 1.

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