



Classroom Guide for
LITTLE MELBA AND HER BIG
TROMBONE
 Written by **Katheryn Russell-Brown**
 Illustrated by **Frank Morrison**

Reading Level

*Reading Level: Grades 3
 Interest Level: Grades 1–5
 Guided Reading Level: O
 Lexile™ Level: AD720L

*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

Themes

Music (Jazz), Music History, Perseverance/Overcoming Obstacles, Pursuing a Dream, Women's History, Biography, African American Interest

Synopsis

Spread the word! Little Melba Doretta Liston was born to make music. Melba loved the sounds of music from as far back as she could remember. Beats and rhythms danced in her head—from the *plink* of a guitar to the *thrum-thrum* of a drum. As a child, she daydreamed about beats and lyrics, and hummed along with the music from her family's Majestic radio.

At age seven, Melba fell in love with a big, shiny trombone, and quickly taught herself to play the instrument. By the time she was a teenager, Melba's extraordinary gift for music led her to the world of jazz. She joined a band led by trumpet player Gerald Wilson and toured the country. Overcoming obstacles of race and gender, Melba went on to become a famed trombone player and arranger, spinning rhythms, harmonies, and melodies into gorgeous songs for all the jazz greats of the twentieth century: Randy Weston, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Billie Holiday, and Quincy Jones, to name just a few. This biography captures her accomplishments, and challenges, at a time when few women, of any race, played brass instruments and were part of the jazz scene.

Award-winning illustrator Frank Morrison, known for his joyful and expressive paintings, celebrates the life and legacy of this pioneering twentieth-century jazz virtuoso. Brimming with ebullience and the joy of making music, *Little Melba and Her Big Trombone* is a fitting tribute to a trailblazing musician and a great unsung hero of jazz.

BACKGROUND

Melba Doretta Liston (adapted from Afterword): A self-taught child prodigy, Liston began playing trombone at age seven. At age sixteen, Liston became a professional musician.

In 1943, Liston, only seventeen years old, was hired for trumpeter Gerald Wilson's new band for a cross-country tour. She stayed with the band for five years. When Wilson's band broke up, Liston joined the band led by famed trumpet player Dizzy Gillespie. A year later, the group disbanded, and in 1949, Liston was invited to play with Billie Holiday's band as it toured the South. The tour did not go well. The farther south the band traveled, the smaller the audiences became. They did not appreciate the band's new bebop sound. The tour was cut short, and Liston decided to take a break from performing on the road. For a few years, she worked as a secretary at the Los Angeles Board of Education. In 1956, Liston returned to music, and in 1957, she met composer and pianist Randy Weston. They collaborated often for the next forty years. Liston was the arranger for ten albums with Weston. In 1958, *Melba Liston and Her 'Bones* was released. This album was the only one Liston recorded as the lead musician. Liston had a stroke in 1985 that left her partially paralyzed, and she was forced to give up playing her beloved trombone. In 1987, the National Endowment for the Arts named Liston a Jazz Master, the highest honor the United States gives to a jazz artist. Today Melba Liston's sounds are heard across the black musical diaspora, including jazz, rhythm and blues, and reggae.

Jazz: According to the [Center for Jazz Studies](#) at Columbia University, "jazz is often called America's only original art form."¹ With a blues heritage, jazz began in New Orleans in the African American community. Jazz is a unique art form because it requires a group of people to come together and improvise. Constantly evolving, jazz musicians collaborate together in real time through music. Groundbreaking artists include Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. Major cultural centers for jazz today include not only New Orleans, but also Chicago and Harlem in New York City.

Jazz has many different styles including New Orleans, swing, bebop, cool jazz, hard bop, free jazz, and fusion. Instruments used by jazz musicians include the trumpet, saxophone, trombone, piano, guitar, bass, and drums. PBS's "[Jazz: A Film by Ken Burns](#)" presents extensive jazz history and music theory, and discusses the cultural impact of the music.² The [Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz](#) offers audio clips, photographs, musician bios, and more.³

Women in Jazz: African American women have participated in jazz as musicians and singers since its beginnings and before women had the right to vote. Women were typically vocalists, but women contributed in other areas as well, such as pianists. There were several all-women bands and ensembles in the 1920s and 1930s. Learn more about the famous [women in jazz](#) history from PBS's "Jazz in Time," a part of the "Jazz: A Film by Ken Burns."⁴ Helpful information also can be found on "Women in Jazz" from NPR's *Jazz Profiles*, [part 1](#)⁵ and [part 2](#).⁶

The Great Depression (1929–1939) and African Americans: As the [Library of Congress](#) describes, "The problems of the Great Depression affected virtually every group of Americans. No group was harder hit than African Americans. By 1932, approximately

¹ <http://jazz.columbia.edu/content/what-jazz-studies>

² <http://www.pbs.org/jazz/>

³ <http://www.jazzinamerica.org/>

⁴ http://www.pbs.org/jazz/time/time_women.htm

⁵ http://www.npr.org/programs/jazzprofiles/archive/women_1.html

⁶ http://www.npr.org/programs/jazzprofiles/archive/women_2.html

half of black Americans were out of work.”⁷ According to the [Amistad Digital Resource](#) from Columbia University, the economic crisis of the Great Depression began with an agricultural crisis in the South and led many African Americans to migrate to the North and West. As unemployment rose in cities, African Americans were often the first to be fired to save or give jobs to whites.⁸

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 5 and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

Before introducing this book to students, you may wish to develop background knowledge and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

1. Take a look at the front and back covers. Take a picture walk. Ask students to make a prediction. Do you think this book will be fiction or nonfiction? What makes you think so? What clues do the author and illustrator give to help you know whether this book will be fiction or nonfiction?
2. What do you know about texts that are biographies? What are the typical text features of biographies? What are some things that will not happen in biographies? Why do authors write biographies? How do you think their reasons differ from authors who write fiction?
3. What is *persistence*? Share a time you demonstrated persistence and worked hard to achieve a goal. What was your goal? Who helped you achieve your goal? What challenges did you face? What advice would you give someone who has a goal he or she wants to achieve?
4. What do you know about the jazz? How is it different from other kinds of music? What instruments are used to play jazz? Who are some famous jazz musicians? What mood(s) does jazz music evoke? What types of music today might jazz have influenced or inspired?
5. What do you know about the trombone? How does a person play it? What kinds of sounds does it make? What type of instrument is it?
6. Why do you think I chose this book for us to read today?

Exploring the Book

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strand 1, Craft & Structure, Strand 5, and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

Talk about the title of the book. Ask students what they think the title means. Then ask them what they think this book will most likely be about and who the book might be about. What do they think might happen? What information do they think they might learn? What makes them think that?

Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book: front and back covers, dedications, title page, illustrations, afterword, discography, and author's sources.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

⁷<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/depwwii/race/>

⁸http://www.amistadresource.org/plantation_to_ghetto/the_great_depression.html

Have students read to find out who Melba Doretta Liston was, why she is an important figure in United States and music history, and how she demonstrated persistence and passion.

Encourage students to consider why the author, Katheryn Russell-Brown, would want to share this story with young people.

VOCABULARY

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

The story contains several content-specific and academic words and phrases that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary below. Encourage a variety of strategies to support students' vocabulary acquisition: look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, create a specific action for each word, list synonyms and antonyms, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

CONTENT SPECIFIC

trombone	avenues	jazz scene	harmonizing	worlds away
gig	blues	gospel	kinfolk	bandstand
pedaled the piano	porch	piece of cake	making magic	rock bottom
tour the country	walked away	feel it	smart as a whip	in her bones
trotted around the globe	beamed from ear to ear	making headlines		

ACADEMIC

rhythms	lyrics	beats	instrument	cradle	tilt
tune	keen	solo	jealous	soulful	talent
jazz	thrill	eyeful	master musician	harmonies	cruel
melodies	gorgeous	fans	discouraged	dazzling	divine
mesmerized	composed	arranged			

AFTER READING

Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages and/or illustrations in the book to support their responses. **To build skills in close reading of a text, students should cite evidence with their answers.**

Literal Comprehension

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1 and 3)

1. What characteristics of music make young Melba excited about music?
2. Why does Momma Lucille buy the trombone for Melba?
3. How does Melba's family encourage her?
4. What kind of student was Melba?
5. What obstacles does Melba face in school?
6. What evidence in the book demonstrates Melba's persistence?
7. How does Momma Lucille feel about Melba's love of music?
8. What obstacles does Melba face while touring with various bands?
9. The book shows many men and boys who are hurtful toward Melba, but it also shows men who support her in a time when many don't take women seriously. List examples of men who supported Melba's goals and what they do to help her.

10. What scenes in the book demonstrate Melba's passion for music?
11. What causes Melba to feel lonely and want to quit?
12. What does Melba do when she feels discouraged or lonely?
13. What are examples of onomatopoeia in the story?

Extension/Higher Level Thinking

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 2 and 3 and Craft & Structure, Strands 4 and 5)
(Language Standards, Knowledge of Language, Strand 3 and Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

1. When Momma Lucille buys the trombone for Melba, the text says, "Melba . . . squeezed her new friend." Why do you think the author describes the trombone as Melba's friend?
2. "Before long, Melba and her horn were making magic." Is Melba really making magic? What does "making magic" mean here?
3. Why are the boys in Melba's music club jealous of her?
4. How does Momma Lucille show she is proud of Melba?
5. Why does Momma Lucille let Melba tour with the band when she is still only a teenager and her only child?
6. How does segregation affect Melba's career and self-esteem?
7. How do the illustrations in the book capture the mood of the story? What about the style of the illustrations suggests the mood of the music?
8. What about the illustrations shows jazz's energy and spirit?
9. Why might the author start and end the story with the same two sentences: "Spread the word! Melba Doretta Liston was something special."
10. The main text and the afterword both give facts about Melba Liston's life and career. How are these sections different from each other? How are they similar? How are both texts examples of nonfiction?
11. The author chooses to shape certain verbs and onomatopoeia to resemble the meaning of the word or sound it makes. How do these choices affect the tone and mood of the story?
12. Why might the author use the words *little* and *big* together in the title?
13. Why do you think the author chose to include the quotation from Melba Liston on the back cover of the book? How does the quotation relate to the central idea of the book and Melba's character traits?

Reader's Response

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1 and 2 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4–6)

Use the following questions and writing activities to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to the book. Suggest that students respond in reader's response journals, essays, or oral discussion. You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work.

1. In this book, music, particularly jazz, has the powerful effect of helping Melba feel less discouraged or lonely. Write about a time you felt lonely or discouraged and what you did to overcome those feelings. Did you listen to or play music, write a poem or story, draw a picture, talk to someone, or do something else? Has enjoying art or expressing yourself in art helped you think about your feelings? How have these activities helped you?
2. Melba is quite persistent, or determined, to achieve her dream of mastering the trombone and becoming a musician. Share a time you demonstrated persistence and worked hard to achieve a goal. What was your goal? Who helped you achieve

- your goal? What challenges did you face? What advice would you give someone who wants to achieve a goal, but might feel discouraged or scared?
3. Imagine you are a theater owner and Melba and her band are coming to perform at your theater. Write a post for a music blog or create an advertisement to post online to interest people in buying tickets to see Melba and the band perform.
 4. Melba's aunts, mother, and grandfather are quite proud of her talent and hard work. Describe a time when someone special in your life was proud of you. How did they demonstrate their feeling? How did their support make you feel? Do you think everyone needs someone who believes in them? Why?
 5. Would you recommend this book to a friend? Why or why not? Describe what makes this an interesting book or what you might do to improve it.

ELL Teaching Activities

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–6)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English Language Learners.

1. Assign ELL students to partner-read the story with strong English readers/speakers. Students can alternate reading between pages, repeat passages after one another, or listen to the more fluent reader.
2. Have each student write three questions about the story. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
3. Depending on students' level of English proficiency, after the first reading:
 - Review the illustrations in order and have students summarize what is happening on each page, first orally, then in writing.
 - Have students work in pairs to retell either the plot of the story or key details. Then ask students to write a short summary, synopsis, or opinion about what they have read.
4. Have students give a short talk about what they admire about Melba in the story.
5. The book contains several content-specific and academic words that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary. Expose English Language Learners to multiple vocabulary strategies. Have students make predictions about word meanings, look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, list synonyms and antonyms, create an action for each word, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

(Introduction to the Standards, page 7: Student who are college and career ready must be able to build strong content knowledge, value evidence, and use technology and digital media strategically and capably)

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas. These can also be used for extension activities, for advanced readers, and for building a home-school connection.

Social Studies

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7 and 9)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strand 2, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4–6, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9)

1. Have students research the history of jazz. Where was jazz “born?” What instruments are used to play jazz music? How has jazz changed over time? What influence did African Americans have on jazz and American music? What is *improvisation*, and how is it important to jazz? Students can explore [Jazz in America](#) for a timeline of developments in jazz and more.⁹
2. Have students investigate the role of women in jazz. In what parts of the jazz scene have women typically participated? Who are some famous women jazz players, composers, and singers? How were women jazz musicians treated in the jazz community and broader music community? What challenges did women singers and players face due to their gender and the color of their skin in the United States and in other countries around the world? How did jazz open opportunities for these women and others? What contributions did they make to worldwide music and entertainment? Helpful information can be found on “Women in Jazz” from NPR’s *Jazz Profiles*, [part 1](#)¹⁰ and [part 2](#).¹¹
3. Encourage students to research the Great Depression and its effects on Americans. What caused the Great Depression? What motivated people to move to new cities or states, like with Melba’s family? How did the Great Depression affect African American communities?
4. In November 2011, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) officially designated April 30 as International Jazz Day “to highlight jazz and its diplomatic role of uniting people in all corners of the globe.” For educational resources and events for Jazz Day, check out [JazzDay.com](#).¹²

Music

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7 and 9)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strand 2, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4–6, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3)

1. Have students investigate one of the jazz artists mentioned in the book: Gerald Wilson, Billie Holiday, Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, or Quincy Jones. When did this person live? What type of jazz did the person create? Was the person a singer or did the person play an instrument? What instrument(s) did he or she play? What challenges did the person face? How did jazz help the artist? What music did he or she create and perform? With whom did this jazz artist collaborate?
2. Ask students to listen to some jazz recordings, including one of Melba Liston. Students can then research who created the piece, where it was performed, who performed it, and the central idea or message of the piece. Students may look for music reviews to learn about the audience and critical reception. Was the piece popular when it was first performed? Why or why not? Do you think audiences today would still enjoy it or find it meaningful? Why or why not? For students to explore different jazz songs, listen to free jazz audio snippets across the history of jazz at [JazzinAmerica.org](#)¹³ or the [playlist by illustrator, Frank Morrison](#), from The Open Book Blog.¹⁴
3. Invite your school, local community college, or nearest university’s music department to bring jazz instruments, particularly a trombone, to your classroom. Ask the

⁹ <http://www.jazzinamerica.org/JazzResources/Timeline>

¹⁰ http://www.npr.org/programs/jazzprofiles/archive/women_1.html

¹¹ http://www.npr.org/programs/jazzprofiles/archive/women_2.html

¹² <http://jazzday.com/>

¹³ <http://www.jazzinamerica.org/JazzResources/Audio>

¹⁴ <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2014/09/17/the-little-melba-playlist-a-jazz-music-primer-from-frank-morrison/>

musicians to play each instrument and allow students to hold each instrument, if permitted. What instruments are popular in jazz? How do the different instruments affect the mood of a jazz song?

4. Help students understand jazz instruments and the sounds they produce, song structure, lyric writing, musical styles, and ear training. PBS created [Chuck Vanderchuck's "Something Something" Explosion](#) to expose children to music and music composition.¹⁵ You will find videos, audio clips, and lessons to teach jazz musical concepts and performance skills.
5. Melba Liston was a trombone player, composer, and arranger. What are the responsibilities of each of these roles in a jazz band? Compare the roles of the composer, arranger, singer, player, and instrumentalist.

English Language Arts

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3 and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 9)
(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strand 2 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4–6)
Have students read [Baby Flo](#),¹⁶ [In Her Hands](#),¹⁷ or [Catching the Moon](#),¹⁸ all of which are biographies of women who faced obstacles of race and gender in pursuit of their dreams. As students reflect on each story, ask them to compare how a clear goal and passion helped these women conquer hardship along the way. What is the central idea of each book? How do these stories tell about the impact African American women have had on the world around them? What does each story demonstrate about persistence and passion?

Art

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

1. If possible, listen to *Melba Liston and Her 'Bones*, originally released in 1958 and the only album Melba Liston recorded as the lead musician. Design a cover for this album. Research what the songs on the recording are about or the mood they create when you listen to them. Study other jazz album covers for ideas and think about what will be eye-catching to customers.
2. Follow simple directions to [make a musical instrument](#) and try jazz rhythms from OurStory, a website created by the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History to encourage adults and children in grades K–4 to read historical fiction and biography together.¹⁹

Home-School Connection

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3)
(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strand 2, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strand 4, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strand 7)

1. Encourage students to interview a parent, guardian, or adult mentor who is a fan of jazz. What does the person know about jazz? What jazz music or artists were popular when the person was growing up? What memories does the person have about jazz in popular culture? Why does the person think people like jazz? What jazz song(s) would the person recommend?
2. Invite students to interview a parent, guardian, or adult mentor about music at home. What makes music important to you and your family? What instruments, if any, are

¹⁵ <http://pbskids.org/chuck/>

¹⁶ <https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2767>

¹⁷ <https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2712>

¹⁸ <https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2372>

¹⁹ <http://amhistory.si.edu/ourstory/activities/jazz/>

played in your home? What kind of music does your family like to listen to? What songs are meaningful to you?

3. Melba Liston was passionate about music and stopped at nothing to make a life around it. Have students interview a parent, guardian, or adult mentor about what the person is passionate about either currently or when growing up. How is this passion enjoyable, meaningful, or important to the person? Does the person want to pursue a career in this field or just enjoy it as a hobby? What advice does the person offer for turning a passion into a career?
4. Encourage students to ask a parent, guardian, or adult mentor to describe a time he or she experienced prejudice or witnessed prejudice toward someone else. How did the experience make the person feel? What did the person do, if anything? How did the person overcome the obstacle? What changes has the person seen since his or her childhood, or hope to see in the future to make the world a fairer, more just place?
5. Invite students to research a musician from their city or state. What type of music and instrument does/did the musician play? Create a timeline of major events in the musician's life and career. Using a Venn diagram, compare and contrast this musician's life and career with the life and career of Melba Liston.
6. Celebrate International Jazz Day (April 30) or Jazz Appreciation Month in April with [112 ways](#) by the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.²⁰

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katheryn Russell-Brown is a professor of law and director of the Center for the Study of Race and Race Relations at the University of Florida. She grew up in a family of music lovers, where jazz was an integral part of the sounds of daily life. A radio broadcast in 2008 about Melba Liston inspired Russell-Brown to research the musician and eventually write *Little Melba and Her Big Trombone*, her first picture book. Russell-Brown lives in Gainesville, Florida, with her husband and their twins. Visit her online at kbrbrown.net.²¹

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Frank Morrison has illustrated numerous award-winning books, including *Sweet Music in Harlem* and *George Crum and the Saratoga Chip*, both published by Lee & Low Books. He is a recipient of a Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Award for New Talent in Illustration, and his artwork is included in many private collections, including those of Bill Cosby and Maya Angelou. Morrison lives with his family in Georgia. To find out more about Frank Morrison, visit his website at morrisongraphics.com/.²²

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²⁰ http://www.smithsonianjazz.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=82&Itemid=73

²¹ <http://kbrbrown.net/>

²² <http://www.morrisongraphics.com/>

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RESOURCES ON THE WEB:

Learn more about *Little Melba and Her Big Trombone* at:

<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2854>

ORDER INFORMATION**On the Web:**

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