



STUDENT
MATINEE
PROGRAM

Discovery Guide



A MAGICAL, MUSICAL REMINISCENCE.

LACKAWANNA BLUES

LACKAWANNA BLUES is actor, playwright, and director Ruben Santiago-Hudson's ode to his 1950s childhood home: Lackawanna, New York. Santiago-Hudson's autobiographical play focuses on the woman who raised him, Rachel "Nanny" Crosby, and the eccentric community of lost souls and abandoned lovers she nurtured. Inspired by African griot storytelling traditions and the 1950s and '60s blues he grew up on, Santiago-Hudson embodies over 20 characters, accompanied by the music of composer Bill Sims Jr. *Lackawanna Blues* pays homage to a woman and place that gave refuge to those who needed to be accepted for who they were and to the power of family, community, and stories.

Ruben Santiago-Hudson crafted *Lackawanna Blues* as a means of empowering the women in his life through telling their stories and highlighting the roles they play as pillars of families and communities.

Written, Performed, and Directed by
RUBEN SANTIAGO-HUDSON

Music Performed by
CHRIS THOMAS KING

Original Music Composed by
BILL SIMS JR.

Additional Music Composed by
CHRIS THOMAS KING



Ruben Santiago-Hudson. Photo by Benedict Evans.



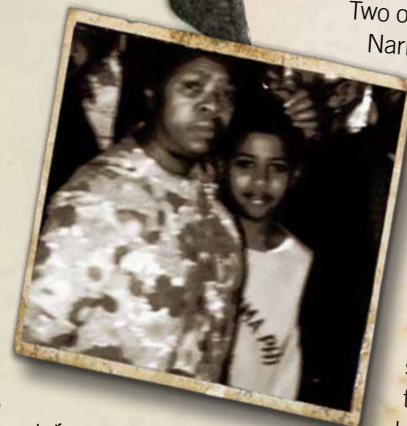
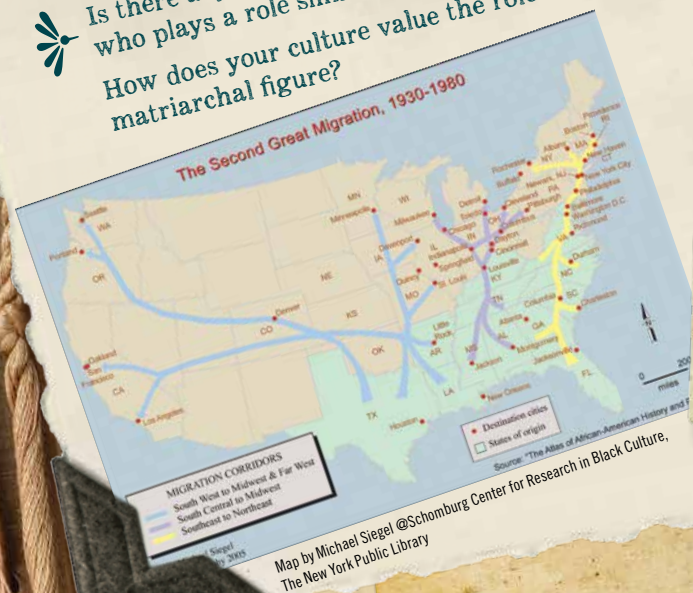
Who are the people in your life that bring your family and community together, and how do they accomplish this?

NANNY

Rachel “Nanny” Crosby is the matriarch of the boarding house at 32 Wasson Avenue, which acts as a safe haven for a rotating group of eclectic residents. Nanny moved to Lackawanna as part of the Great Migration, the movement of millions of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North and West from 1917 – the 1970s, spurred by jobs in industrial fields and related industries. The Great Migration opened new opportunities for African Americans in commerce and leadership, and allowed Nanny to become a business owner and community leader.

Nanny selflessly carries the emotional weight of those around her. Raising Junior in the absence of his parents, standing up to disrespectful and abusive men, and even caring for injured wild animals, she constantly puts the needs of her community above her own wants and desires.

Is there anyone in your community or family who plays a role similar to Nanny?
How does your culture value the role of a strong matriarchal figure?



THE NARRATOR / JUNIOR

Two of the characters played by Ruben Santiago-Hudson are himself: the Narrator, an adult looking back at his childhood, and Junior, who lives in Nanny’s boarding house. The older folks who also live in the boarding house provide Junior with leadership and guidance. Hearing their struggles helps Junior to learn and grow—and gives him a sense of family. Santiago-Hudson—like the Narrator/Junior—was born in Lackawanna, New York to an African American mother and a Puerto Rican father. Although he didn’t live with his parents, Santiago-Hudson maintained relationships with both of them throughout his life as well as his godparents, Adolph and Mattie Overton. All of them, as well as Nanny and the residents of her boarding house, provided him with love and support—proving the truth behind the African proverb “It takes a village to raise a child.” Surrounded by his village, Santiago-Hudson went on to become an accomplished performer in theatre, film, and television, as well as a director and writer.

THE COMMUNITY OF LACKAWANNA



“1956 Lackawanna, New York, like all Great Lakes cities, was thriving! Jobs everywhere, money everywhere. Steel plants, grain mills, railroads, the docks. Everybody had a new car and a conk. Restaurants, bars, stores, everybody made money. The smell of fried fish, chicken and pork chops floating in the air every weekend.”

THE RESIDENTS OF 32 WASSON AVENUE



For Santiago-Hudson, the play at its core is the story of a community taking care of its own. Far from the families who birthed and named them, the people who end up in Lackawanna also end up with new, colorful nicknames, a tradition in many African American communities. In Lackawanna, names like Numb Finger Pete, Montana, Pepper Red, and Small Paul become a trademark, a sign that you have been accepted and have become a part of the community. This community acceptance is key to the characters’ ability to move through society in a time and place of great change for people of color.

How do members of your community connect through stories and storytelling?
How has your community and/or environment helped shape your identity?

STORYTELLING & ORAL TRADITIONS

Today, thanks to technology like social media, text messaging, and video calls, we consume the personal stories of both strangers and friends in a more rapid and widespread way than generations before us. Historically these stories passed from person to person at a much slower pace in part because you needed to hear them face-to-face. In West Africa, a griot is a singer/historian who keeps the oral histories of families, tribes, dynasties, and communities alive through song and story. The role is passed down from generation to generation, and often encompasses much more than storytelling. Griots may be musicians and composers, poets and teachers, genealogists and ambassadors.

Ruben Santiago-Hudson channels the griot tradition in his formation and delivery of the narrative in *Lackawanna Blues*. Using language, rhythm, body, and voice, he brings the story to life onstage in the same way these traditional oral storytellers passed along knowledge of ancestral events and histories. The griot tradition is grounded in a sense of community. By passing along memories, stories, and experiences in a performative way, griots helped to preserve aspects of their culture through reflection.

THE BLUES

The blues evolved from a number of different cultures, but many scholars have traced aspects of early American blues music back to the songs of West African griots. Both griots and blues musicians use music to pass along memories, stories, and experiences. African American communities—including in New Orleans, Chicago, Memphis, Houston, and Los Angeles—have their own distinct styles of the blues. Storytelling is at the heart of them all.

Composer Bill Sims Jr.’s music, as interpreted by blues great Chris Thomas King, supports Ruben Santiago-Hudson’s storytelling: sometimes commenting on the story, sometimes advancing it, sometimes simply providing a foundation for the story to ride on but always present.

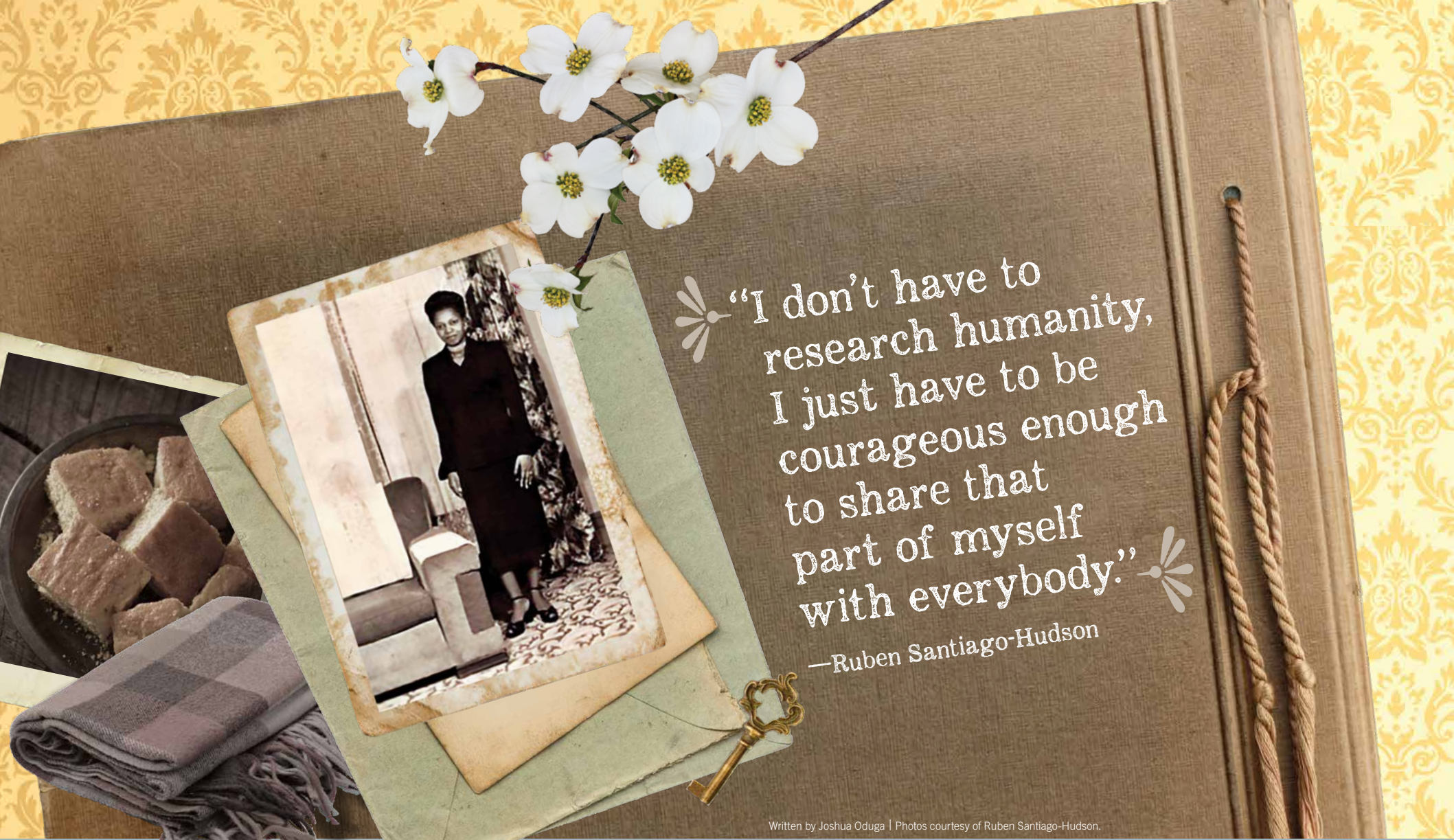
What type of music defines you?

Do any particular songs come to mind that would underscore particular moments in your life?

LACKAWANNA BLUES PLAYLIST

Scan this code using Search in your Spotify app to listen to classic and contemporary blues songs.





“I don’t have to
research humanity,
I just have to be
courageous enough
to share that
part of myself
with everybody.”
—Ruben Santiago-Hudson

Written by Joshua Oduga | Photos courtesy of Ruben Santiago-Hudson.

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