Get students thinking about language, sound, music, and art in fun, exciting ways.

It’s out of this world!

Mexican musician Juan Garcia Esquivel (es-KEE-vel) was a pioneer in the use of stereo sound. His music was quirky and whimsical, using unusual instrumentation and vocal textures. Esquivel was a true musical innovator, using sound and stereo as his musical palette.

In Esquivel! Space-Age Sound Artist, Duncan Tonatiuh’s illustrations are inspired by the Mixtec codex, an ancient Mexican writing system that combined glyphs and pictures.

The secret to making a music biography work in the classroom?

Play the music for your students!

Pre-Reading Activities

• Play a well-known song like “Mary Had a Little Lamb” or “Happy Birthday.” Have students find classroom items—pencils, rubber bands, rulers, crayon boxes—to use as “instruments” to play along with the song. Next, with students in small groups, have them work on producing another recognizable tune, without singing and only using their “instruments.” Have each group perform. Can the rest of the class guess the group’s song?

• Have your students make a list of all the sounds heard in the classroom NOT made by humans. Is the clock ticking? Do you hear road sounds? Does the heater make a noise? Try to list every single sound. Have students practice imitating the nonhuman sounds with their voices. For fun, look at videos of Bobby McFerrin to see how he uses his voice and body to make music. Ask your music teacher to share a collection of unusual instruments. Allow students to explore the various sounds they make.

• Play some mariachi—Mexican folk music Esquivel heard as a boy—for students, especially songs in Spanish. Ask students how the music makes them feel, even if they might not understand the words.

Common Core

This guide has been written in alignment with Common Core state standards (http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy). This guide covers all English Language Arts standards except, obviously, the range of reading expected over the course of a year.

If all activities are completed, students will demonstrate knowledge of key ideas and details from the text. Students will comprehend the book’s craft and structure. Most questions and activities require the integration of this knowledge.

Standards covered by this educator’s guide:
RL.1.1–1.9
RL.2.1–2.9
RL.3.1–3.9
RL.4.1–4.9
• Explain to the class that illustrator Tonatiuh uses very old Mexican art as inspiration for his artwork. The Mixtec codex included information about important people and historical events and celebrations—a perfect match for a biography of a musician who used traditional songs in his music. The Mesoamerican writing form used many pictographs. To demonstrate the idea of this writing style from long ago, have students “write” about, say, what they love to do during recess and what they absolutely do NOT like doing (so there will—or should be—some contrast). However, students may ONLY use shapes and colors in place of letters and words.

• Play a cumulative rhyming game with your students. Take a make-believe word like zup and have the first student repeat the word, then add a new rhyming word. The next student will repeat all the rhyming words and then add a new one ("zup, zup nup, zup nup jup, zup nup jup bup"). After you’ve played a few times, try singing these sounds!

• Have some fun listening and singing along with various vocalists who sing scat, improvised nonsense syllables that mimic an instrumental jazz solo. Esquivel’s music isn’t scat, but he often uses random, nonword vocals to create fun musical textures. Later, compare and contrast with students Esquivel’s lounge music and the scat songs of Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, or other interesting scat singers. Scat-singing activities for the classroom can also be found online.

• Have students find Mexico on a map and describe the directions they’d need to travel from their classroom to Mexico. Find Tampico, Mexico, on the map. What would those directions be if they flew from the classroom to Mexico City and then to Tampico? Esquivel traveled from Tampico to Mexico City (with his family), then from Mexico City (by car) to New York City, and then to Las Vegas. Trace this route on a map and describe the directions he went. Turn this into a math activity by calculating how many miles Esquivel traveled on the various legs of his journey.

• The subtitle of this book is Space-Age Sound Artist, because Esquivel created his music around the time humans first visited space. Have a class discussion about what space-age means. Have students draw pictures to illustrate this term.

Now that our brains are warmed up, let’s dig in!

Activities to Comprehend and Extend

• Share the book’s cover and have the class develop a list of its elements: names (author, illustrator, book title), images (Esquivel, keyboard, stars), colors. Share the back cover too, with the guitar player and (upside down) trumpet player. Explain that book covers have the important job of quickly summarizing a book and making people eager to read it. After examining the cover, collect student predictions about the book—its subject matter, genre, words they might find inside. Make sure students know that predictions aren’t right or wrong—they reflect our best thinking. Remind students that if our predictions match the text, we can make new, more detailed predictions (model this), and if our predictions don’t match, we need new predictions. Consider playing Esquivel’s music in the classroom as students make their predictions.

• Make connections to your rhyming-word and sound- and scat-singing activities by pointing out the AAAYYTEEE in the first spread, then the RINTY-TIN-TIN! in the next. Continue inspecting the spreads for the various sounds that surrounded Esquivel. Now read the book again, but this time play Esquivel’s Cabaret Mañana album or other Esquivel music. If it’s near December, his Christmas album with quirky versions of songs like “Frosty the Snowman” will get your students giggling! Have the class make a list of the sounds they hear in the music. Compare what they find in the music to the pre-reading activities.

• Read Esquivel! at a leisurely pace without stopping, so that students hear the whole text and respond to it on their own terms FIRST. Then reread the book or revisit certain pages so students see the value (and joy) of rereading. Were the predictions they made from their cover analysis accurate? Encourage students to keep an inquiring mind as they listen or read, asking themselves, Do I understand what is happening? Do I recognize any patterns? Collect reactions about things students noticed in the text and illustrations.

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Esquivel! Space-Age Sound Artist

- Play various renditions of “Sentimental Journey” (the Ray Charles and Ella Fitzgerald versions are good choices). Ask students to draw something abstract, with just one or two colors, that shows how these versions make them feel. Have students look at each other’s artwork and guess the emotion depicted. Discuss what in the music has the students responding this way. Now listen to Esquivel’s version of the same song. Have students draw how this version makes them feel. Talk about whether their reactions changed and why.

- Introduce students to the idea that all parts of a book work together to tell a story or convey meaning. Look carefully at the illustrations on the title page and back-matter pages. Have students draw and write about the artwork on the cover and title page, and that accompanies the Illustrator’s Note and the photo of Esquivel at the end. Ask about the orange-red endpapers and the blended colors on the cover, repeated at the end and in the back matter. What might those colors represent? How do they work with Esquivel’s story? Now that students have heard the text at least once and have heard some of Esquivel’s music, have them explain what they think the illustrator and publisher were trying to say with the cover, what the students like about the cover, and what they would change if they were the illustrator. Have them draw their own covers.

- In the spread featuring the radio station, we read, “When the radio comedian needed music for a skit about, say, a stout man walking his tiny poodle down a busy city street, Juan had to imagine what that might sound like.” Ask students to imagine what common classroom or neighborhood situations would sound like and then create sound skits—using only sounds, no dialogue—to portray them. Allow students to sing nonsense syllables and use common items like pencils and keys, plus musical instruments, if available. Have the class listen carefully to Esquivel’s music, noting that his sound effects have both very loud and very quiet parts—what musicians call dynamics. Encourage students to use dynamics in their sound skits. Expand the idea of dynamics into language and art: Have students write down words they feel should be loud and words that should be quiet. Have them draw loud pictures and subtler, quieter pictures. Guide a class discussion about how dynamics can make writing, art, music, and speech more expressive. Explore the book and have students identify the loud parts and the quiet parts. Encourage polite arguments!

- Have students use the media center to research Esquivel, lounge music, Mexico, Tampico, Mexico City, New York City, jazz, sound effect, stereo sound, Las Vegas, vinyl records, radio, player pianos, the Mixtec codex, Esquivel’s music, a timeline of Esquivel’s life, Esquivel’s children’s television program, Susan Wood, Duncan Tonatiuh, or other topics related to this text.

- The science of space travel might seem unrelated to music at first, but ask students to think more deeply about how science and space exploration could have affected how Esquivel conceived of and created his sound-art masterpieces. Ask students to think of how science and technology affect their lives—in the classroom, at home, in their after-school activities.

- Read to students Before John Was a Jazz Giant by Carole Boston Weatherford, Trombone Shorty by Troy Andrews, Django by Bonnie Christensen, Jazz by Walter Dean Myers, or other similar music-related books. Have students compare and contrast the books, the art, the music, and other elements.

- Most schools have persuasive writing requirements. Have students write and then deliver (to another class, the parent-teacher group, or principal) a book talk that convinces others to read Esquivel! Focus on writing for a specific audience by brainstorming with students which book-talk elements their audience would find persuasive.

- Read Esquivel! straight through one more time. Then ask the class what would’ve happened if Esquivel liked country music, hip-hop, rock, classical, gospel, or some other genre. If possible at your school, encourage students to bring in and share their favorite music. Ask: If we were writing a biography of this artist, what kind of artwork would it require? Have students search for artwork at the media center—or create their own—that matches their vision for such a book.

This guide was created by retired first-grade teacher Ed Spicer, winner of a 2016 Outstanding People for Education Award from the Allegan (MI) County School Board Association and a Cool Teacher Award from Grand Valley State University’s educational TV station. Ed’s taught a graduate-level course in young-adult literature and has served on several American Library Association committees, including those for the Printz and Caldecott awards. Ed’s written more than thirty educator’s guides for students of all ages. Ed’s on Twitter: @spicyreads, and Facebook: facebook.com/spicyreads.