

## MUSIC IS THE MEDICINE



Lead Partner



Exclusive Education Partner



*Docs For Schools is generously supported by lead sponsor DundeeWealth and exclusive education partner Humber School of Media Studies & Information Technology. Additional support is provided from The Hal Jackman Foundation, the Catherine and Maxwell Meighen Foundation, the Charles H. Ivey Foundation, Deluxe, Indigenous Culture and Media Innovations, and through contributions by individual donors.*

**hotdocs**  
OUTSPOKEN.OUTSTANDING.

 [www.facebook.com/docsforschools](http://www.facebook.com/docsforschools)

**WWW.HOTDOCS.CA**

# MUSIC IS THE MEDICINE

Directed by Lindsay Rusheleau

2010 | Canada | 45 min

## TEACHER'S GUIDE

This guide has been designed to help teachers and students enrich their experience of documentary film by providing support in the form of questions and activities. There are a range of questions that will help teachers frame discussions with their classes, activities for before, during and after viewing the film, and some web links that provide starting points for further research or discussion. In separate packages, there will also be support materials available with information regarding general viewing and teaching principles for documentary film and the fundamental aspects of making documentary films.

## The Film

Named after his first breakthrough album, *Music Is the Medicine* follows virtuoso blues-rock guitarist and singer-songwriter Derek Miller as he releases a new CD. A Mohawk born on the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, Miller has won two Juno Awards and played with music legends Willie Nelson and Buffy Sainte-Marie. Although critically acclaimed, however, he has struggled to make it big in the music industry. The film features concert footage, deeply personal interviews, and follows Miller over two years as he sets down tracks in the studio, tours small-town Ontario and travels as far as Nashville to try to break into the mainstream. Throughout, Miller is honest about his recovery from addictions and the emotional and spiritual aspects of his art.

Educational package written and compiled by Suzanne Methot  
[suzanne.methot@tdsb.on.ca](mailto:suzanne.methot@tdsb.on.ca)

## VIEWING THE FILM WITH STUDENTS

There are important themes in this film that have broad implications for students and their futures.

Take time to activate your students' background understanding of these themes before viewing.

This will help them as they come to their own understanding and develop their critical abilities.

The following three subsections, on this page, are intended to provide you with a range of pre-viewing, viewing and post-viewing activities. They are followed by a set of questions based upon the film's larger thematic domains, some follow-up questions and quotations, sample curricular outcomes, and a page of web links for further investigation.

### Pre-Viewing Activities

Pass the DVD around the classroom in a clear case. Have students examine the image on the DVD, which shows Derek Miller on stage with his guitar. Based on that image and on the title, ask them to predict what themes might be present in the film.

Print the quotations from the Extension Activities section on individual sheets of paper. Have students work in small groups or in pairs to discuss the ideas in the quotations. Then ask them to share their conclusions with the large group. As they discuss the quotations, ask students to think about the following:

- What is the main conflict in this film? How do you know this?
- From whose perspective is this story told? How do you know this?
- What values are being promoted? How do you know this?
- Whose point of view do the values represent? Are your values represented? Why or why not?
- Who is the intended audience for this film?

Have a large-group discussion about one of the Extension Activities quotations. Ask students to structure their discussion around the themes of identity, relationships, sovereignty and challenges.

### Viewing Activities

Have students take notes on the connections they see between the issues in this film and one of the Big Ideas in the Big Questions/Ideas/Themes section of this guide.

Have students describe what they see in the film. Ask them to withhold judgment and observe carefully. They can write notes or give an oral description.

Ask students to create a mind map as they watch the film. The mind map should contain the following key words:

conflicts, techniques, purpose and perspective. To get students started, use the following prompts:

- What are the main conflicts we encounter in this film? Were the conflicts resolved at the end of the film? Why or why not?
- Who produced this media text, and for what purpose? Who profits if the message is accepted? Who may be disadvantaged?
- How would this story be different if told from the perspective of another character in the film?

Have students jot down three questions for discussion that the film raises in their minds.

### Post-Viewing Activities

Have a large-group discussion guided by student questions written during the last Viewing Activity.

Have students revisit the quotations they discussed during the Pre-Viewing activities. Have a large-group discussion to see whether their opinions have changed after viewing the film.

Have students write a review of the film. Have them work the following elements into their review:

- A title for the review.
- The title and type of film they are reviewing.
- A brief summary of the content or story of the film, including the main conflict, the setting and the characters.
- Some analysis of the director's work: does the film seem to flow well from scene to scene and from sequence to sequence, or is it hard to follow? Do viewers know why the characters are doing what they're doing? Is it visually pleasing? Is the pace appropriate? How does the soundtrack add to the film? Does the director get the intended reaction from the audience?

- Comments on the camera work, editing, lighting or other visual impacts of the film.
- An overall assessment of the film, employing analysis and commentary that includes the central theme of the film (the point the film tries to make, its lesson or the central idea) and whether it holds the viewer's interest (and why).

Have students build a conceptual map showing the web of ideas, topics and associated subtopics in the film. Using the conceptual map as a guide, ask students to create questions they think will represent the important issues. Then, using the questions and the conceptual map, ask students to make interconnections among elements of the text (film). This should take the form of an argument, including a thesis statement and evidence from the text. Have students make a final judgment about the text based on the argument they created above. Students will learn that their evaluations and feelings are informed by description, analysis and interpretation.

Have students reflect on the processes of description, interpretation and evaluation they completed during the Pre-Viewing, Viewing and Post-Viewing activities. Ask students to write a personal reflection summarizing what they have learned, and how the processes of describing, interpreting and evaluating has informed their understanding of the film.

## THE BIG QUESTIONS/IDEAS/THEMES

### Multiple Perspectives

What is the subject of this film? Can you determine the filmmakers' perspective on this subject? What evidence can you find in the film to support your view?

How does this film help you analyze and interpret points of view about issues that concern people?

Does the filmmakers' perspective foster respect for diversity and an inclusive society? If so, how?

### Identity

Whose story is told in this documentary? Whose story is not told? How does this story, and the way it is told, help you understand your own community/life?

How do the people in this film identify with their community? What are the common bonds among the people in this film? What challenges do they face in expressing their identity?

What film techniques do the filmmakers use to convey the identity of the people in this film?

### Citizenship

What insights does this documentary offer about the ideals of good citizenship in the community depicted in this film?

How does the film deal with issues of freedom, equality, human dignity, and individual and collective rights and responsibilities?

### Change and Continuity

How does this film help you understand a community's values and its attitudes towards an issue at a particular time?

What changes do the people in the film experience? What causes those changes? What are the consequences of those changes for the people in the documentary?

### Culture and Community

Which aspects of a people's culture does this film focus on? Why do you think the filmmakers focused on those aspects?

How do the images, themes and message of this film help you understand the filmmakers' attitude towards the subject?

What do you think might have been the intended audience's attitude towards the documentary subject?

### Individuals, Societies and Economic Decisions

What economic systems are at work in this film? What are some of the causes and effects of the economic decisions made by the people in the film's community?

Does money play a part in the decisions being made in the film and what does it tell you about their local culture?

### Power and Governance

What system of government control do we see in this documentary? How is power distributed within this society?

What are the implications of that distribution on issues affecting the people's well-being and freedom?

### Global Connections

What global issues are addressed in this film? What is the filmmakers' point of view on the opportunities and challenges of those issues?

Adapted from NFB Documentary Lens: <http://www.nfb.ca>

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Have students view Derek Miller's video for "Music Is the Medicine" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POmB5p-6tPE>). As they watch, have them record what they see. What images does Miller use to communicate his message? (Answers should include a church, an Iroquois longhouse, a deserted road, a modest home, a fire and a bed.) To model the activity, have a large-group discussion to discuss the image of the deserted road and what it might mean (e.g., journeys, loneliness, choices, crossroads) and how it might relate to Derek Miller's life. Then have students research the role of the longhouse in Iroquois cultures, and write a one-page reflection on why a longhouse and a church might both appear in this video. What is the story Miller is trying to tell? Why might Miller play guitar in front of the church altar and sit next to a longhouse fire and offer tobacco to the fire?

Have students read the lyrics to Derek Miller's song "Music Is the Medicine" ([http://www.lyricsmania.com/music\\_is\\_the\\_medicine\\_lyrics\\_derek\\_miller.html](http://www.lyricsmania.com/music_is_the_medicine_lyrics_derek_miller.html)). In small groups, ask students to discuss how the lyrics might relate to Miller's personal life and his relationship to his art. What challenges might he be talking about? What relationships? How might the lyrics relate to his identity? If students have seen the music video, how might the ideas in the lyrics relate to the images in the video? Have students present a short (one- to two-minute) summary of their discussion to the large group.

### Additional Questions for Pre-Viewing or Post-Viewing Activities

How does Derek Miller's relationship with his son and his family on the Six Nations reserve reflect the importance of relationships in Aboriginal cultures? How would the racism Derek Miller experienced as a child affect the relationship he had (and has) with non-Aboriginal Canadians?

How might the challenges Derek Miller faced as a child and youth—the loss of his father and his grandfather—have led to both his addictions and his art?

How does telling one's story help make a person stronger? How does it help create and maintain personal identity? How might Derek Miller's story help other artists? Other people with addictions? Youth on his reserve?

Does this film encourage you to see the world differently?

### Quotations From the Film to Explore

*"Being proud as a Native American, it's opened doors and allowed me to have a career with my people supporting me, which I think is amazing. Hitting the glass ceiling is frustrating, but to get over the next hurdle, to get through to a bigger stage, that's the next step."*

*"This is a different record; it's going a different way. I've never written a record sober in my life. It's nuts."*

*"When you're an addict, you're, like, emotionally stunted or something and, like, completely chaotic and selfish. It's been a total rebirth. I'm not the same person in terms of how I take life and its challenges."*

*"I feel like I have unseen things backing me and helping me along."*

*"I didn't think I could ever have a shot at making a living doing music, because I come from the reserve, where there's nothing good. You're just a dirty Indian that's never gonna amount to anything. There was no way in hell I was gonna get outta there."*

*"I just wanted to disappear as a kid, because I didn't understand why I was looked down upon and somebody else wasn't."*

*"There was a lot of self-identity I had to find out. Even being Native American, I didn't really know much because residential schools stripped away a lot of our culture and our language and our everything. There's a whole world out there that we weren't really allowed to dream for, but... I went after it. And here we are. Trying."*

*"It's tough out there, man, but you gotta just have the passion and the will to wanna do something— and you practice. You try to find how self-aware you are, inside yourself, so you can judge your progress. You gotta be constructive and critical of yourself. Love what you're doing and be thankful for everything that you've got and have respect for yourself and your gifts and everything around you, and you should be good."*

*"The pain is the colours in the music."*

*"I never wanted to be a mediocre artist. I never wanted to be someone who could just get up on stage and paint by numbers. I want people to have an adventure when they listen to what I'm doing."*

## POST-VIEWING ACTIVITY: CD ARTWORK PROJECT

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Mark: \_\_\_\_\_ /40 (See rubric)

Musicians who are signed to a major label have record companies to help them record, manufacture and distribute their CDs. Independent artists, however, have to handle all the work themselves. The film showed Derek Miller picking up cartons of his latest CD at a Toronto manufacturer.

For this assignment, your group will be responsible for creating the artwork and text for a CD cover. You can use any art media you wish: digital, photography, paint/pencil/ink on paper or anything else you think will work. You may choose representational or abstract images. Your CD cover must contain images of importance to yourself and your fellow group members, either from your own lives or the life of your community(-ies), a title for the CD, a name for your group and a connection between the CD title and the artwork.

When every group has completed their artwork, display the results. Every group will give an oral presentation on the context and meaning of the images, their connection to the title, why and how the group chose its name and any other details the group wishes to include. After each group's presentation, there will be a feedback session from the large group, where the group receives peer evaluations, comments and questions on the artwork.

You may use ideas from the Pre-Viewing, Viewing or Post-Viewing activities, information from the film, the questions from the Big Questions/Ideas/Themes section of this guide and the rubric categories to help guide the creation of your artwork and text.

## CD ARTWORK RUBRIC

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Group: \_\_\_\_\_

Criteria	Level 1 (50-59%)	Level 2 (60-69%)	Level 3 (70-79%)	Level 4 (80-100%)
Knowledge and Understanding	5.0 5.2 5.4 5.6 5.8	6.0 6.2 6.4 6.6 6.8	7.0 7.2 7.4 7.6 7.8	8.0 8.2 8.5 9.0 10
Understands relationships between concepts (e.g., the relationship between the artwork and title)	Demonstrates limited understanding of the relationship between artwork and title	Demonstrates some understanding of the relationship between artwork and title	Demonstrates considerable understanding of the relationship between artwork and title	Demonstrates thorough and insightful understanding of the relationship between artwork and title
Thinking/Inquiry	5.0 5.2 5.4 5.6 5.8	6.0 6.2 6.4 6.6 6.8	7.0 7.2 7.4 7.6 7.8	8.0 8.2 8.5 9.0 10
Uses critical and creative thinking skills to plan and select strategies and resources	Uses critical and creative thinking skills with limited effectiveness	Uses critical and creative thinking skills with moderate effectiveness	Uses critical and creative thinking skills with considerable effectiveness	Uses critical and creative thinking skills with a high degree of effectiveness
Communication	5.0 5.2 5.4 5.6 5.8	6.0 6.2 6.4 6.6 6.8	7.0 7.2 7.4 7.6 7.8	8.0 8.2 8.5 9.0 10
Communicates ideas clearly using appropriate language that persuades the reader	Communicates information and ideas with limited clarity; not persuasive	Communicates information and ideas with some clarity; somewhat persuasive	Communicates information and ideas with clarity; very persuasive	Communicates information and ideas with clarity and insight; highly persuasive and well-argued
Use of language, symbols and images	Uses language, symbols and visual images with limited accuracy and effectiveness	Uses language, symbols and visual images with some accuracy and effectiveness	Uses language, symbols and visual images with considerable accuracy and effectiveness	Uses language, symbols and visual images with a high degree of accuracy and effectiveness

Comments:

Total: \_\_\_\_\_/40

## EXAMPLES OF CURRICULUM EXPECTATIONS

COURSE	OVERALL EXPECTATIONS
Grade 9 Native Studies: Expressing Aboriginal Cultures, Open	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• describe the elements of culture reflected in various art forms.</li> <li>• demonstrate understanding of how Aboriginal art forms reflect cultural identity.</li> <li>• demonstrate understanding of traditional Aboriginal forms of expression and their influence on the portrayal of Aboriginal identity in contemporary art forms.</li> <li>• explain how art forms can be an expression of sovereignty.</li> <li>• identify different interpretations of sovereignty exemplified in various art forms.</li> <li>• demonstrate how Aboriginal art affirms Aboriginal cultures.</li> <li>• demonstrate understanding of the impact of Aboriginal art forms on society.</li> <li>• explain how art forms are a means for promoting dialogue and healing in Aboriginal communities.</li> <li>• demonstrate understanding of issues related to the production of Aboriginal art forms.</li> <li>• identify how new and evolving art forms reclaim, revive and sustain Aboriginal cultures.</li> </ul>
Grade 10 Native Studies: Aboriginal Peoples in Canada, Open	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• describe the many aspects of Aboriginal identity.</li> </ul>
Grade 11 Native Studies: Aboriginal Beliefs, Values and Aspirations in Contemporary Society, College Prep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• describe the efforts of Aboriginal Peoples to attain autonomy in their lives.</li> <li>• describe how contemporary Aboriginal communities assert their autonomy through a blend of traditional and modern practices.</li> </ul>
Grade 11 Native Studies: Aboriginal Beliefs, Values and Aspirations in Contemporary Society, College/ Workplace Prep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• describe contributions made by Aboriginal peoples to Canadian society.</li> </ul>
Grade 9 The Arts: Comprehensive Arts, Open	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• describe, orally and in writing, the elements and principles of the arts found in their own work and that of others.</li> <li>• create a work by applying concepts common to all arts areas.</li> <li>• demonstrate the ability to conduct a step-by-step critical analysis of their own work and that of others.</li> <li>• demonstrate an understanding of cultural characteristics that distinguish an individual's and/or community's artistic identity.</li> </ul>
Grade 11 & 12 English, University/ College/ Workplace Prep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• demonstrate an understanding of a variety of media texts.</li> <li>• identify some media forms and explain how the conventions and techniques associated with them are used to create meaning.</li> <li>• reflect on and identify their strengths as media interpreters and creators, areas for improvement and the strategies they found most helpful in understanding media texts.</li> </ul>

## WEBSITES AND ONLINE RESOURCES

Musician Derek Miller's official website.

<http://derekmiller.ca>

This site was created specifically for the film *Music Is the Medicine*.

<http://musicisthemedicine.ca>

The online magazine RPM conducted an interview with *Music Is the Medicine* co-producer Rod Ruel.

<http://rpm.fm/interview/rod-ruel-talks-music-is-the-medicine>

In this interview, Derek Miller talks about the difficulties in being labelled an Aboriginal artist. The story also delves into stereotypical assumptions about indigenous music.

<http://rpm.fm/news/music-is-the-medicine-the-derek-miller-story>

## Various Links for Lesson Plan Ideas, Media Awareness, Critical Literacy and Documentary Films

Center for Media Literacy: A U.S. website which provides several resources for making, understanding and criticizing media.

<http://www.medialit.org>

Hot Docs Library: Dozens of online Canadian documentaries, including a number with education support material to aid with classroom viewing.

<http://www.hotdocslibrary.ca>

Hot Docs' Looking at Documentaries: A teaching guide that sets out questions designed to help teachers include the study of documentary film in their curriculum. Free PDF download.

<http://www.hotdocs.ca/youth>

Media Awareness: A Canadian non-profit media education and Internet literacy resource library.

<http://www.media-awareness.ca>

NFB Education: Rich in resources and activities.

<http://www.nfb.ca/education>

CAMPUS: Your online media solution from the NFB. Ontario teachers—activate your profile today at

<http://www.nfb.ca/campus/go>