

# PORTRAYAL & PERCEPTION

## AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN & BOYS



### Episode 1

## Pitch Perfect

**Music** can be a compelling force. Through piano keys, staccato horns, and mesmerizing voices, music can teach life lessons, encourage empathetic responses, and provide joyous excitement.

In this episode, WQED producer Minette Seate profiles leaders and students of Pittsburgh's **Afro American Music Institute** (AAMI). Directed by Dr. James Johnson, affectionately known as Dr. J., AAMI strives to impact African American boys beyond musical training by fostering a culture of pride and community responsibility. Traditionally Black music genres like blues, jazz, gospel, and hip-hop play a prominent role in helping Dr. J. and his fellow educators provide members of the award-winning AAMI Boys Choir and other AAMI students a strong, positive foundation from which to grow into the successful leaders of tomorrow.

### ABOUT THIS GUIDE

*Portrayal & Perception: African American Men & Boys* is a series of community-based television programs produced by WQED Multimedia showcasing positive media profiles of successful African American men. Sponsored by The Heinz Endowments, this series strives to inspire discussion, elevate portrayal, and clarify perceptions of African American men and boys in the community. This guide provides further information, discussion questions, and resources for students or groups to explore the topics highlighted in each episode.

### FOR TEACHERS

These guides are intended for use in sociology, information technology, media literacy, and social studies classes. Questions are geared for high school students, grades 9-12.

*You are creating role models, you are instilling hopes, and it's a really awesome thing to do and to be a part of.* – Howie Alexander

# Biography



## Dr. James Johnson (Dr. J.)

**Neighborhood:** Penn Hills

**Occupation:** Music Educator and Professional Musician

**Current Organization:** Afro American Music Institute

### What new projects are you working on?

A new partnership with Pittsburgh Public Schools for a Saturday afternoon program.

### Who was your greatest mentor and how did he affect your life?

My greatest mentor would have to be Dr. Ernest Lampkins who was my teacher in college. I actually played violin. He was over in the orchestra and he told me we got to diversify my music and I had some talent on the piano. So he started taking me around to professional gigs and I just couldn't believe I was making money having fun. So when I graduated, I kind of gravitated to the piano rather than the violin for which I was trained.

### What do you think are the greatest challenges and opportunities African American men face in the world today?

African American males are in a situation where their portrayal is not really the greatest thing. And it's really by design, by people who did not want to see us succeed through education. We can go all the way back to slavery. We were freed but we didn't have a job. You can go back to the Black Codes where there were deliberate attempts to keep African Americans down, period. Men and women. And we've always had second rate educational facilities. We've always had second rate books, and we just didn't have the same access to mainstream education that the rest of America did. Consequently they lose interest in what I call the western system of education. So then they go out, hit the streets and you know there aren't any jobs out there so they turn to the streets, they turn to crime. It's a challenge keeping them focused, knowing the kind of world that they live in, and helping them to move forward. The more they learn about themselves and their contributions to the world, their self-esteem rises and you don't get as much resistance as you would normally get just saying, "You better go to school and learn and do this, that and the other." They have no images, they have no history, and they have nothing to look up to. But when you teach it to them they tend to do better things with their lives because they have models. Models that you've shown them, models that you've taught them.

### What responsibility do you think African American male leaders have to the next generation?

In any society, it is the responsibility of the adults to pass down the culture to the children. In the African tradition we are talking about orally, and our traditional music. It's our responsibility to help the students learn from our mistakes. Our young kids can profit by our mistakes. Music is a powerful vehicle. *It's our job to pass down what I call the minefield, the pitfalls of what not to do.* I'm not really up on this modern technology they have but I do know enough to say, "Well look, you better stay away from that. That doesn't feel right, that doesn't sound right, doesn't look right," so that's all our responsibilities. And it's also our responsibility to help them to build community. The African society is a global community and right now we have gotten into a situation where we are divided by gains, and we are divided by territory, and we have allowed that to happen. We need to keep that umbrella of the African spirit over our African American males, and this is how I think, going forward, we are going to survive into the future.



*The question becomes, if the Afro American Music Institute was not there, who would miss us?*

– Dr. James Johnson

# Discussion Questions

*For every person out there with a gun, there is someone out there with a pen.*  
– Howie Alexander

## CREATE YOUR OWN MEDIA!

Teachers, help your students create their own media. Download the [Media Guide](#) and [Common Resources](#).

1. How does blues music typify African American culture? What about other types of music?
2. The teachers and older students at AAMI serve as mentors to the younger students; what mentorship qualities do you think are most important? Do you have a mentor? Are you a mentor?
3. Does it ever bother you when you see the way that African American men and boys are portrayed in music videos? If you directed a video, what would it look like?
4. What is the role of organizations like AAMI in a community? Does your community have similar organizations?
5. What life lesson has music taught you or those around you?
6. Dr. J. believes in using “military-like” structure to create stability and discipline in his students. Do you think this is an effective teaching technique? Talk about your opinion with a small group.



## FEATURED ORGANIZATIONS

**Afro American Music Institute:**  
[www.afroamericanmusic.org](http://www.afroamericanmusic.org)

**Afrika Yetu:** [www.afrikayetu.org](http://www.afrikayetu.org)

# Resources

**Archives of African American Music and Culture:** Online repository of materials covering a range of African American musical idioms and cultural expressions from the post-World War II era, collected by Indiana University-Bloomington — [www.indiana.edu/~aaamc/](http://www.indiana.edu/~aaamc/)

**National Museum of African American Music:** Museum located in Nashville, TN, honoring the legacy and detailing the impact of over 50 musical genres created or influenced by African Americans  
[www.nmaam.org](http://www.nmaam.org)

**Honor! A Celebration of the African American Cultural Legacy:** Interactive timeline highlighting performances by African American musicians at historic Carnegie Hall in New York City  
[www.carnegiehall.org/honor/history](http://www.carnegiehall.org/honor/history)

**Resources for Teachers - African American Music:** Directory of reference books, websites, and textbooks about African American music provided by Columbia College Chicago — [www.colum.edu/CBMR/Resources/Resources\\_for\\_Teachers/Resources\\_For\\_Teachers\\_-\\_African-American\\_Music.php](http://www.colum.edu/CBMR/Resources/Resources_for_Teachers/Resources_For_Teachers_-_African-American_Music.php)

**National Museum of African American History and Culture:** A museum of the Smithsonian, where all Americans can learn about the richness and diversity of the African American experience, what it means to their lives, and how it helped shape this nation  
[www.nmaahc.si.edu/](http://www.nmaahc.si.edu/)

## MEDIA

**The Blues:** Seven-part film series produced by Martin Scorsese focusing on how the blues evolved from parochial folk tunes to a universal language — [www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues)

**Explore - Jazz, Black Culture Connection:** Special collection of videos and web-exclusive features from trusted producers and PBS member stations about jazz  
[www.pbs.org/black-culture/explore/jazz/#.U4yWOnJdWSo](http://www.pbs.org/black-culture/explore/jazz/#.U4yWOnJdWSo)

**Masters of Jazz:** Series of videos, interviews and articles about the next generation of jazz masters, all mentored by Thara Memory — [www.opb.org/artsandlife/series/masters-of-jazz](http://www.opb.org/artsandlife/series/masters-of-jazz)



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