

Glossary

A sing-along	cantar a coro
boost the spirits	levantar la moral
fill-in-the-blanks	rellenar los huecos
good grasp of Spanish	buen conocimiento de Español
out of pocket	sin dinero
kicking his heels	sin nada que hacer
number	canción
supplementary	adicional / extra
to take a firm hold	convertirse en algo importante
to ditch	abandonar
billed	programado
lyric sheets	hojas de las letras de música
to smack of something	esto me huele a algo
to be tailor made	estar hecho a la medida
pretty raucous	bastante ruidoso
linked to	relacionado con
lavish	lujoso
lined up	preparado
rendition	una interpretación
to take your eye off the ball	distraerse por algo

DANI'S SCHOOL OF ROCK

Russell Parton meets musician Dani Griffin, the Bruce Springsteen of Madrid's schools

As much as in the classroom as in wartime, there's nothing like a sing-along to boost the spirits. That said the usefulness of songs in teaching English is often criminally undervalued by teachers. One of the problems — apart from that of picking something cool and the worry of students not liking it — is finding something linguistically relevant or that at least relates to what's going on in class. Then there's what to do with it, other than your average fill-in-the-blanks exercise.

Dani Griffin has none of these problems. For a start he's not a teacher, but a musician who for 14 years has been helping Madrid's primary and pre-school teachers motivate their young English learners by giving concerts in schools. "I was a classroom teacher years and years ago in an academy in Chicago," he tells me, "but I always wanted to make my living as a musician." Having met his girlfriend while studying for a semester in Seville, and with a good grasp of Spanish, Dani moved to Spain to fulfil his ambitions. Since then he's had his own group, recorded as a drummer with such big-name Spanish artists as Ariel Rot, Miguel Rios and Bunbury, and has even toured the world.

But the going hasn't always been easy. Back in 1994, Dani cancelled a whole summer of work with his group so he could go on what was billed as a massive tour with a well-known recording artist who'd sold over 100,000 records. It turned out to be only six gigs, leaving Dani out of pocket, kicking his heels and cursing his bad luck. "It wasn't her [the artist's] fault. But it was then that I said I've got to do something to stabilise this career."

Dani got the idea of doing school gigs and started out just singing traditional numbers on the guitar. "I was doing about 10 to 20 gigs a year and it really wasn't anything I was focused on at all." But what started as something supplementary soon took a firm hold. "I suddenly realised I could do something more interesting with it by writing my own music." Everything evolved organically from there: the kids liked the songs and soon Dani ditched the guitar and voice approach, preferring to sing to pre-arranged backing, which in turn allowed him to incorporate more movement into the concerts.

"This is what I give the schools," he says, handing me a pack of lyric sheets which includes all the dance movements marked out. "Each phrase goes with a gesture and while they're singing they're doing all these gestures." Though it may smack of an aerobics class, the advantages of such an approach are clear, with each movement linked to the meaning of the song. "It's a carrot-donkey dynamic: in concert as soon as I start moving they start moving. The idea is to have them repeat everything I say in English and do everything I do."

Dani tailor-makes his concerts to suit his audience, so for pre-schoolers he slows everything down, allowing three and four year olds to sing along. The gigs for the older kids can be pretty raucous affairs, depending on which songs the teachers choose. You could have as many as 350 youngsters in a single show rocking out to songs about scary castles and dancing dinosaurs, sailors and ice cream; alternatively a teacher may choose to focus on a song highlighting a certain point of grammar or set of vocabulary. Dani even has what he calls his 'message' songs about serious themes such as hunger, war or racism, which can complement what a class is doing in areas other than English.

Dani already has over 100 shows lined up for this year, which, he tells me, is more than most major touring groups. And demand for his services doesn't stop there, as his rock 'n' roll side has revived itself spectacularly in recent years. First, as drummer for Argentina-born artist Ariel Rot, he was twice nominated for a Latin Grammy in the best rock album category, and following that, he was asked to be the new drummer in the hugely popular 70s Spanish group Tequila when they reformed last year.

Adoring crowds of thousands and lavish after-parties now await with every gig, and last summer the band's re-recorded rendition of megahit 'Salta' was used as a theme for both Spain's Olympics and Eurocopa coverage. "It's a very different role and a different high," he says modestly, "but really I think the two things complement each other well. For example, the children's stuff helps me be a better rock 'n' roll drummer because it makes me think of the music as a whole, rather than just my own drum part."

Not that Dani's in danger of taking his eye off the ball. For now and for the foreseeable future, his priorities lie with making sure the kids he plays to have as good a time as they possibly can. "You know, I do a lot of jokes, I clown around and I try to make it really entertaining for the kids. Basically they need to find me funny and attractive as a person. If they don't walk away saying, 'man that was great. He was funny and I had a ball,' then for me it's a failed project."

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Try to answer these questions based on the story

- 1) Before giving concerts in schools, what experience of music did Dani have?
- 2) What led Dani to explore doing concerts in schools?
- 3) What is the advantage of Dani not using his guitar?
- 4) How does Dani help the pre-school kids understand his lyrics?
- 5) What type of songs does Dani offer the schools?
- 6) How is Dani connected to the group Tequila?
- 7) Why did Dani hear himself a lot on the television last summer?
- 8) How do the two sides of Dani complement each other?
- 9) Which role does Dani prefer?