

Making a connection

Sign-language interpreter helps deaf audiences enjoy concerts, dirty lyrics and all

By Alyson Ward

5/6/2014

Amber Galloway Gallego was in bed when a friend texted her: "Turn on Jimmy Kimmel."

"I was like, 'Why?'" said Galloway Gallego, who lives in Houston. Then she flipped on the late-night talk show and saw herself on TV.

Kimmel was showing a clip of Galloway Gallego on stage at Lollapalooza, dancing and doing sign language as rapper Kendrick Lamar rapped expletives. An audience member had captured about a minute of her performance, shaky camera and all, and posted it on YouTube.

In the nine months since that Chicago music fest, Galloway Gallego's sign-language spectacle has been viewed about 4 million times on YouTube. With a rapper's swagger, she lets it fly, signing rapid-fire lyrics and dirty words that look like dirty words. Her performance is lewd. It is startlingly, hilariously cool. It's also her job.

Galloway Gallego, an American Sign Language interpreter who specializes in music, has done the same thing at hundreds of concerts. She's hired to stand at the side of the stage and interpret Madonna and Paul McCartney, Lady Gaga and Rage Against the Machine for deaf audience members. She works South by Southwest every year, and she's in high demand at music festivals such as Austin City Limits and Lollapalooza.

"I don't play anything. I don't sing. But I can sign really well, and I have good rhythm and I love music."

She wants to share that love with people who can't hear it for themselves. Galloway Gallego's interpretations are full-body physical. She moves to give a sense of the beat and what's happening in the music. If there's a guitar solo, she plays air guitar. If keyboards are driving the melody, she'll play chords on an imaginary keyboard. And when the lyrics begin, she shares both the words and the meaning, acting it out with full emotion as she translates.

"Music does something to my soul," she said. "I feel like if we're not able to show that, then what are we doing up there interpreting?"

Rap fan

Galloway Gallego, 37, didn't plan to become an interpreter. When she was a kid, she wanted to be a rapper. "I was from the hood" in San Antonio, she said. "Rap music was a huge part of my life." She'd write her own rhymes and dream of being on stage.

She also was learning sign language from an early age.

When Galloway Gallego was 5, her father dated a woman whose son was deaf. "He taught me my first signs," she said. A few years later, she was cared for by a baby sitter who had two deaf children. In high school, she was a trainer for the football team when a deaf player tore his ACL and needed therapy. And a couple of years later, when she herself needed therapy after a car accident, her roommate at the rehab hospital was deaf.

"It's funny," Galloway Gallego said, "to have all those incidences happen to you and still not realize your life's purpose."

When she enrolled at St. Philip's College in San Antonio with plans to become a physical therapist, Galloway Gallego became friends with the deaf community there. One night at a party, Sir Mix-a-Lot's "Baby Got Back" came on the stereo, and she spontaneously got up to interpret.

"I was doing it with all the movements and the rhythm," she said, "and I was dancing and signing, and one of my deaf friends said, 'What are you doing?' I said, 'I'm interpreting music.' She said, 'I've never seen music like that before.'"

It was an off-the-cuff interpretation, but it looked like nothing any of Galloway Gallego's deaf friends had ever seen.

"For years," she said, "deaf people would tell me, 'Music's a hearing thing. We don't get it.'" But Galloway Gallego didn't agree. "I said, 'Have you seen music? You can *see* music.'"

Soon after, she went to a Wallflowers concert at the San Antonio Rodeo and saw that the small section of deaf concertgoers had a team of interpreters - but the interpreters were merely standing there, reciting lyrics with their hands.

"All the deaf people were talking in the deaf section," she said. "No one was paying attention to the concert. It was disheartening to me because some of the songs are so great, you know? I thought: Maybe I can change something somehow so that deaf people love music."

That's when Galloway Gallego got serious about music interpretation. She enrolled in an ASL interpreter program at San Antonio College and approached the San Antonio Rodeo about coordinating concert interpreters, showing them what she could do with a song. For the next few years, until she moved to Houston in 2005, Galloway Gallego was in charge of arranging interpreters for each of the rodeo's 20-odd nightly concerts. She handled many of the shows herself.

Preparation

Preparing a song takes hours.

"I listen to it over and over," Galloway Gallego said, memorizing the lyrics and forming a story board in her head. She'll learn about the artist's background and influences, then pore over fan boards and discussion groups online to get a sense of what each lyric really means. Finally, she'll create and memorize her own interpretation.

Interpretation isn't a word-for-word translation of a song; the presentation is more conceptual. "ASL is grammatically different" from English, Galloway Gallego said, and it takes effort to explain songs that are full of metaphor or wordplay.

When interpreting Cyndi Lauper's "True Colors," she'll explain that "true colors" can mean more than actual color. "If I said it in ASL, it would come out 'real color,'" she said. "That doesn't really make sense. But if I say, 'True colors means personality, character, the person that you are' and go from there, they'll know exactly what I'm talking about."

Galloway Gallego doesn't shy away from interpreting the raunchiest of lyrics.

"Oh my gosh, no," she said, laughing. "I don't mind dirty language, cursing, any of that. I know it's not mine - it's somebody else's." So when the expletive-laced song "... Problems" became her 15 minutes of national fame, Galloway Gallego didn't worry for a second about the content. "My first thing was: Is it good language?" she said. "I wanted to make sure it was clear, it was understandable, that the ASL was clear, that it was conceptually accurate and that it made sense. And it did."

Jo Rose Benfield, who lives in Austin, is a deaf performer and music lover. When she goes to concerts, she said, "Amber is one of the very few interpreters that I actually appreciate" because "she takes the time to get familiar with the music and has that mentality of a visual artist."

"Amber is one of the few interpreters that have grown up in the deaf community," Benfield said in an email. "That is why deaf audiences love her - because she actually gives us the full-on experience of what the artists are actually expressing through their music."

Teaching the craft

Galloway Gallego also teaches sign-language interpretation at Houston Community College, Lone Star College and Lamar University. She's teaching some of her students to interpret music the way she does, she said, because there aren't enough music interpreters to go around.

The Americans with Disabilities Act requires that businesses provide deaf customers with equal access if it's requested. For a concert venue, that means providing an interpreter for the show.

Too often, Galloway Gallego said, deaf concertgoers get captioned lyrics or interpreters who aren't qualified to interpret music.

"It's so disappointing," she said. "They always see it as a price tag and not accessibility. It's somebody's language - it's somebody's life. I think a lot of times they don't understand that."

But hearing people are starting to get it. After the Lollapalooza video went viral, Galloway Gallego was invited to show her skills in person on "Jimmy Kimmel Live," signing along to rapper Wiz Khalifa's hit song "Black and Yellow." Benfield, the deaf performer, joined her on stage.

"I understand how emotions are evoked by certain ways that people say things," Galloway Gallego said. "I feel like that's what music does to us - that's how we connect, and it's such a huge part of our soul."

And she's a key link in that connection.

"You have this fan base, the people in the crowd, and that energy is overflowing to the artist," she said. "But at the same time, the artist is giving this energy back." By interpreting, she said, "I'm also a part of that energy that's flowing through the artists to our deaf fans. They're feeling that energy."

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