

John Nowak

Spanish Language, Literature and Culture in Santander

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### A Universal Language

On my final night in Santander, Spain I choked back tears as I said my final goodbye to my friends. I am always the emotional one in the group, and this night was no different. Still, I knew my friends were also sad to part ways. We had shared so many memories and I had learned so much from them. We played music together, they took me to barbecues in the country, I met their friends and families and — unlike my friends from Michigan State — I wasn't going to see them after I returned home. For seven weeks, I was the temporary keyboard player for a local band called the Groovin' Beards. I learned 17 songs, practiced with the band for hours on end, performed for more than 100 people and we all became best friends. My Spanish improved exponentially during my time in Spain, but with Santi, Quique, Gustavo and Luis, I found another way to communicate: through music.

I met the Groovin' Beards the first Saturday night we were in Santander, at a bar called Tia María. When my MSU friends left, I stayed behind to talk with my new friends, Quique and Santi. The owner of the bar, Mario, had introduced us, and less than a minute into conversation, we discovered we were all musicians and had many favorite artists in common. We gave each other suggestions to listen to, discussed our favorite Grover Washington Jr. song and talked about our own bands. We hung out and talked about Frank Zappa, Spain and the beaches of Santander until the morning hours, as the conversation flowed and I tried to keep up with my strong but timid Spanish skills. The

next night, I joined them on stage, playing the drums in front of a crowd of 50-plus strangers, and two nights later, the bass player Luis shouted, “You’re in the band!”

This improbable four-day whirlwind of landing myself in a Spanish band was hard to believe and hard to explain to my classmates. On the Tuesday before my first rehearsal with the band, I told some friends I couldn’t go to the beach because I had band practice. I heard, “Band practice?” and “With who?” and “You play an instrument?” and even, “You’re getting in the car with random guys you met at the bar four days ago?!” No matter how I tried, I could not effectively put into words how perfectly I got along with these guys. I told my classmates that after the first night of jamming with my new band mates that it was like we were best friends. After just five days in Spain, I had found the local group of people I shared the most in common. I found the strange, foreign and exciting place in the world that I would fit into for the next seven weeks. I found a part of the Santander community that I would grow to be a part of, and that would be the hardest thing to say goodbye to when my time in Spain was up.

Through music, I connected with complete strangers 3,939 miles away from home. My hard work and studies at MSU for four years prepared me to go to Spain and talk with natives, and the incredible study abroad program I was involved in and the teachers and directors I worked with gave me the freedom, confidence and opportunity to get involved in my new community. I was proud of the amount of Spanish I was speaking with them, but music was the language through which we were truly communicating.

Weeks passed and each day was better than the one before. I did my best to take full advantage of my time in Santander, the resources I was provided, and the new relationships I had made since arriving. Every now and then as I was walking through the

streets with my new band, I would look around, take in my surroundings, and smile. Through my new friends I met even more local musicians, music fans and natives of the city. Every Sunday night I participated in an “open jam” at a bar where 15 local musicians would play music all night, like a continuous game of musical chairs. The community took me in — a random, bearded American college student — and treated me like one of their own local musicians. Having played in the Lansing and Grand Rapids local music scenes for my entire life, it felt surreal to be inserted and welcomed into a similar community in a foreign country. My experience is a perfect example of how music can bring people together and how it can connect people of all kinds all over the world. We had some conversations in Spanish, we had some conversations in English, but once the music started, we communicated purely through feeling, expression, and creativity.

Since returning to the United States, I’ve kept in touch with the Groovin' Beards and other musicians I met in Spain. We share YouTube videos of songs or artists we like, talk about our upcoming gigs and reminisce of the days that I was a part of their band. I am so lucky these four men let me into their creative space, an outlet where they go to forget about their long day at work or the fight they’ve had with their girlfriend. As a lifelong musician, I can say that when you’re in that space, everything feels right. Not only did they let me into this space, they wanted me to be there. It’s humbling to think that as much as I learned from them about the Spanish language, music, and life, they learned from me, too. This rewarding and comforting recognition of reciprocity and learning is exactly what makes music so powerful.

I'm confident that even if I didn't speak a lick of Spanish, I would still have met Santi, Quique, Luis and Gustavo and ended up playing music with them. Night after night, we would talk about how it felt like the stars had aligned for us. There was a reason I chose Santander as my study abroad program, there was a reason we met at Tia Maria on that Saturday night, and there was a reason an old dusty keyboard was sitting in their closet waiting to be used.

Through music, I expanded my knowledge of the language, the culture of Spain and the people who live there. This powerful and universal language allowed me to feel at home in a foreign city. As I look back on my time spent in Spain, I remember my final project for SPN 452: Teaching Spanish as a Second Language. I used music as a theme for my final presentation — a lesson plan I created to teach a class vocabulary, verbs and grammar. How could I use instrument names to effectively expand a student's vocabulary (drums are "la batería")? How could I use verbs like "to sing" (cantar) to demonstrate verb conjugation in a fun and creative way? This lesson plan came easily to me, and I had a ton of fun presenting to my class. It makes sense, because I was really just teaching them everything the Groovin' Beards taught me. And yes, we're already planning a reunion tour.