

HOW SIGN LANGUAGE INNOVATORS ARE BRINGING MUSIC TO THE DEAF

Transcribed by: Adrienne Smith & David Widman - Humber College

ESTELLE: This is Amber Galloway Gallego. She's interpreting a song for you in traditional American Sign Language. Now, here's the same song but it's in a specialized version of American Sign Language just for music.

♪

ESTELLE: You might actually recognize this riff. It's from "Don't Wanna Fight" by Alabama Shakes. So, which one connects you more with the music?

♪

AMBER: Hi, I'm Amber Galloway Gallego.

ESTELLE: She's interpreted concerts in ASL for literally every artist you could think of.

AMBER: Adele, Kendrick Lamar, Drake. I think it's up to 400, a little bit over 400 now.

ESTELLE: Now, Amber is a part of a growing number of ASL interpreters that work to translate a hearing centric music world into a visual one.

JIMMY KIMMEL: I want to introduce you to three very talented women. Please welcome Holly Maniatty. That's Holly. And Jo Rose Benfield and Amber Galloway Gallego. Each of these women... is a nationally certified sign language interpreter and even more importantly, they have fun with it.

AMBER: ASL, American Sign Language, is fairly new. It was only technically, like, really approved in the early 1960's, saying, yes, it's an official language.

ESTELLE: It has its own rules for grammar and syntax and there are five parameters that everyone has to follow.

The first is hand shape. Now, this is a sign for mom and this is the sign for dad. The hand shape in both cases has to look like this. You have palm orientation, so your palm can't be facing down or up. And then there's location. The hand has to be placed on the chin for mom and the forehead for dad. And then you have movement. The fingers have to wiggle or they can bounce. And finally, there are the nonmanual markers. These nonmanual markers are vital in conveying instrumental sounds.

AMBER: That's going to be the expression here but also, the expression that happens on your body, right, like usually, it's, like, mom but it's like mah, dah.

ESTELLE: The deaf community is made up of a diverse group of people who have a wide range of residual hearing. Some might be able to hear lower frequencies, like drums or bass, but not higher frequencies like vocals or guitars. And, of course, everyone can feel the vibrations of music, especially at live events.

AMBER: So, what the interpreters have done for many years, is they've ignored the
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sounds and solely focused on the English.

So, this is the sign for music, right, like this, can you see it? So, you'll hear music and this is what the interpreter does.

[Amber signing "music"]

AMBER: Music. And that's all they do and that's what they have been doing for years and years and years.

ESTELLE: So, here's how Amber solved this problem.

AMBER: I thought about basses and how thick they sound, right?

[Bass line plays]

AMBER: And when there's a fat person, they'll do like this, like they'll show a person like this, but they do this. You have to do this... to show thickness and density, right. So, you'll see my lower sounds are lower put here and then my higher sounds go up, and you'll see my facials move to that. So, I'm like, bow, wow, like the wow, wow, wow. So, you'll see that. Bow, wow. And then I show this to show the waviness.

ESTELLE: There's actually footage of her doing this exact thing on stage with the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

♪

AMBER: If we merely show the sign for music, then we are doing an injustice as an interpreter.

So, after listening to the beat and how their tonality is, and all the instruments, then what I do is I break it down from English to ASL.

ESTELLE: So, rhyming, metaphor, and wordplay are an intrinsic part of lyrical music, especially hip-hop. So, how do you translate that to a visual form of communication? Let's look at Eminem's "The Monster," featuring Rihanna.

AMBER: Okay. Where he says, "In the draft, turn nothing into something, still can make that straw into gold, chump. I will spin Rumpelstiltskin in a haystack."

ESTELLE: Rumpelstiltskin is the fairy tale about straw turning into gold.

AMBER: So, that part is where I take it and I take it, the rhymes, out of my pocket and I write, and then I show it like that, like I'm expressing it, that's how you express. And then I show it become a gold record, and then I say, "Poom," where he says "chump," where it's like, "I beat you."

ESTELLE: Of course, this all has to happen at the rate in which Eminem raps.

♪ It's payback Russell Wilson ♪

♪ Falling way back in the draft ♪

♪ Turn nothing into something ♪

♪ Still can make that straw into gold, chump ♪

♪ I will spin Rumpelstiltskin in a haystack ♪

ESTELLE: You can also combine two signs in ASL to convey wordplay. Amber did this with Future's "Fuck Ups Some Commas."

♪ Future: Fuck up some commas ♪

♪ Fuck up some commas ♪

♪ Let's fuck up some commas ♪

♪ Let's fuck up some commas ♪

AMBER: This is a sign for, like, commas, like showing the number, but I did it with the "fuck up," with "fuck." So, I did that.

ESTELLE: So, you might not be able to rhyme in ASL but you can certainly get the cleverness across.

AMBER: . You have to truncate your signs to be able to keep up with the beat, to make sure it's looking like rap.

ESTELLE: Since the enactment of the Americans With Disabilities Act, in 1990, concert venues have been required to provide interpreters for deaf attendees.

AMBER: When asking to get services, that is the biggest barrier that we have in the world today.

ESTELLE: It's vitally important that concert venues hire interpreters who understand the emotional power of music.

AMBER: Like, for example, the national anthem. Like, if you were to interpret Whitney Houston's, it's going to be drastically different than Barbra Streisand's, right? And we can't just say I'm standardizing this sign and this is what I'm going to always sign. Like for the sign "brave," right, you do "brave." And I'll see some people just go through the motions of the actual signs, and then they'll do "brave" and Whitney Houston's still singing, you know, going through her long-ass "brave."

♪ Brave ♪

AMBER: That's the whole reason we go to music events, is to be a part of this experience and forget about the rest of the world, and be there in that moment. And so many times, deaf people are not allowed that experience because we, as hearing people, choose to say "no."

[End of video]

Caswell, E. (Mar 27, 2017). How sign language innovators are bringing music to the deaf.

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