

lingua weekly

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Schoolhouse Rock

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Before I make my point in this “Weekly,” I’m going to explain how it got to this, so you can see just how my mind works (or fails to work). I was going to write about children’s television, mostly about the poor quality and the bad options that they have.

That turned into cartoons of today and yesteryear, the ones of yesteryear clearly being superior. That caused me to examine my inner self and admit that cartoons weren’t necessarily better nor more educational when I was a child. This brought me to “the ideal cartoon,” which got me thinking about the cartoons that I really did learn from. This reminded me of Schoolhouse Rock, which reminded me that everything I ever learned and stayed in my head was set to a tune.

If you ever want to learn a string of facts, a list, or a poem, the most effective way to do it is to give it a tune and sing it. I am convinced that most of the American population who grew up in the seventies and eighties can spout out the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, tell you what a noun is, and explain how exactly the nervous system works, all thanks to the songs they sang on Saturday morning.

I am a living example of this theory and sometimes I think that these songs take up a lot of wasted space. The names of all 66 books of the (Protestant) Bible are engrained in a folder in my mental hard drive along with myriad Bible verses, all because somebody thought that the best way to make good Christian children was to sing to them. I may not be able to construct a coherent sentence in French, but I will always remember the alphabet and a little ditty that says “je sais l’alphabet.” That’ll do me a lot of good at customs at Charles De Gaulle. The ingenious

Fräulein Popken was thinking more practically and taught us the “Ich bin Ausländer und spreche nicht gut Deutsch” song, so I won’t have any problems in Germany, well, as long as they let me sing to them. I would have never gotten through the first year of music theory in college without the help of Julie Andrews; I learned C, D, E and they used “do re mi” (crazy!). And who doesn’t know what it is when the moon is in the seventh house and Jupiter aligns with Mars?

This is not a new concept. My Spanish teacher had the idea of “get the beat.” She put rhythms to grammatical concepts to learn them, such as the “subjunctive beat”: “First person singular present tense drop the o change the vowel and con-ju-gate.” It worked but it would have been ten times more effective had she put it to music. So this is my advice for you. What is difficult about English? Take it and put it to a song. I still haven’t figured out how to put a tune to all of the irregular verbs or the meanings of modal verbs but it’s worth a try. If my sister could learn all fifty states of the United States and knows Psalm 89, you can learn English verbs. Leonard Bernstein said that “music can name the unnameable and communicate the unknowable.” What could be more appropriate for the English language?

*“I have mine and she has hers and he has his,
Do you have yours?
They love us and we love them.
What’s ours is theirs, that’s how it is with friends.
And pronouns, you are really friends. Yeah!
‘Cause saying all those nouns over and over
Can really wear you down.”*

-Schoolhouse Rock

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