

Beginning French

Laurie Anderson

Lately, I've been doing a lot of concerts in French. Unfortunately, I don't speak French. I memorize it. I mean, my mouth is moving but I don't understand what I'm saying.

It's like sitting at the breakfast table and it's early in the morning and you're not quite awake. And you're just sitting there eating cereal and sort of staring at the writing on the box--not reading it exactly, just more or less looking at the words. And suddenly, for some reason, you snap to attention, and you realize that what you're reading is what you're eating ... but by then it's much too late.

After doing these concerts in French, I usually had the temporary illusion that I could actually speak French, but as soon as I walked out on the street, and someone asked me simple directions, I realized I couldn't speak a single word. As a result of this inadequacy, I found that the people I had the most rapport with were the babies. And one of the things I noticed about these babies was that they were apparently being used as some kind of traffic testers. Their mothers would be pushing them along in their strollers--and they would come to a busy street with lots of parked cars--and the mother can't see what the traffic is like because of all the parked cars--so she just sort of edges the stroller out into the street and cranes her head out afterwards. And the most striking thing about this is the expression on these babies' faces as they sit there in the middle of traffic, stranded, banging those little gavels they've all got and they can't even speak English.

Do you know what I mean?