

Jennifer McFerran – ALT, Unnan-Shi, Shimane-Ken, 2005 – 2007

Nervously waiting to step on stage, Jen checked her guitar one more time and peered out into the audience. From her vantage point, the seats were only about half full. But considering the size of the grand performance hall and that a few months ago in college, playing for a group of friends in her dorm room seemed intimidating, looking out to see hundreds of faces did nothing to settle her nerves.

A few months earlier, Jennifer had arrived in the second-most rural prefecture in Japan to start her new job as an Assistant Language Teacher, or ALT. Having been to Japan for three homestays during high school, she felt prepared for her role teaching junior high students, but was unsure what to expect in her life outside of the classroom in Shimane Prefecture.

She was surprised at how quickly the invitations came flooding in after her arrival. Neighbors and coworkers welcomed her into their homes, invited her to nearby festivals and markets, and drove her to see famous local sites such as Izumo Taisha, the oldest Shinto shrine in Japan. The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) community reached out just as enthusiastically and Jennifer's calendar was soon filled with excursions to parks, performances and, of course, nights out in the prefecture's capital, Matsue City.

It was during one of those nights out in Matsue when Jen first met Leif. A fellow music lover from the mid-west, they bonded over a shared love for Indie bands and Radiohead. As the night progressed and the group ended up at a small, intimate bar nestled in the tiny winding roads of the city, Jen noticed a guitar sitting in the far corner of the room and started playing a Pixies song. Soon enough, Leif had the attention of everyone in the audience as he started to sing along.

Jen was on cloud nine by the end of the evening. She had grown up listening to live bands, but never imagined that she would get to perform in a bar one day. She had started learning how to play the guitar just a few years back, playing casually with friends for fun, but performing? That never crossed her mind.

So it came as a real surprise that just a few weeks later Leif called her for yet another performance. The new teacher had similarly just arrived in Japan and Leif's town, Kawamoto, was having a community performance day in the grand music hall. He had signed up to play two songs, but wanted to make it a duo with Jen on the guitar. The performance was only two weeks away and practice was tough since Kawamoto was a two hour drive through very windy roads, but they made do, practicing via Skype after work. The day before the performance, they managed to practice for a few hours in Leif's small Japanese house. It was a whirlwind to be on such a big stage with professional sound systems and lighting. They were both very nervous, but their diligence over Skype paid off and the songs were a hit! The night marked the first planned performance of the band that would later be dubbed "Mr. Sparkle," a reference to a Simpsons episode tied to Japan.

Soon the band grew as Maddy, fellow ALT from England, stepped in with a vocal background and great skills on the rhythm guitar. The band only needed a drummer to complete the lineup.

Every Wednesday, Jen led an *Eikaiwa*, an English conversation class that was free and open to the community. The backgrounds and abilities of the adult students were diverse, ranging from former professors and stay-at-home moms, to public sector employees and high school students wishing to brush up on their conversational ability. As the class discussion turned to music, one of her students, Kazuna, revealed that she had played the drums in high school. Kazuna's love for classic rock and alternative bands sealed the deal—she was in!

Soon Mr. Sparkle was performing at events all over the prefecture, from 80s theme nights to weekend excursions in remote areas of Shimane. The band was as ragtag as ever, with practices comprising of traveling to someone's house, often nestled in a secluded, idyllic part of the prefecture. The band members reached out to their communities and received enthusiastic support, allowing them the occasional full practice in local community centers or high school band rooms.

Jen felt great about being with this motley bunch of musicians. The hours spent driving to and from houses for weekend practices and performances meant that she saw more of the countryside than most visitors would ever see in Japan. Each time they practiced together in a tiny town on the Japan coast, they made new friends, as conversations about music quickly segued into more, often ending at the local karaoke bar or *izakaya*. They never got paid for shows, but it didn't matter because they were having fun, doing something they loved and forging new connections in the process.

Mr. Sparkle's real moment of glory took place outside of the prefecture. An ALT from Hiroshima organized a show and Mr. Sparkle hit the road for the three-hour drive to the city. About a dozen of their Japanese and JET friends followed them to Hiroshima. With their very own entourage and a Friday night gig in the big city, they felt like true rock stars! The show went off without a hitch and the band reveled in the post-performance buzz.

In the past, watching other bands perform, Jen had sometimes fantasized about being on stage, but she quickly dismissed the thoughts as mere daydreams. However, as a JET, she was in a new place that offered up a fresh start. Suddenly, Jen was immersed in a community of people who had left their lives in their home countries and took the leap of living and working in Japan. They were open to different experiences, to adventure and trying new things. Jen was swept up in the positive enthusiasm and what once seemed impossible stopped being so far-fetched.

Jen still has her guitars, but her performance days are long past. Still, she looks back fondly on Mr. Sparkle and stays in touch with her former band mates. And if anyone does ask her if she's ever been in a band, she'll crack a sly smile and say "Yeah, I was big in Japan."