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¿Cómo se dice Polyglot?

Meet comedian Bill Santiago, the Spanglish explorer.

BY ANDREW GILBERT

Given his previous life as an award-winning journalist for newspapers such as *The Washington Post*, *The Miami Herald*, and *The San Juan Star*, it's not surprising that the stand-up comic Bill Santiago is obsessed with language. But you might have trouble finding the words he's been exploring lately in a standard English or Spanish dictionary. Santiago presents some of his research on Friday at La Peña in **Spanglish 101: A Total Immersion Comedic Excursion into Latino USA**, an evening-length piece he describes as a work in progress. As Santiago sees it, Spanglish isn't just an evolving pidgin tongue, it's "an identity, and everything that's involved with that." During a recent interview at Ben and Nick's Bar & Grill on College Avenue in Oakland, he elaborates: "There are so many issues around it. Is it the corruption of two languages? Is it a third language? A marriage of two languages?"



The up-and-coming Nuyorican comic, who has opened for Margaret Cho and shared stages with Culture Clash and Marga Gomez, recently gained attention through his appearances on Comedy Central's *Premium Blend* and Galavision's *Que Locos*. He realized the potential of Spanglish as a comedy topic last year after a college performance in Santa Barbara. "Afterwards everybody wanted to come up to me and share their Spanglish experiences, their favorite words, how it's part of their life with their parents, grandparents, or friends," he says. As part of the show's development process, Santiago invites the audience during the second half of the performance to share their favorite Spanglish words and anecdotes about growing up Latino or interacting with Latino culture.

Each time he performs "Spanglish," Santiago gathers more material, uncovering the regional differences between Los Angeles, New Mexico, New York City, and Miami. "It's dialect upon dialect upon dialect, this polyglot non-language called Spanglish," he says. "And when you say Latino, what are all the different groups and experiences? Mexicans are coming for specific reasons and how they get here is very different from, say, Dominicans,

Puerto Ricans, and Cubans. They're all coming here under completely different circumstances and get lumped into this Latino title."

Born and raised in New York, Santiago attended film school at New York University, and dabbled in stand-up. But a job at *The San Juan Star*, an English-language daily, brought him to Puerto Rico, where his parents grew up. Unable to suppress his zingy one-liners, he made the move to stand-up after winning a prestigious national award for feature writing. Santiago is a captivating performer. His handsome, boyish face registers his lightning-quick emotional leaps. But he sees his writing as the key to success. As he has honed his comedic talent, Santiago has taken to dissecting classic routines by comics like George Carlin and Woody Allen, much the way jazz musicians transcribe solos by Charlie Parker and Lester Young.

"I identify with Carlin's fascination for language, the way he can take one idea and unravel it into a piece that's enduring," Santiago says. "Seinfeld is the same thing, but he does it with a little bit more of a microscope and he takes out the edge. There's no politics. It's one of the reasons for his success."