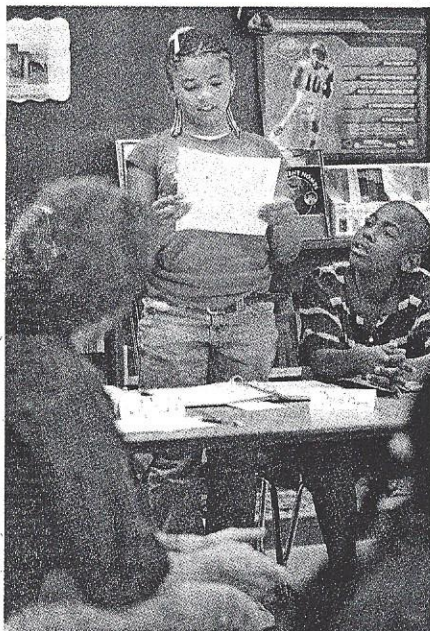


Josh Ritter appreciates the response from Jill Rogers' class at Delmar-Harvard Elementary School in University City. Tamra Jones (left) and her classmates even knew his songs well enough to sing along and request favorites. Photos by Karen Elshout | Post-Dispatch

# Singer, songwriter, teacher



Destiny Collins reads a poem she wrote for Josh Ritter as classmate Isaiah Morris listens.

Josh Ritter brings his show to class and connects with the kids.

By Daniel Durchholz  
SPECIAL TO THE POST-DISPATCH

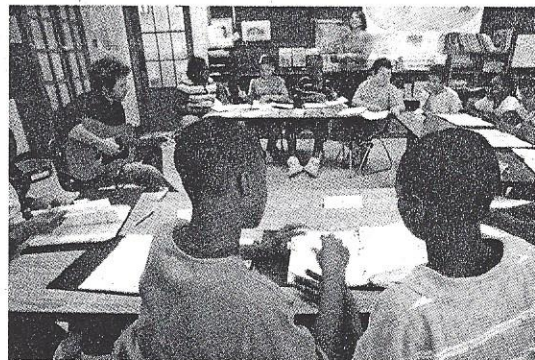
Singer-songwriter Josh Ritter played to two very different audiences in St. Louis late last month. At the Pageant, the Idahoan faced a crowd that, for the most part, was there to see the headliner, British jazz-pop sensation Jamie Cullum.

But earlier in the day, Ritter, 29, sang to a group that hung on his every lyric. Indeed, they'd studied them beforehand. This audience was made up of a dozen fifth- and sixth-grade reading pupils — plus a few adults — at the Delmar-Harvard Elementary School in University City.

So, how did a folk-rock singer whose work talks about wolves, farming and other things fairly foreign to children at an urban school like Delmar-Harvard become part of the curriculum?

It was the work of Jill Rogers, a Title I reading specialist whose pupils, she decided, needed something to encourage their progress in reading and writing. Their overall confidence needed a boost, too, she says.

Rogers is a fan of Ritter's, having traveled to Nashville, Tenn., to see him once, where she also saw him sign autographs and talk with fans



Nathan Short (left) helps classmate Sherrod McGee find the song Josh Ritter is playing for them.

long after his handlers told him it was time to go.

"Something about his presence and how much attention he gave to his fans impressed me," Rogers says. "He gave each of his fans his full attention. He wanted to know about them and why they were there, and he signed things for them with their name and a personalized message. There was just

a kindness in him. I got to thinking about my students and how I wanted to inspire them."

Rogers wrote to Ritter's manager, proposing that the singer visit her classroom. To her delight, they agreed.

"I never dreamed he would actually do it," she says.

PLEASE SEE RITTER | D3



'That was wonderful. He has a good voice. I liked how he sang and how he howled.'

Tamra Jones, Delmar-Harvard pupil



A nervous Nathan Short asks teacher Jill Rogers to read his poem to the class.

BITTER | FROM D1

## Songwriter teaches class

Rogers and her pupils had been studying Ritter's work — taking apart songs such as "Snow Is Gone," "Idaho," "Drive Away" and "Thin Blue Flame" — not only for their meaning, but for Ritter's use of alliteration, simile, metaphor, personification and onomatopoeia.

"We've also been using his songs to compare and contrast the rural settings of the songs and the kids' own urban setting," Rogers says. "His songs really lend themselves to developing vocabulary, so they help the kids build their own writing."

When Ritter appears in the classroom, he unpacks his guitar, makes small talk and asks whether anyone has any questions before they get started. Amusingly, the first one is more personal than academic.

### Inspirational romance

"Do you have a girlfriend?" one of the students wants to know.

He does. But romance can make for artistic inspiration, he points out, getting back to the subject at hand.

"I think if there weren't girls, there wouldn't be much point in writing music," he says. "You're trying to impress somebody, you know?"

Others ask how old he was when he wrote his first song — 16 — what that first song was about — a gold miner who gets trapped in an avalanche — and about the imagery of one of the numbers they've studied, "Wolves."

But what the kids really want



Jill Rogers' pupils at University City's Delmar-Harvard school break into grins as musician Josh Ritter arrives. Photos by Karen Elshout | Post-Dispatch

is to hear Ritter sing, which he does, displaying his onomatopoeic use of wolf howls in "Idaho."

"I was thinking about how, if you were a wolf, how would you write a song?" he says afterward. "You would do it with a lot of howling."

### Echoes in a silo

The kids then request "Lawrence, Kansas," which prompts a story from Ritter about farms and baling hay.

Those are subjects the kids don't know much about, Rogers says; before studying the song, they'd never heard the word "silo."

"You guys would love to go to a silo," Ritter tell them. "It's where you put all the grain. But when they're empty, you can go

inside of them and it's like being in a huge church. It's all made out of metal, so when you sing, it echoes and echoes and echoes. It's really cool. They look like rocket ships."

Later, the children share some of their own poems with Ritter, and he comments on the occasional nice turn of phrase — "Palm trees and poker." That's great," he says.

He does a few more songs, and the kids sing along. Ritter grins broadly, knowing that whatever happens later in the day, he's connected with at least one audience in St. Louis.

Later, Ritter stands outside the classroom and talks about why he agreed to appear at the school.

"I think of the people who made a difference in my life, and it wasn't the big moments,

it was the little moments," he says. It was the little moments that kind of slip in, you know?

"Kids are way smarter than we ever give them credit for. They understand emotions at a way more raw level than we do once we build up more cynicism and age and experience. If you can bring across a song to them, that's a really amazing thing. There are a few songs in my life when I was growing up that just gave me the chills and turned me into who I am."

Overall, Ritter figures, he got more out of the experience than he gave. But the kids may have felt otherwise, especially if they heed his parting advice, of which he is, after all, living proof.

"I hope you guys keep writing," he told them. "It only gets better and better."