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### [An Alaskan pop star finds fame in Argentina](#)

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**BUENOS AIRES** — Kevin Johansen is the biggest Argentine rock star ever to come out of Alaska. Really.

His canny combination of English and Spanish lyrics coupled with eclectic musical forays into rock, rap, reggae, salsa, samba, cumbia, country, and tango have made him one of Argentina's most popular musicians.

Now Johansen is turning his attention back to his native country. This month, he will embark on his first big tour of the United States in support of his album "Sur o No Sur," which will be released by Sony Music in November. Johansen and his band, The Nada, have scheduled stops in New York, Chicago, Miami, and Los Angeles, where they hope to win over fans with the same breezy, bilingual tunes that have already made him a staple on Argentina's airwaves.

"The only reason that my songs come out in Spanish or in English, or both, is because of my background and the places I've lived," he says.

And that background is varied. Johansen was born in Fairbanks, Ala., in 1964 to an Argentine mother and an American father. He spent most of his childhood in the San Francisco Bay Area before the family moved to Argentina when he was 12. As a teenager in Buenos Aires, Johansen embraced Argentina's culture, customs, and language. Still, the bilingual singer found himself curious about his American heritage.

"When I was 25, I moved up to New York to try to find out how North American I felt, and how South American I was," he says with a laugh during a recent interview on his sunny patio in Palermo Viejo, a trendy neighborhood of Buenos Aires. In New York, he says, "I found out that I felt comfortable with both cultures."

During the 1990s he gigged at some of Manhattan's most popular clubs, such as the Mercury Lounge, the Knitting Factory, and the legendary CBGB, where he got his big break in 1992.

"I played a gig, like, on a Tuesday night [during] the first Gulf War [in the] middle of the winter, for probably like 10 or 15 people. There was this guy who looked like one of the ZZ Top guitar players and it turned out to be Hilly Kristal, who is the owner of CBGB ... and he loved it."

The relationship with Mr. Kristal blossomed, and Johansen soon found himself performing as the CBGB house band and logging time in the studio. During this period, Johansen married an Argentine woman and had a daughter. But as his songwriting and family life matured, so did his desire for a change, and in early 2000 they decided to return to Argentina.

"We said 'OK, let's try Buenos Aires for a while and see what happens,' and of course, we came at probably the worst time ever, in Argentina's economy and politics," he says.

But Johansen managed to get through the tough times by reconnecting with old Argentine friends and musicians. The result was an independently-released album titled "The Nada." (Johansen later named his backing band, The Nada, after the album.)

Critics and fans in Argentina began to embrace the quirky and catchy songs that the expat was penning, taking particular note of the inventive lyrics that appealed to both Spanish and English speakers.

"I never knew how to market myself, and when I came back, I said, 'Well, I was born ... in Alaska and I'm back in Argentina,' so that is a weird story, you know, from pole to pole, almost."

Last December, Johansen released his second album, "Sur o No Sur" in Argentina and it became an instant hit here, thanks in no small part to a slow-burning single called "Down With my Baby" which is sung entirely in English.

The song, which Johansen describes as "Barry White meets Nirvana," catapulted him to the top of the charts and was even adopted as the unofficial anthem to one of Argentina's most provocative nighttime soap operas. It was a phenomenon that caught the singer/songwriter/guitarist completely by surprise.

"I didn't even think about selling a song in English to the people here because I just thought it was a bit too much," he says. "I don't know how much of the lyrics they understood, they just understood that it was a kind of a sensual, romantic thing."

Johansen is now hoping to repeat his success abroad. He has already played to enthusiastic audiences in Spain, and the band's current US tour stopped in Miami to give a red-carpet performance at Thursday night's MTV Video Music Awards for Latin America.

Johansen's attempt to bridge the language gap between North and South America is a cross-cultural experiment that he says has been fueled by recent advances in technology and people's desire to learn more about life on both sides of the equator. The singer is amazed that he's able to record and publish from any part of the world, thanks to "that terrible word, 'globalization.' "

"[It] gives you the opportunity to kind of develop a project from wherever you are," he says. "That was a great lesson."