

From the Bars of Virginia To Bases Around the World

Singer Gains Fans Among the Troops

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Sunday, November 20, 2005; C01

Jenny Boyle didn't make it to Hollywood after her "American Idol" audition. And when the 26-year-old pediatric nurse sings in the smoky Northern Virginia bars where she's a regular act, she has to compete with the sports channel and boozy conversations for the attention of customers.

But on her overseas tours, Boyle travels with a security entourage and plays to cheering crowds. She and her four-piece band spend hours signing autographs and posing for photos with fans.

Even if it sometimes requires body armor.

Boyle, from West Springfield, was plucked from obscurity to perform on the war-zone circuit. She and more than 100 largely unknown artists like her, including about 20 groups from the Washington area, have been enlisted by an organization called Armed Forces Entertainment to play for the troops in such countries as Afghanistan, Qatar and Kuwait.

"They treat you like a superstar," said Boyle, whose Jenny Boyle Band returned earlier this month from a 21-day trip to Central Asia, parts of the Middle East and Africa, her fourth overseas tour. "I'll do the shows as long as they ask me," said Boyle, who will soon return to her job at a pediatrician's office in Burke. "I just have to wait until they call."

You've probably heard of the USO, made famous by Bob Hope and a string of celebrities who began entertaining the troops during World War II. The lesser-known Armed Forces Entertainment was founded in 1951 and today coordinates most of the overseas performances for military audiences, including providing

support for USO shows. These days, many troops stationed overseas are entertained by "non-celebrity" acts, particularly in isolated areas.

This year, AFE has sent more than 100 acts, mostly singers, musicians and comedians, to U.S. military bases from Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to South Korea.

"Primarily we deal with regional bands, young acts, comedians that haven't gotten national exposure," said Capt. Jesse Davidson of the U.S. Marine Corps, who is circuit manager for AFE's Southwest Asia tour. "Sometimes it feels a little bit like 'American Idol.' We have a lot of groups that are very eager, and we have to thin out the applicants."

When performers are selected, they agree to volunteer their time. In exchange, they get free travel and a \$150-a-day stipend to cover food and lodging.

Performers can -- and sometimes are required to -- stay on the military bases where they perform, eating and sleeping for free. It's one way artists are able to bank a little money to pay the bills when they get home to their regularly scheduled lives.

A band that sounds good and wins over the crowds might get invited back, Davidson said.

Its most recent tour was perhaps the most challenging for the Jenny Boyle Band, encompassing 13 shows in six countries, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain among them.

"It was particularly nerve-racking when Jenny would say things like, 'Don't worry about us; we've been issued body armor,' " recalled the singer's mother, Betsy Boyle. "Truthfully, I think it was scary for them, too."

Boyle left on Oct. 21. The invitation to travel was last minute, just three weeks before the departure date, and Boyle called a longtime band mate, bassist Jeff Reed, to help gather an ensemble of young musicians who would be willing to

back her up on the road. Her employer allows her to take time off without pay to do the tours.

"I was more nervous about the whole thing this time," Boyle recalled. "And it was harder to put together a group. What do you say? 'Hey, you want to go to Afghanistan?' "

From an early age, Boyle knew she wanted to perform, but some of the most likely opportunities, such as the seventh-grade choir, were closed to her. Her voice, the choirmaster explained, just didn't blend in with the group.

So she did school productions and participated in community theater. At 16, she persuaded her mother to accompany her to an open mike night at a bar in Fairfax City.

Boyle has been performing in local bars ever since, much to the disdain of one classical voice coach, who dropped her for risking her vocal cords during three-hour acoustic sets in smoky rooms.

In 2001, she auditioned for a new television show called "American Idol." Radio station DC-101 hosted auditions in Wheaton, and Boyle was one of 10 singers invited to New York to perform for the show's producers. They were not blown away.

Soon after, Boyle sent a tape to the USO, which directed her to Armed Forces Entertainment. After three months, AFE responded with a letter saying she'd been accepted into the program. It would be nearly two years before Boyle was given a tour schedule that in March 2004 would take her and her band to Egypt, Jordan and Turkey.

"I was naive," Boyle recalled. "I wasn't sure what was going on in the world. I just knew I wanted to see it."

The trip was an unqualified eye-opener.

"When we arrived in the Cairo airport, there were people with guns," Boyle recalled. "There was chaos all around. It was a total shocker. Here I was from Springfield having never seen what's outside my little world."

Boyle still hasn't seen the West Coast of the United States, but she's traveled much of the globe, visiting an orphanage in Djibouti, where she thought hard about adopting a child, and taking the stage in Qatar in front of 2,000 people to belt out her brand of classic-rock cover tunes.

Over time, she's grown accustomed to hearing the heartbreaking stories of war, and today she talks breezily about the roar of land mines detonating outside the base in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

When it's considered too dangerous, she and the band keep to their hotel rooms, as they did in Kuwait, where officials advised them to stay off the streets.

Since she's been home, Boyle has been recording tracks for a CD she hopes to shop around next month. Maybe, she said, Starbucks will carry it.

Curled up in a stuffed chair in her apartment last week, she talked about the role she said she's honored to be playing overseas -- part entertainer, part goodwill ambassador, part morale booster.

She gets dozens of e-mails after each tour, mostly from men who want to thank her for coming such a long way.

"It's impossible to describe the contrast between the situations we are sometimes placed in, to just sitting back and enjoying a great show like a regular Joe," wrote a captain from the Royal Netherlands Air Force who posted a note on her Web site this month. "It's exactly that feeling that's sometimes needed to put things into perspective so we can continue on, and that's what you delivered."

Boyle said the praise is unnecessary.

"You guys are the ones fighting the war," Boyle tells them. "I'm getting to do what I love, and I get to see the world."

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