

## MUSIC

## These military recruits armed only with guitars

SXSW acts enlisted to entertain troops overseas

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AUSTIN — The military is looking for a few good bands.

And so a platoon of recruiters arrived at the South by Southwest music fest and pressed themselves into teeming venues.

The recruiters, in matching

T-shirts showing a microphone-toting Statue of Liberty, crammed in with hip-hoppers and rockers, caught some ear-splitting shows and then offered the best emerging bands an opportunity to tour. For their country. Iraq 'n' roll.

They sold it as the chance of

See **MILITARY** Page 8A

8A Sunday, March 29, 2009 M

FROM THE FRONT PAGE

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# Military enlists bands to rock out overseas

Continued from Page 1A

a lifetime. Dump the van for a C-130 transport. Let a flight deck be your stage. Take your musical pals and transform yourselves into a band of brothers.

"They get to fly on Blackhawks, Osprey, Chinooks, get flown onto a ship and caught by a tailhook. When will they get another chance to do that?" asked Air Force Col. Edward Shock, head of Armed Forces Entertainment, who traded his silver eagle-tipped uniform earlier this month for a polo shirt and khaki pants.

For troop entertainment, most think of the big USO tours. Shock works with them,

too, but he uses SXSW to look for emerging talent that can travel light enough to fit their amps into a helicopter. He wants bands that can drop into remote outposts

**WATCH**  
Catchpenny perform for soldiers in Iraq. [dallasnews.com/extra](http://dallasnews.com/extra)

and bring the magic of chord-banging rock or heartland-strumming country to dusty soldiers who need a drink of American music.

"And these bands are bringing the message of, 'Thank you for what you're doing,'" Shock said.

The recruiters approached, interviewed or listened to about 300 bands during SXSW, and in the next few weeks, after the evaluations done in triplicate, they'll sign about 20 bands — the few, the proud — to travel overseas.

Some might get the South Pacific or Europe. There are 371 bases filled mostly with 19-to-25-year-olds who could use some reggae or rhythm and blues.

But many of these get-up-at-noon, sneaker-footed,



ERICH SCHLEGEL/Special Contributor

**Armed Forces Entertainment** recruiter George DeGrella (center) congratulates members of Catchpenny during the South by Southwest music festival in Austin. The group recently left for their fourth Middle East tour in eight months.

stringy-armed musicians will be issued Kevlar vests and combat helmets and sent to small stations with tents and dirt floors.

Some are in harm's way but none has been hurt, Shock said. "There have been mortar attacks. It's real," he said, adding with a slight, wry smile, "but we haven't lost any."

### Changing lives

The musicians say it is a life-and-music-altering experience.

"There's something about driving across the country in a van from city to city that will bring a band together. But it's nothing like this," said Zach Schauf of the Minneapolis-based Catchpenny. The five-member band left last Sunday for their fourth Middle East tour in eight months.

Catchpenny signed up at SXSW in 2007 but had other touring commitments. Finally, when their schedule opened, they got the call last summer from Armed Forces Entertainment.

"At that point we thought it was going to be the Caribbean," Schauf said. "When they said Iraq, it took about 20 seconds before I could say anything."

His brother, Christian Schauf, also said he felt that reverberation. "And then I thought if we're going to play military shows, let's go where it's needed," he said.

"The hardest thing," said band mate Mark Charles Kelly, "was how are we going to tell our moms?"

He has since played atop a tank. Jammed with guys who brought their guitars to a war zone. Marveled at a "huge stage" built from scratch by one pumped-up female soldier. In Iraq, they all got jolted when their plane scrambled to evade a surface-to-air missile.

But on their Web site is a letter from one of the soldiers who attended a November show at a base in southern Iraq:

"I've been here since April and I have never seen such happiness and enjoyment on the soldiers faces as what I saw Tuesday and Wednesday night with you guys playing to all of us. We all have angels and you guys were ours ... It's because of the great loving Americans like you guys that give meaning

to what we are doing here."

Kelly said that kind of reaction is why they go. Not because they're great Americans. "I just play a guitar. Their patriotism is what's real," he said.

### More than money

Last year, Armed Forces Entertainment scheduled 114 tours with 1,000 performances. Most of the tours are three to five weeks, and the bands play about five bases a week. Austin's SXSW is the premiere recruiting event.

"Everybody I've talked to said they came back a changed person," Shock said. He oversees a \$6.2 million entertainment budget.

But the rewards don't come from the money.

The band members get free transportation and \$75 a day, from which they pay for meals.

But they get to see how the troops live, sometimes without running water or on the lookout for tarantulas.

Shock said his recruiters have been successful finding musicians who enjoy talking to the soldiers, playing their video games, eating at the mess, trading some chords and listening to their stories.

"I look for those who are genuinely interested in supporting our troops," he said.

### Temporary escape

Michael-Anaya signed up and got sent to Afghanistan last year.

He and his two band mates

in Subrosa Union, an Austin-based reggae band, strapped themselves and their gear into a C-130 transport plane out of Kuwait. He remembers swinging like a side-to-side roller coaster through the mountains near Kabul.

"We called it the 'La Bamba' plane. I never experienced anything like that," Anaya said.

On the ground, they were issued flak jackets and helmets and loaded into the heavily armored "Bang Bus" for the trip to the base.

"I always felt safe," he said, even as the bus tore through the city at 80 mph. "I was more excited about being in spaces where civilians never get to go. I felt privileged."

Drummer Paul Valenzuela said it was snowing, and children were standing on the street without shoes or coats.

At the base, they performed, and then soldiers brought out their guitars.

They jammed and talked about their families and their jobs. "It let them escape from their lives for a minute or two," Valenzuela said.

They went on to Kurdistan, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates and Qatar, and then to a missile cruiser in the Persian Gulf, where they performed on the flight deck with a backdrop as blue as the sky and vast as the water.

But what Anaya said he remembers most is the appreciation he felt for those men and women. "It was a very, very patriotic feeling to see their sacrifice."

Subrosa Union played SXSW again last week, but they came by the booth for Armed Forces Entertainment to let Shock and his recruiters know something.

"I'd go back in a heartbeat," Anaya said. "It was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life."



Cpl. Ryan Tomlinson

**Eric E. Raum**, guitarist for Minneapolis-based Catchpenny, strapped on a helmet during a tour of a military base in Iraq in July. The band thanked soldiers for their service.