Soldier musicians let loose

New spin on military music is all about entertainment

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Army band ain't what it used to be.

The Army School of Music has taken a new approach. Instead of instrumentalists, the school is building entertainers for the troops.

The traditional concert songs are still there for all the pomp and parades. But these soldiers now have permission — and encouragement — to get the party started.

Would you believe a woodwind ensemble belting out Guns N' Roses' "Sweet Child 'O Mine," with an oboe nailing Slash's guitar solo? Believe it. And don't be surprised to see these musicians set aside their horns to take up electric guitars.

Army Times was treated to this eclectic ensemble at the school's Advanced Individual Training graduation on Feb. 20. Students opened with a traditional concert that "gives voice to value and tradition in a way no soldier with a rifle can ever do," according to Lt. Col. Andrew Esch, school commandant.

Then Music Performance Teams took over and ramped up the fun. These small groups are a new element to training that require students to be engaging and creative; to get outside their comfort zones and change their approach to military music.

The Folks Lonely Hearts Club Band played an original song. A group calling itself "8-Man Front" cranked it up with "Who Says You Can't Go Home," and while the singer had a lot less hair than Jon Bon Jovi, he worked the crowd with the same spirit.

A sassy salsa ensemble dubbed La Vida had the crowd dancing in the aisles – when was the last time you saw that at an Army graduation?

"To this point, it has been all about them playing music," Esch said. "We've turned that focus out. It's all about the audience and engaging people."

The 10-week course is not like most Army schools. Its soldiers arrive with a variety of skill and experience in their field. The majority have bachelor's degrees. Many have a master's — and two of these students already have their doctorate. Still, half of this AIT is one-on-one instruction designed to take each musician to a new level.

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The Army School of Music is putting more emphasis on producing entertainers, in addition to talented musicians.

And this new approach is not exclusive to AIT. Multi-echelon training sees this MPT format at all levels of enlisted training through warrant officers and into the captain's career course. The idea is to combine the vigor of the young soldiers with the wisdom of the older soldiers.

Taking it downrange

It's not all about the music. These soldiers have to meet the same requirements as others — fitness, military bearing, warrior battle skills and training. And with good reason. Many pulled 12 to 15 months in Afghanistan entertaining troops in the farthest outposts. The operational environment drove this new MPT format as band leaders saw the need to send small teams that could lift unit morale.

"The band did more traveling in the red zone than almost anybody," said Command Sgt. Maj. Frank Suri, commandant of the school's NCO Academy. "Many have combat action badges for getting in scuffles on the way to entertain troops. That is where the real reward comes for us — to perform in these patrol bases where soldiers have been in a skirmish, have had buddies shot or even killed, and they're really having a hard time. It is great that we can take them away from that for just a little while. That is really rewarding."

Suri is a former grunt who earned jump wings and a combat infantry badge in the first Gulf War. And he knows all too well that most of his students will spend at least half of each year away from home.

Life on the road is nothing new for Spc. Henry Soriano. The percussionist was in the University of Nevada, Las Vegas jazz program but jumped ship to tour for six years with the Broadway show "Burn the Floor." The Baguio City, Philippines, native was long inspired by soldiers, and decided to make another jump.

"A musician can't find anywhere else that they can have the camaraderie that you have here," said Soriano, who is headed to Camp Zama, Japan. "And being a soldier is the icing on the cake."

Sgt. Chelsea Gonzalez agreed.

"Soldiers gain camaraderie through training. We do it through music," the eight-year veteran said. "And when you get to deploy and take soldiers out of their environment, even for a short time, that feeling is unexplainable."

Gonzalez came through AIT in 2007. "It was ceremonial, it was concert bands, it was play, play, play," she said. But now that entertainment is the focus, "you can do nothing but grow. Bands at all posts are pushing the envelope thanks to what they have been taught here. We're not just going to stand there playing music, we're going to perform the songs."

Suri sees this as "an incredibly powerful tool" for the Army and diplomacy in general. (He once had the troops sing the Afghan national anthem in the native language to ease tensions before a meeting of top leaders).

"We can be more than stiff military soldiers," he said. "We can break up the ice a little bit and actually entertain people and have a great time.

"When you love what you do, you're going to be good at it. I think we figured out the ingredient to help them love what they do." □