

War Songs

Whether they're listening to get pumped up, calm down, remember home, or simply forget, music is vital for the men and women who fight and die for America.

By Jennifer Peters

Since the beginning of history, music has played an integral role in the lives of soldiers. From Joshua's trumpets at Jericho to drummers beating drills in the 1600s to marching bands playing down Thunder Road to confuse the enemy in Vietnam to motivating troops in all the battles in between, music has always been a fundamental element of war.

Today, that connection is stronger than ever.

"Music was more important to me than water and food in Iraq," said Paul Rieckhoff, executive director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. "I was there for about a year, and for me and my soldiers, music is what kept us sane."

In his book *Chasing Ghosts*, Rieckhoff describes flying to Iraq. After putting his headphones on, he looks around and realizes that everyone else has theirs on, too.

Every war has its own soundtrack, Rieckhoff explains, from the drummers of the American Revolution to the Doors and Jimi Hendrix in Vietnam. In Iraq and Afghanistan, wars being fought in the age of the iPod, the soundtrack is diverse, with tastes ranging from jazz and pop to rap, rock, and even Middle Eastern music.

"It was an escape," said Sergeant Danielle Murray. "I could turn on my iPod, go to whatever type of music I was in the mood for, lie back in my rack, and slip away from reality and think of some time or someplace better."

Sometimes that escape to a better place was necessary, as it was for Geoffrey Millard when, in December 2004, one of his friends from another unit was killed. "I got filled with this hatred, this anger, that I'd never really felt at that level before, and that's a time that I definitely plugged myself into my iPod for a good four, five hours," Millard said. "That was the first time I lost one of my military friends, the first time I lost someone in combat. And I actually had to work that night, so I sat there at my workstation and all I did was put on my headphones and crank them up and put my head down and pretend I wasn't there."

Other times, the music was simply an escape from the day-to-day monotony of life on a military base. "We're very limited to where we can go there," said Sergeant Joseph DeRidder. "Sometimes we'll spend a lot of time stuck in one part of camp, or in a single room looking at the same wall every day for long periods of time, and there are times when it'd be nice if that wall had a soundtrack."

"I would've been in a rubber room [without music]," Rieckhoff said. "I had friends' bands I would follow [while I was deployed], and they would do live shows in New York. I would get letters about the live show and I would be like, *Shit, I missed another show*. But then they'd send a CD, a live recording, so at least I could hear what the show was like, and I felt like I was sort of there."

CDs aren't the only way for troops to hear live music, thanks to the USO. "Any time a USO tour comes, anybody who can get off tries to make it," said Senior Airman Charles Ratcliff, who saw rock band O.A.R. during a tour in Iraq in 2007. "I got to meet them after the show, and they're real personal," he said. "They signed autographs and talked for a few minutes. It was really cool."

The musicians who tour the war zones are also impacted by the experience. "We saw a lot of things there that were truly awe-inspiring and amazing, a lot of things that we'd probably rather not see ever again," said Jerry DePizzo, the saxophone player for O.A.R. "Our job, we felt, was to go over there to make them forget that they're in a battle zone for two hours and make them feel normal, just for a few brief minutes."

For soldiers like Ratcliff, the distraction is a welcome one, especially considering the waning attention the war is receiving back home. It means a lot for big-name artists to pack up their bags and head to a war zone to show their support.

"I was in Kirkuk the night that a couple of Army guys got injured. They were in the hospital, and O.A.R. was taking a tour there when the injured soldiers came through," Ratcliff explained. "The concert was right after that, and you could tell [O.A.R. was] really affected by that. It seemed like they really appreciate everything, and that's really cool."

Bands have found a number of ways to show their support for military personnel, including writing songs based on stories they hear from the troops. O.A.R. wrote "War Song" after their tour through the war zone, and punk band Bouncing Souls had a song on their 2006 album penned by a soldier stationed in Iraq.

The members of Bouncing Souls met the soldier, Garrett Reppenhagen, while on tour in Germany, and when he and his buddies shipped out to Iraq, they kept in touch with the band via e-mail. A poem Reppenhagen sent to the band inspired them so much that they set it to music and turned it into the upbeat punk song "Letter From Iraq." But even without Reppenhagen's help, Bryan Kienlen, the band's bassist, insists a similar song would've been released. "Had we not met Garrett and his friends, we would have still written, or at least tried writing, a song in that vein because we felt it was imperative to address the issue," he said. "The thing is, whatever we would have ended up writing would have been crap compared to Garrett's words, a firsthand account from a veteran."

"We've gotten nothing but lots of thanks for releasing that song," Kienlen added. "I figure it's the least we could do, and it's nothing compared to the sacrifices these men and women have made for our country."

Tomas Young is one of those heroes. He was paralyzed from the chest down in 2004, when a sniper's bullet struck him on his fifth day in Iraq, and it was music that inspired him to turn his misfortune around and help others by fighting against the war and the poor treatment of other injured soldiers. His struggles were captured in the documentary *Body of War*. "I would listen to



PHOTOGRAPH BY BYRON ROLLINS/AP PHOTO

a lot of anti-war songs," Young says, "and it gave me the strength to carry on and become an anti-war activist."

For Ray Gerber, a New York musician who served as a medic at Abu Ghraib, music was equally essential. In April 2005, there was a full-scale attack on the detainee facility, and Gerber was in the middle of it. "It was like being in the climactic scene of a big war movie, except it was real. I actually looked at my watch and thought, *I'm not going to be around five minutes from now*," Gerber said. He was trapped in a bunker with nine other medics, listening to machine-gun fire and mortar explosions, but when the chaos died down, the first thing Gerber thought of was music. "There was a guy who'd received an acoustic guitar as a present, and we kept it in the medic tent, and after all of that, I was really shaken. I took his guitar and went into the bunker by myself. I was thinking, *If I do one last thing tonight before we all get blown*

up, I'll get blown up with a guitar in my hands. So there I am in a full 40 pounds of vest and helmet with an M16 on my back and a silly little cheap acoustic guitar in a concrete bunker, sandbags everywhere. Tom Clancy would've dug it."

Music was just as significant to the soldiers when they returned home. For some, such as Rieckhoff, it was a way to put their world in perspective. "I think [music] made me realize that, to some extent, my struggles weren't that unique. I remember I sat on a beach in Florida in the middle of nowhere with a bottle of whiskey and hours of Johnny Cash music. I listened to Johnny Cash's version of "Hurt" over and over again, and I was going through so much confusion and tension and emotion. Just understanding that other folks have been through this helped me unwind my mind and unpack all these experiences that were so intense over the past couple of months and years."

The one experience they all shared was their love of music. "Without it, my mood would be a lot more sullen, and I'd be despondent," Young said. "I just wouldn't care as much if there weren't music." —JP