

# Six Strings, a Song, and a Soldier

by Richelle Putnam

*“Army Bands provide music throughout the spectrum of military operations to instill in our soldiers the will to fight and win, foster the support of our citizens, and promote our national interests at home and abroad.”*

The US Army is the oldest and largest employer of musicians in the world, dating back to the Revolutionary War. As ambassadors to the nation, musician soldiers uphold 230 years of tradition, entertaining veterans, soldiers and communities through the Army Music Program that offers musicians opportunities to do what they do best—play music.

Sergeant First Class Marc Purinton joined the U.S. Army as a trumpet player in August 2002. Since

then, he served in the Infantry Center Band at Fort Benning, Georgia, the 8th Army Band in Seoul, South Korea, and the 1st Cavalry Division Band at Fort Hood, Texas. He has more than six years overseas experience, including a combat deployment in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. Since 2013, Sergeant Purinton has served in the U.S. Army Field Band and is currently a tour coordinator for Six-String Soldiers.

*“Six-String Soldiers officially formed in February 2015,” said Purinton. “They had been performing together about two or three years before that and were originally constituted as a rock band.”*

Labeled as the Army's premiere rock band of volunteers, the band toured the country for approximately 100 days out of the year, performing at VA hospitals and veteran facilities. However, smaller facilities weren't suitable spaces for the heavy equipment of a rock band.

*"We kind of formed as necessity," said Purinton. "We got out our acoustic guitars and a couple of drum sets here and there and started playing in smaller spaces for those who didn't have the opportunity to come out to our larger shows."*

All band members are active-duty soldiers with a full-time mission to show appreciation for the support of the American public and their support for the American soldier.

"It's not just us that they are appreciating. It's the people deployed overseas, the men and women of the Armed Forces everywhere around the world that we represent."



"We all auditioned to get into Six-String Soldiers," said Staff Sergeant John Brandon Bolon, who plays guitar with the group. "It's a special assignment." Some band members came straight into the music field, he explained. Others didn't. The sound guy was a diesel mechanic on boats, the banjo player is field artillery and served as a supply sergeant. "When I joined, I wanted to go to medical school to be a psychological

specialist investigator. They found out that I had a musical background and asked me if I wanted to play in the band in Europe, so I tried out and I got into that gig.”

The military is like a microcosm of society, according to Bolon. “You have the infantry and combat arms, but you also have other soldiers that support them, from cooks to doctors to media people.” Most any career in the regular world can be found in the military. “We happened to be fortunate enough to be musicians in the military and it’s a special job. We are called special bandsmen.”

To promote the Six-String Soldiers band, shows, tour dates and video performances are posted on their Facebook page. One of the first videos posted was in February 2015 during a heavy snowstorm in the New England area where the band was touring.



“When one of the performances was cancelled due to weather, the guys went out to the snowbank by the hotel, which was about 10-feet high,” said Purinton. “They played ‘Here Comes the Sun.’ Everybody got a kick out of it and the local news did a story.” The video received around 9,000,000 views. “That was a good way to interact with the American public.”

Six-String Soldiers began as a side project, but took off because it resonated with people. The band has performed on national TV and opened for John Fogarty, who is a veteran.

“I’ve been fortunate enough to perform for the Prince and Princess of Monaco,” said Bolon. “I’ve played with the Vice President of the United States in the living room of the Ambassador to Iraq in Bagdad. I’ve also played for a handful of soldiers out by the Syrian border.” To play for the soldiers, to eat with them and hang out with them, brings a little feeling of home, he added. “It’s for morale, but also for camaraderie. Being a part of it is amazing.”



Typically, veterans are the older generation, Vietnam and Gulf War Vets, so the band plays music the veterans listened to back in the day, like Creedence Clear Water Revival. Music is therapy to the soldiers, said Purinton. Some VA facilities started programs that tie art and music into rehabilitation. “In this program, you’re teaching someone to play guitar or playing and singing together.” It’s like how the arts help in early childhood development through building, enhancing and improving the brain and motor skills. “It works wonders.”

*“We couldn’t do it without the public support and are so grateful and honored to serve you all,” said Bolon. “We are proud of what we do.”*

**Those interested in catching a performance or concert, check**

**the Six-String Soldiers Facebook page.**