

Guitarist in band recounts tour of Iraq

Being good at what you do has its disadvantages, particularly if it gets you pressed into service in Iraq, some people might say.

But not Dan Moraski, nor the other members of Bennie and the Jets. They didn't carry guns, radios, or emergency medical equipment, like soldiers might. As musicians, all they had was their instruments, and that was everything.

"In all, we were there for 10 days. It was truly an amazing experience," said Mr. Moraski, a guitarist and West Springfield resident of 25 years. "We were very proud to do this for our sons and daughters over there."

It all began when Bennie and the Jets, an Elton John tribute band that seeks to recreate the experience of seeing the piano pop icon in person, was sent an email from an officer who happened to catch the band on one of its North American tours.

"He was stationed at Camp Victory in Baghdad, and he said he was wondering if we'd like to come and play in Iraq," Mr. Moraski said. "We said absolutely. We were just thrilled."

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Bennie and the Jets at one of four concerts they played for U.S. troops at three locations in Iraq and one in Kuwait during their 10-day swing through the war theater in May.

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The band played on May 24 at Camp Beuhring in Kuwait, May 26 at Camp Speicher in Tikrit, May 28 at Camp Victory, and May 30 at Camp Adder in Talil, Iraq. They were scheduled to play at a fifth location, but they ran into a phenomenon not often experienced in the States: a sandstorm.

"It looked like orange fog, that's the best way to describe it," Mr. Moraski said.

In fact, the four band members, Chicopee's Gregory Ransom (piano), Westfield's Mike Gibbs (bass), and Hatfield's Steve Lawton (drums) saw plenty of things they've never been around. The huge deployment of men, women, and machines that is part of the military effort in the Middle East, for instance.

"We couldn't really wrap our heads around it," Mr. Ransom said in a video posted on the group's website at bennieandthejets.com. "We are like, in Iraq, right now. We couldn't believe it."

In Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's hometown, the group played in a war-damaged stadium. But for the Bennie and the Jets show, the backdrop of the stage was an enormous American flag.

"It was like the opening scene in 'Patton'," Mr. Moraski said.

With suicide bombings still a reality in Iraq, the band members' families back home were concerned for their safety. But they probably needn't have been.

"The military were very security-conscious about where we were going, and they were concerned about our safety," Mr. Moraski said. "They took good care of us."

Soldiers were extremely appreciative of the band's traveling half way across the world to play for them, and to a man and woman, thanked the band after the shows and collected autographs.

"It was very moving," Mr. Moraski said. He said the band's message to the soldiers was always this: "It was the least we could for you guys. We wanted to make sure you know you're not forgotten and nor is your service."

For the band, there were few sights more intriguing than soldiers wearing shorts, T-shirts, and automatic weapons strung over their shoulders while they attended the concerts.

"Not too many [performers] have seen that," Mr. Moraski said, chuckling. "It's nice to know that our fans have our backs, too. We felt really safe. We had all our brothers and sisters around us all the time."

Safe or not, Iraq's a long way to go for a gig. But if it's to play for servicemen and women like those in Iraq?

"Absolutely, in a minute," he said.

Majestic show

Bennie and the Jets – the name is taken from the title of an Elton John hit – is playing at the Majestic Theater next Thursday evening, Aug. 19. It will be something of a homecoming, at least as a band.

"Our friends and family can see us. More often than not, they don't get to see us, so it's a thrill for us," Mr. Moraski said.

Besides, they like the venue. If Elton's favorite place is Madison Square Garden, Bennie's is on Elm Street.

"Some are a lot bigger, but we love the Majestic," Mr. Moraski said. "The acoustics in there are just perfect."

The show begins at 7:30 p.m.

By Jack Farrell

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