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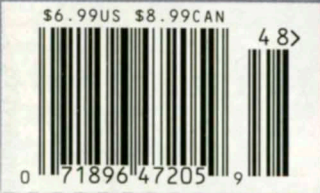
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Base Gratitude

Unsigned Acts Rock Out On Military Installations

When musician **Prashant Vallury** was wandering around the South by Southwest conference last year, he was looking for opportunities to get his band, hip-hop act **Animate Objects**, some gigs outside their hometown of Chicago.

Gigs in Los Angeles or New York would have been just fine. Instead, he and his band would end up playing in Cuba and Honduras. It was all because of a chance encounter with some representatives from Armed Forces Entertainment, who book indie acts at military bases around the world, that Animate Objects found themselves in front of a packed house at the notorious Guantanamo Bay Naval Base.

Unlike the better-known USO, AFE works mostly with unsigned and indie acts, hosting more than 1,200 shows every year at 270 military installations. Bands apply online, submitting electronic press kits, pictures and MP3s for judging. "A panel of at least three people evaluate the music based on a number of factors," AFE chief **Edward Shock** says. "We base our judgment on how the bands sound and look, of course, but we also take their politics into account."

It's probably safe to say that a band like **Rage Against the Machine** wouldn't be ac-

cepted, but since **Kid Rock** and **Bret Michaels** are two of AFE's more famous performers, it appears almost anything other than overt **Bush**-bashing goes.

Once a band completes the application process, is accepted and is matched up with a base, it is flown to whatever far-flung location is currently demanding acts of its genre. **Joe Henry** of rock band **Adam's Attic** has played

in Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greenland since he hooked up with AFE; prior to those trips, he had never traveled internationally.

But free trips to exotic locales aren't the only benefit indie acts can get from working with AFE. For Henry, who came from a military background, there was a sense of "giving back" to an organization that had sustained many of his relatives. More tangibly, though, bands can get a career boost out of completing a tour.

R&B singer **Margot B** says hooking up with AFE and playing in Cuba was "the best decision of my life." Aside from having the once-in-a-lifetime experience of performing for soldiers and detainees at Gitmo, she says that her career has "opened up" in the year since she did the shows. "I'm still getting e-mails from soldiers thanking me for playing, and they've been passing my music along to their friends and families," she says. "Because of the connections I made, I've been picked

up for compilations in Europe and called to audition for 'Spring Awakening' on Broadway."

Adam's Attic has had a similar experience. "We've had people start street teams on the bases for us," Henry says. "Military fans are really loyal, and as they move from base to base, they spread the word." The band is planning on self-releasing a record digitally in December, and hopes that the fans it gained during its world tour will support the act.

While the tours are all expenses paid, bands are not allowed to sell merchandise on the bases. They are free to give away copies of CDs and direct traffic to Web sites, and a few manage to create individual partnerships with on-base stores. According to Shock, however, these partnerships are rare. Bands that want to sell their albums in stores on military bases face much higher hurdles, including the need to be affiliated with a recognized distribution company and make it past a rigorous screening process. **Jeralyn Rice**, the lead music buyer for military retailer AAFES, says that many of the records it stocks tend to be best sellers that interest younger listeners.

But even if a trip abroad to perform with AFE doesn't lead to moving more units, it can still be a boon for an up-and-coming band. "We've had a huge increase in the amount of interest we get from the press," Vallury says. "The story of the AFE tour is something that a lot of people want to hear, and it really sets us apart from other bands. Plus, it's just a great thing to have on your résumé."



ANIMATE OBJECTS