

Valley band takes the show to the troops

by **Sonja Haller** - Nov. 6, 2008 12:00 AM

The Arizona Republic



Dina Preston Band

The world-traveling Dina Preston Band comes home to the Valley this weekend to perform in a pre-Veterans Day event.

As young musicians, they dreamed of traveling the world and playing for thousands of fans - just not while wearing bulletproof vests as soldiers watched for snipers.

The Dina Preston Band has performed on 20 international tours for the armed forces, traveling to 32 countries, including Bosnia, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia. The Valley-based band is back home Saturday at a pre-Veterans Day event during a caregiver boot camp for veterans, their families and caregivers.

The band started playing for military personnel 20 years ago after another musician said it would be a good fit, said Dina Preston-Ortiz, the band's lead singer and a Paradise Valley College business instructor.

While it is gratifying to hear hundreds of young soldiers sing along to songs likely played at their proms, it is even more so when in a designated war area, a drastically different kind of theater, Preston-Ortiz said.

"They are where they are without any distractions at all," she said. "So they really appreciate something or someone from home. (Soldiers) are the best fans in the world. They stay in touch with us." In Bosnia, they had to wear bulletproof vests while being escorted by soldiers. In Afghanistan, their plane had to land with its lights off to avoid sniper fire.

"Usually soldiers are jovial and laughing," Preston-Ortiz said. "It was just so quiet on that plane. I'll always remember that."

The band includes Preston-Ortiz's husband, singer and guitarist Don Ortiz; bassist, saxophonist, flutist, guitarist and singer Mark Peotter; drummer singer Henry Lara, *(Jerry Donato or Shea Marshall on horns and violinist Ron Rutowski depending on concert or events themes.)

The band has a few monikers, including "Ambassadors of Goodwill" and "Five Bands in One" because they play country, pop, blues, rock, classic rock and jazz.

When the band travels, the accommodations can be surprising. Sometimes members sleep in the general's quarters or a five-star hotel, and sometimes they play atop a flatbed truck with a Humvee's headlights for lighting. They are humbled to be where they are but always glad to come home, said Don Ortiz.

"When you go to Afghanistan and see it's like stepping back in time - beautiful skies, beautiful mountains, everything's destroyed - you're happy to return home," Ortiz said. "You realize you take so many things for granted here."

Reach the reporter at sonja.haller@arizonarepublic.com or 602-444-8998.

