

Operation Rising Star offers trip to Hollywood for military vocalist

By Tim Hipps
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SAN ANTONIO – Local competitions for the 2011 Operation Rising Star singing contest begin this week at 37 Army installations and depots around the world.

The competition, similar to the popular television show “American Idol” and televised on The Pentagon Channel, is open to Morale, Welfare and Recreation patrons from all branches of the U.S. military, including Family members 18-and-older.

The grand-prize winner will receive an all-expenses-paid trip for two to Los Angeles to record a three-song demo compact disc. The trip includes air fare, lodging, \$1,000 spending money and three days and nights of studio time with the support of top-rate musicians and recording technicians.

The professional studio time includes musicians, music arrangement, mixing and mastering, a vocal coach, an audio engineer and a CD producer. The approximate retail value of the prize package is \$18,700.

Performers must first win their local Operation Rising Star event, then get selected through video auditions for a spot in the 12-contestant finals in San Antonio. One singer will be crowned the 2011 Rising Star at the conclusion of a week of live competition. The finals are judged by a panel of celebrity judges, and the winner is ultimately determined by online voting at www.OpRisingStar.com. The website provides all contest details and a schedule of events.

Winners of events at the installation level receive \$500 for a first-place finish, \$250 for second, and \$100 for third.

Audience members at each local competition can win prizes, too, thanks in part to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the presenting sponsor of the 2011 Operation Rising Star event. A \$300 Spirit Award will be awarded to the military unit or Family Readiness Group that provides the most support to a singer at the local competitions. Each night will feature a roll call of competitors for the Spirit Award, which will be awarded on the final night at each installation.

Local competitions will each have their own formats. The U.S. Army Garrison at Red Cloud, South Korea, for example, has a qualifying round Aug. 13, semifinals Aug. 20, and finals scheduled for Sept. 2. U.S. Army Garrison Yongsan, South Korea, has a one-shot deal slated for Sept. 24 at the R&R Bar and Grill.

Beginning Aug. 13 at Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo, Operation Rising Star performers will entertain every Saturday night throughout August.

The overall winner eventually will sing his or her way to Los Angeles, where professional musicians eagerly await.

Army Capt. Matt Pratt, husband of 2009 Operation Rising Star winner Lisa Pratt, was awestruck when he accompanied his wife on her grand-prize trip.

“To come into a place like DMI Studios and see the setup they have - the professional musicians and the services they are providing - it’s all sort of unraveling real fast what is really involved,” he said. “That’s part of the magic. It’s overwhelming to see the level that she’s at and to see her basking in it. It still seems very surreal.”

Matt redeployed from Mosul, Iraq, just in time to accompany his wife from Fort Carson, Colo., to Hollywood. The Operation Rising Star winner’s journey reaffirmed his belief in the Army’s promise to support Soldiers and their Families.

“I’m trying to take it all in, but it’s an emotional time for me because I get to see Lisa do what she absolutely loves doing,” said Matt, a 2006 graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, N.Y. “She was supporting me and what I was doing. Now the Army has provided me the opportunity to sit here and support her with what she does.

“It’s like it has come full-circle for us. There are a lot of emotions that are going into it, but I couldn’t be happier seeing her doing what she’s good at doing and what she loves doing.”

Melissa Gomez, the 2010 Operation Rising Star winner, said she exceeded her expectations while recording in Pasadena.

“I’ve never thought I could sing as well as I just sang in there,” said Gomez, a 30-year-old former Soldier turned full-time Army wife and mother. “I was hitting notes that I didn’t know I

could hit. And, Terry, oh my gosh, if I just had a few months with her, I wouldn't be talking to you - I'd be talking to Oprah or somebody. I'd be famous.

“She just really pushed me beyond boundaries I thought I couldn't go past. The songs are coming out way better than I thought they would.”

Gomez was referring to vocal coach Terry Wood, who led her to unprecedented sounds inside the Southern California recording studio.

“I got her to the piano just to do some warm-ups and had her do some exercises and got her up to a high D, which I don't think she ever in her wildest dreams thought she could hit,” Wood said.

“And she does it easily. She's experimenting and finding out what her voice really can do, without much effort, really. She's got a unique sound and she's just discovering who she is as an artist.”

Burleigh Drummond, who has been drumming for the pop group Ambrosia for 41 years, said it was incredible to be able to work with the Operation Rising Star winners.

“I'm an Army brat, so I grew up on military bases in Turkey and Redstone Arsenal, Ala.,”

Drummond said. “What I think is so great about it is that I think people think of the military like it's a separate world. They wouldn't imagine something like this existing within the Army life.”

Drummond, who also worked with rockers Frank Zappa and Tin Drum, expected the exceptional talent Operation Rising Star has produced.

“You figure with that many people in the Armed Services, there’s got to be some tremendous talent,” he said. “I think this is a fantastic opportunity. Even people who do this for a living and are trying to make careers, they rarely get this kind of opportunity, so I think it’s a great, great thing.”

Producer Tim Heinz seconded that sentiment.

“It’s something that’s so different because I’m usually working with people in the music business and people that are focused on really just that - the music business and TV and film,” Heinz said. “These people are in the military. They’re not devoting their lives to try to get their career going as a musician. They’ve given something much different with their lives. Their focus is on serving their country and protecting democracy and all these high lofty ideals - not like I want to be a rock star.

“They are coming from such a different place than people we usually work with but they have dreams and talent and love of music. They have dreams, too, so to try to help them and give a little something back to them is really great. We’re trying to help them and make it comfortable for them so they have a good experience – give them an environment where they’re able to do their best. It’s just a win-win for everybody.

“We try to come up with something special and do something unique for each artist,” Heinz said.

“The first year it was kind of gospel, last year was a little more country, and this year we’ve got a little salsa in the mix, a little meringue. That was pretty fun. You see a slice of all the different people in America. We just love doing it. It’s always a joy, always a treat.”