

Spyro Gyra guitarist finds working with Voices of Valor to be a life-changing experience

Written by

Julio Fernandez, Voices of Valor facilitator

For the NJ Courier News and Home News Tribune/Asbury Park Press

December 1, 2013

I have been the guitarist with the Grammy-nominated jazz group Spyro Gyra for three decades, recording more than 20 albums and touring all over the world, playing for audiences of thousands. So what has drawn me to the Voices of Valor project, where I get to work in an intimate setting with small groups of veterans, writing songs?

I first heard about Voices of Valor through my friend, Jennifer Lampert, who is now my partner as musician/facilitator with the groups. They were recording at a local studio in my hometown of Hoboken, and she asked me to stop by because she was working with a group of veterans. One of the vets was a big fan of Spyro, and she thought it would be nice for me to say “Hi.” Not knowing what to expect, I agreed to stop by.



Spyro Gyra guitarist Julio Fernandez, left, records the Voices of Valor track 'Call of Duty' with veteran Jim Purcell. The therapeutic program aims to help veterans deal with trauma and other issues through songwriting. / VOICES OF VALOR PHOTO

I walked into the studio and was amazed by the experience. Here was a small group of veterans recording a song they had written, and their excitement was over-the-top. I was hooked by the idea. What a wonderful way to give back to a group of people who have sacrificed so much for us. I met Tom, the one who wanted to meet me, and his enthusiasm was so genuine that it really touched my heart. I knew at that moment that I wanted to be a part of this organization.

Jennifer introduced me to Brian Dallow and Rena Fruchter, the creators of the program, who were present at the studio. I expressed my interest, and we met a week or so later. They explained the process and asked me if I wanted to team up with Jennifer to run an eight-week session. I was thrilled and scared at the same time. I've been so used to working in a professional setting. I wondered, "How am I going to work with people who have little to no musical experience writing a song?"

The first session for me was at Lyons VA Hospital in Bernards, and I must say that it was a life-changing experience. I had no idea how powerful it would be for the veterans, as well as me.

Jennifer works primarily with the lyrics, and I work on the music side of things, but the main thing is that together, we create a safe and comfortable environment for the participants. During the first couple of weeks, they usually have a problem making eye contact and are a bit skeptical about the whole thing. As the weeks go on, they begin to open up, create a bond among themselves and more importantly, begin to trust us and the process. The ideas start to flow from their personal experiences, and Jennifer uses gigantic sticky-notes to write everything down.

Through this process a lyric emerges, and I come up with a rhythmic idea after asking the group about the style they think it should be. We then work on melodic ideas for the song and with the Jennifer's vocal expertise, the vets find their voice. When we finally have the concept, I work on the music tracks and we rehearse the song.

We then go into a professional recording studio and record. What happens then is magical. Most of these people have never sung before, let alone record in a studio, but there is a transformation. Somehow, somehow, they find their voice. Whether spoken or sung, it comes out. Suddenly the people who could not even make eye contact were now excited, smiling, connecting, animated and feeling proud of something they created as a team. To quote a line from one of the songs, they seem, "Happy, joyous and free."

Wow! The experience just blew my mind. I had never felt the power of music so strongly before. We all know that music is healing, but to see it happen right in front of your eyes is truly amazing.

I really feel the joy of music working with these guys. Whether they are active duty military or vets from Vietnam, Iraq or Afghanistan, there's one common denominator. They're all looking for a voice, and with the Voices of Valor program, they finally find that voice through music. It's a great feeling to be a part of the process, to see the change. I always felt that music was the universal language, and now I feel this even more. I truly feel that I can make a difference with Voices of Valor. This program has changed my life for the better.

