UI pep band gets some love

Magazine picks Vandals' version of 'Thriftshop' as one of top 10 marching band cover songs

Elizabeth Rudd/Lewiston Tribune

MOSCOW - University of Idaho alumnus Jeff Chambers hadn't even heard the song "Thriftshop" when he was asked last October to arrange it for the pep band.

"Truth be told, I'd never heard anything by them," Chambers said of Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, a recent breakout rap duo from Seattle.

But almost a year later, Rolling Stone magazine named the cover as one of the "10 Mind-Blowing College Marching Band Cover Songs," alongside songs like "Gangnam Style" by Psy and "Blurred Lines" by Robin Thicke.

"I never thought it was going to hit the way it did," said the 23-year-old, who graduated in May with a music composition and education degree.

The Rolling Stone article written by John Gentile spread rapidly across social media sites Wednesday as alumni and students alike learned that UI was named alongside schools like the University of California, Michigan State University and Temple University.

"I was shocked," Chambers said. "I was like, 'Wow, how cool is that?' "

Chambers was not alone in his excitement.

Marching and pep band Director Spencer Martin also did not expect to see an email from the College of Letters, Arts and Social Sciences dean's assistant congratulating him on the accomplishment.

"It was very sweet of her to send it," Martin said. "I had no idea, no one from Rolling Stone had contacted me."

The "Thriftshop" cover came about when Martin's brother-in-law sent him the music video and told him to listen to the song.

"It was just funny, I just got a kick out of it," he said.

He then approached Chambers about arranging the song, but it was still fairly new at that point and hadn't yet skyrocketed to popularity.

Chambers had to listen to the song a few times when he started working on the arrangement to be able to pick out recognizable and catchy elements. After he identified those pieces of the song, he filled in with the marching band's various instruments.

"It really came together pretty quick," said Chambers, who had been arranging band songs for two years.

The pep band's version of "Thriftshop" debuted in December at an away basketball game against Boise State University. Fans from both schools just stared when they heard the song, Martin said. The Macklemore and Ryan Lewis version emerged in the Top 10 on national music charts the day before.

"I bet we were the first university pep band to have it," Martin said.

"Thriftshop" is now worked into other songs performed by the band, Martin said, like the Vandal Fight Song, a second Macklemore and Ryan Lewis song titled "Can't Hold Us" and a Neil Diamond song.

The video selected by Rolling Stone for its website is another interesting story, Martin said. The boy who is featured playing the drums was not - at that time - a UI student.

Jeremy Quinn was a senior at Eagle High School in Boise who was visiting Moscow and the UI campus to audition for a spot in the Lionel Hampton School of Music. His father shot the video at a men's basketball game in the Cowan Spectrum in February after some members of the band asked him if he wanted to play. Martin said it was just a coincidence that Quinn knew "Thriftshop."

"But he did a great job," Chambers said.

Quinn is now a freshman at UI majoring in percussions and a member of the pep and marching band, which is made up of 235 students including cheerleaders and the color guard.

Martin became the band director last year and has made it a point to bring in a mix of songs that will appeal to all fans - that's why he said he tries to sneak pieces of new songs in with the old ones.

"There's an energy to doing new and interesting arrangements instead of doing the same old stuff," he said.

And that's exactly what he was trying with "Thriftshop." Martin said his students are excited about the recognition. He's proud of what they have accomplished and will continue to strive to achieve.

"It's not every day you're in Rolling Stone," he said. "It's kind of cool."

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