

Playing along on the American Music Abroad Program

Experiencing the world can be a great way to make others want to experience it as well.



TONY MEMMEL

FROM:
United States

TO:
Countries in South & Central America, and Southeast & Central Asia

EXCHANGE TYPE:
Arts & Culture Exchange

BOARDING PASS

Tony Memmel, a guitarist, vocalist and individual with a limb difference, has a lot to motivate him. He and his band have completed three tours in different parts of the world on the U.S. Department Of State-sponsored American Music Abroad (AMA) Program, and through those adventures he has had a platform to change perceptions of what it means to have a disability. In 2016 Tony's band had its first AMA tour in South and Central America, visiting Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Panama. In 2017, they toured Southeast Asia including Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Taiwan on another Arts Envoy Program. In 2019, they toured through Central Asia including Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, also through the Arts Envoy program.

According to the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), American Music Abroad artists represent the new generation of musical ambassadors, who are reaching beyond concert halls to interact with other musicians and citizens around the globe. Each year, approximately 10 ensembles of American roots music in different genres are selected to embark on multi-country tours, where they engage with international audiences through public concerts, interactive performances with local musicians, lectures and demonstrations, workshops, jam sessions, and media interviews.

Tony was born without his right hand. His interest in the guitar started when he was in the eighth grade. The guitar was the central instrument in all of his favorite rock songs, and his best friend was really good. He figured out how to attach a pick to a special cast that could

slip over his stump. He learned some power chords, and before long he had formed a band with his friends. Talent shows, battles of the bands and even gigs soon followed.

Since then Tony has played with several different band ensembles, and his disability has given him a way to change other people's outlook.

"As I demonstrate my guitar method, it's often a great opportunity to talk about capability over disability, and other related topics. It's a special joy to work with musicians in these communities, and help them to develop their own adaptive methods toward making music accessible!"

Tony's tours have produced many memorable moments. The first place his band visited in 2017 was a school for children with disabilities in Singapore. After the band played a short concert, they taught an adaptive music clinic inviting the students to practice on borrowed guitars and ukuleles. When Tony was invited back a year later, he found many of the Singaporean students utilizing the adaptive methods that he had taught them to such an extent that they were able to join him in a jam session.

Another time, he was invited to play a mini concert in Indonesia at a pediatric oncology hospital, with an audience consisting mainly of young patients who had affected limbs amputated as part of cancer treatment. Tony was approached by many families before and after, who expressed a hopeful new outlook for their lives after meeting someone who could relate to them. "On these tours, music is the catalyst to unlocking imagination and new ideas in many people I meet," says Tony.

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Most recently, Tony produced for AMA a recorded seven part mini-series to help U.S. Embassies abroad celebrate National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM), including ECA-sponsored artists with disabilities, and including for the first time, artists on the autism spectrum. The program enjoyed over 1.4 million views and was picked up by television and streaming stations across the U.S.

Since he was young, Tony was taught to travel with only what he could carry. As a result he learned to travel light. While on tour, he travels with a single roller bag and a guitar case slung over his shoulder with an attachable strap. He coordinates with host countries to supply as much as possible to limit what he and his group must bring. Though Tony has never needed to ask for any specific reasonable accommodations, he has always found that people are helpful wherever he has gone. They are often willing to carry his food tray for him or to let him into museums for free. Though these kindnesses may seem unnecessary, Tony accepts them with grace.

It's one of many ways that I am always learning to be flexible while traveling. "Hey, the world is crying out for kindness. It's a simple step for me to do for others, yes, and also to let others do for me. - Tony Memmel

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Tony and his band became tireless champions for ECA, keeping music engagements vibrant through virtual and hybrid programs. In summer 2020, Tony led a 6-week virtual Arts Envoy program in Kazakhstan called "Tuesdays with Tony" promoting inclusion and equal rights through



cultural exchange. Then in 2021, he collaborated with a popular Kazakhstani singer, Daneliya Tuleshova, on video renditions of the U.S. and Kazakhstan national anthems, garnering hundreds of thousands of views on social media and deepening Tony's connection with the people of Kazakhstan.

Always looking forward to what comes next, Tony continues to work on ways to bring his music to people in far-flung places. He has directed a documentary which, through interviews, archival footage and musical collaborations, tells the story of the history of jazz musicians who have performed as part of the American Music Abroad initiative. In collaboration with The Association of American Voices, he will lead two Youth Excellence on Stage (YES) programs, the goal of which will be to guide aspiring young music entrepreneurs from Uganda and Nigeria to develop themselves as professional musicians. ■