

Artist Profile: Singer-Songwriter Jason Moon

Jason Moon served in Iraq with a combat engineering battalion. He returned to the States in 2004 and was eventually diagnosed by VA psychologists with depression, insomnia, and adjustment disorder. Despite medication his condition worsened, leading to a suicide attempt in 2008, which resulted in a diagnosis of PTSD. This diagnosis started his healing process, which actually led to his creative resurgence. Apart from his own music, Moon founded Warrior Songs **1**, with the goal of using music to help veterans integrate and transform their military experiences into song. To date Warrior Songs has produced two CDs. The first, *If You Have to Ask . . .* (2016), features fourteen cuts by Army, Air Force, and Marine vets of Iraq and Afghanistan, with a little help from Vietnam vets Raymond Cocks and Jim Wachtendonk. The second CD, *Women at War* (2018), contains fifteen cuts by a variety of women vets.

Moon's breakthrough CD is *Trying to Find My Way Home* (2010). The genesis of the album is his work with film director Olivier Morel, whose 2009 documentary *On the Bridge* features current veterans telling their stories of war and post-war life. Moon says that Morel "encouraged me to work on these songs that I'd begun when I returned from the war but had been unable to finish." As the title suggests, the album expresses Moon's attempt to regain a sense of "home." However, the return is problematic due to feeling disconnected and alienated, as the title track indicates: "The child inside me is long dead and gone/Somewhere between lost and alone . . . It's hard to fight an enemy that lives inside your head" "Alone With Me Tonight" continues the theme of the inability to reconnect to others and to society. He recalls "the mystery and marvel of a smile on a face" but this has been replaced by "broken dreams and empty bottles." All he

sees are ghosts. "Happy To Be Home" takes a bitterly ironic tone when he writes that "all this 'welcome home, we're so proud of you, good job' bullshit is wearing thin." "Thank you for your service" from well-meaning civilians only goes so far until the phrase becomes an empty cliché. Other songs discuss his psychological numbness and need to self-medicate. The album ends on a cautiously hopeful note. Although the effects of PTSD are overwhelming he tells himself to "hold on" as there is always the chance that tomorrow, or the next week, or the next month, will bring him relief.

As Moon's music developed it became more optimistic. Although *Love & Life* (2014) reveals some of the same themes as the earlier work, there are more hopeful signs. While the title track and "Railroad Song" touch on loneliness and alienation, in "My Child, My Boy, My Son" Moon finds joy in the fatherly role, giving his son "life advice" to help guide him through life's ups and downs: "Now what can I say except, somewhere along the way, You may find yourself on a road that you had never known. And this road may be rough, and this road may be long, So keep with you always in your heart this song." "Family Song" tells the story of his family when he was growing up and the importance of home and family to him today.

His newest album, his fourth solo CD, is entitled *The Wolf I Fed* (2020). Again, there are undertones of isolation and loss but out of those arise a growing sense of hope and reconnection. In "Wisdom of the Wound" Moon writes that because of the war "that person I once was, is now a distant memory." The memories of his war experience "brought him to his knees." However, the song takes a positive turn when he realizes that in order to be free from the burden of the past he (and by extension, all veterans) has to tell his story, and that civilians need to listen: "And if you share our story then our healing can begin. Now the next chapter can begin." That healing from trauma can emerge from sharing one's story and starting a "new chapter" is seen in other songs on the

album. In “You Didn’t Say Goodbye,” Moon looks back from a twenty-year vantage point at a failed relationship. For most of the song he is wistful and rueful, writing, “sometimes late at night I still hang my head and cry, when I think back on the day that you didn’t say goodbye.” However, as the song ends, Moon is happy that the relationship ended because he is happy with a wife and family. “The Sweetest Little Thing” is a whimsical lullaby to his daughter, revealing his joy in getting her to sleep. **2**



Jason Moon and co-performer.

Another aspect of Moon's healing journey is *7 Things You Never Say to a Veteran*, a live presentation in which he uses songs and narration to discuss PTSD. Having given over 200 presentations from 2010 to 2015, Moon made a video of a 2016 performance at a jail health care conference in Wisconsin. About *7 Things You Never Say to a Veteran* he writes that "unable to keep up with the ongoing requests to give this presentation, I offer this DVD with the hope that it will serve to equally inspire and educate. PTSD is not a weakness, you are not alone, and we do not leave our wounded behind." In the film he tells his story as a way of educating the civilian audience about his post-war experiences and subsequent diagnosis of PTSD. Using his songs from *Trying to Find My Way Home* as a counterpoint, he tells of his cycle of depression and drinking, isolation, and inability to sleep. He discusses the physical and psychological effects of trauma generally, and war trauma in particular, which led to his suicide attempt in 2008, which he says was an attempt to "eliminate the threat. I am the threat." The film ends with seven statements that the well-meaning civilian should not say with six points that are helpful. His overall message is to share the burden and share the story as a way to heal oneself. **3**

1. www.warriorsongs.org; info@warriorsongs.org; jasonmoon.org; fullmoonmusic.org
2. Liner notes, *Trying to Find My Way Home*, Full Moon Music, 2010; all lyrics quoted from fullmoonmusic.org
3. *7 Things You Never Say to a Veteran*, 2016, produced by Julie Olson, distributed through warriorsongs.org.

Interview with Jason Moon:

Larry Abbott: Just to start with, what were your musical influences?

Jason Moon: Growing up, the most influential was Bob Dylan.

Then I got turned on to John Prine. Another big influence was kind of an unknown songwriter named Jason Eklund, who my friend Little Rev from Milwaukee turned me onto. Lil' Rev **1** was like a musical mentor who I knew locally. He actually taught me some chords and notes and a lot of what I know about music and performing. But the big one, Bob Dylan. That was when I understood that you could do something with words.

LA: How would you say your music has evolved? You've been writing and performing for over 20 years.

JM: When I started out I just wanted to write songs because I wanted to be like Bob Dylan. Then I started writing songs to express emotions, and they became like a musical diary to me by the time I was in college. Then the war happened. I wasn't really able to write songs for a while. And now they've become a tool to help others have that catharsis of hearing your feelings and story in a song. It's a release from trauma.

I started learning music for fun, writing songs for fun, got into singing for my own life trauma, then went to war, started using music to heal myself from more serious war trauma, and now I use it to help others.

LA: Do you see then your songs as stories?



Singer-songwriter Jason Moon

JM: Yeah, almost all my songs are stories. They're almost always stories. If they're not, then they're just snapshots of a story. But they're almost always a story.

LA: What would you say are the key themes in your songs/

JM: Healing, self-discovery, transformation, and truth in terms of looking at the human experience and trauma we all go through.

LA: What would you say is your songwriting process? You've written, what, 50-plus songs?

JM: It depends on what type of song you're asking about. The

type I write for warrior songs, I have a different process than when I write for myself. Generally, with the warrior songs, I help other veterans turn their trauma into song, and that's usually a collaborative process. Normally, I'll do it with a group. I was just at a retreat with thirteen women veterans who had been raped in the military, so I listened to all their stories and we threw a bunch of words up on a whiteboard about who they were before they were traumatized and who they were afterwards.

And then I took those words and what I had heard of their testimonies of their trauma and crafted that into a song. There's a process that's creating a story, an arc, and making sure that you're using everyone's words. The hardest part is when you sing it back to them, the thirteen of them, and then ask them honestly: "Did all of you hear your truth in this song?" And then all said, yes, they had all heard something, something unique to them in the song we wrote. The new one I just wrote is called "See Me" **2** from that retreat.

That's the magic, listening to those traumatic stories and then finding the light and arc and the theme, and making sure everyone's voice was included.

LA: So, you would say music, as well as the other arts, is instrumental, no pun intended, in the healing process?

JM: Absolutely. The way it works with war trauma, what I'm seeing . . . you have to remember, I don't have a degree in this; I just healed myself through songwriting and then started healing others, and through my music I've prevented thirty-three suicides. What I do is purely based on what's working. The trauma that is caused by the military is so large and so outside the ordinary. The average person just doesn't experience what someone who's been to war or what some of these women who were victims of MST. It's beyond normal comprehension, so it is, of course, beyond normal verbalization through standard language, because it's outside

of the contextual norm of our civilization.

When war trauma happens to people, they have no way of expressing it to their peers, so they're forced to carry it internally. The arts provide a way to bridge that gap between our unverbilized emotions. It's like, I hear a Christmas song by Bing Crosby, and I get a warm feeling. There's a memory attached to a song that I wouldn't be able to really tell you about. It's the same concept.

Veterans who've had traumas beyond explanation, they have to carry that alone. But when you give them a tool to explain it to their peers, to their community—we use the arts for that—it does two things: it allows the community to hear it. It's easier for people to listen to a song or look at a painting or hear a short poem than it is to listen to a testimony of a gruesome, traumatic event. That's easier on the civilian side, on the community side.

As for the veteran's side, it's also easier to use the arts because if I start talking about times and dates with you, I'm going to have an onset of PTSD symptoms, and it will cause me to stop talking, because I recall the memories. But when I'm allowed to just recall pain from a memory, or the sadness from a memory, or the fear from a memory, which you can do in the arts, and just say "paint your fear," then I don't have to necessarily touch the linear, fact-based triggers that would be normal in a therapeutic setting, where I would tell you about the time and the date and the place of the trauma. That'll cause the veteran to be triggered and have PTSD, which is why so few of us want to talk about our shit, because it hurts us to allow that process to happen.

The music, the arts, can heal the veteran. The veteran can express the trauma, the civilian can hear the trauma. I actually think it's one of the most important things for healing, for trauma, and probably all trauma, and I wish I had a better way of proving that scientifically.

LA: So, you would say then that the song or the artwork or the poem is able to transform the trauma or the pain into something that is easier to express?

JM: Yeah, so it's more digestible, I guess, is one way to say it, easier to carry, because the veteran has discovered that the trauma that she couldn't talk about in normal words now has a way to be expressed. It kind of lives outside of them to some degree, and they feel a little lighter. I actually have testimonies from the veterans who come to our workshops that say those exact words, "I feel a lot lighter," because they put their trauma into the art.

When the civilians see it, they actually carry a little bit of it. But it's a lot lighter now and it's easier for all of us to look at that. That allows the individual who, by nature of that trauma is outside the normal context of our cultural realities, they get to come back now into the community. That's what happens once they express themselves through the arts, once they talk about that horrible thing that they've never been able to talk about, once they express that and civilians hear it, then all of a sudden they start to get back into community.

When they start to heal, that's where most of our suicide prevention and most of our success stories happen. Someone was frozen. They were in the darkness—it was PTSD, drinking, self-harm—and we teach them to self-express. We show them they have the power to speak. They put it out there. It's outside of them. Civilians have heard it, and then they start to heal. They start to move back towards the light.

LA: In a way, the arts are a bridge from the veteran world to the civilian world, but also the civilian world into the veteran world?

JM: It's the point where their trauma separated them from their community. They are no longer home. They may come back

to the USA, but until they are received back into their community, they are not home. And that does not mean integration into the community, that means received “as they are.” It’s a necessary step. All of this is based on the work of Dr. Edward Tick **3** from Soldier’s Heart, who had this idea, partly based on Joseph Campbell, about healing from war trauma. But, yeah, it’s that bridge between those two, and that bridge is the final piece of all those veterans coming home, really coming home, where they get to stand before their community and say, “Hey, I went to war, and it was more horrible than anything anyone in their room has seen, but I need to tell you about it or I can’t really be home because then I’m just carrying it alone.”

But when you put that experience into art, now it’s easier for the veteran. It’s not as traumatic for them. It’s not as triggering. And it’s easier for the civilians. You’ve heard some of the songs we’ve written, right?

LA: Yes.

JM: I think most people would say it’s easier to hear that and for me to say, “Listen, I’ve heard...” If you go on our webpage now under “unreleased songs” and look at “See Me,” you listen to the stories of thirteen women who were raped in the military. You’ve heard their truths. That was four and a half minutes for you to do that. It took them lifetimes to do it. But it’s the easiest way to get those two things. Each of the women had ten minutes to tell their story of MST at this retreat, and it took four hours. That’s four hours’ worth of truth on sexual assault in the military distilled into four and a half minutes and made palatable—as palatable as it can be. I mean, they’re right to be cautious. It’s not easy, but it is easier.

When I’m staffing a retreat, I’m sitting there listening to these horrible stories. But I can tell you it’s much easier to listen to that four and a half minute song than it is to sit

in that room with an open mind and open ears and a heart and hear how these people have been hurt. But know that these four and a half minutes come from four hours spent listening to thirteen women who have the collective wisdom of over 100 years of recovering from military rape trauma. Songwriting is distilling 100 years of collective trauma and wisdom into four and a half minutes of raw truth.

LA: You did *Women at War: Warrior Songs: Volume 2* (2018). What led you to do that?

JM: As I was collecting stories for volume 1, *If You Have to Ask . . .* (2016), I was hearing a lot of these stories from women that were similar, that I wasn't hearing from the men. The women were being passed over for promotions and not being respected, having someone see a veteran sticker on their car and ask, "Did your husband serve?" or "Who's the veteran?," always assuming their husband. It made me angry and I thought it should be addressed, but there were just so many that spoke to MST and sexual assault, being assaulted, being harassed, being punished for reporting. It was so many, so many of them.

And then I started to look into it, and the more I got involved and learned about it and talked to women veterans, the more I realized it was worse than most people imagined. That's when I just thought, we need to talk about this. So, we finished up volume 1. We began working on volume 2 while we were finishing up volume 1. That was our first CD, and I got a lot of criticism for it. Most of the veterans were men. It was very male, very white. So, that's generally how I answer criticism, by addressing it.

So, we did volume 2 with women. Volume 3 is with Vietnam veterans. Volume 4 is veterans of color. We're talking with the Native American music community, maybe do one on Native voices. I think I want to do ten volumes total.

LA: Are volumes 3 and 4 in the works or are they out?

JM: Volume 3 is just beginning. We have it mapped out. We have the songs assigned. Some of them are done. One's recorded and it'll be about a year and a half. The fundraising is in progress, and we have to get all the participants in the studio. Volume 4 we just announced, so we're starting to think about what stories need to be told

With each volume we learn how to make them a little faster and a little better, and figure out what needs to be done.

LA: Let's look at some of your albums. Your first album, *Naked Under All of These Clothes*, came out in '96?

JM: That was my first one. That was a big deal back then, to have a CD.

LA: It struck me that at least one of the songs, "American Dream," was an expression of anger at society and the plight of the underclass.

JM: Yeah. I was 16, I think, when I wrote that, and my older brother and his friends were all excited to go off into the workforce. We were all a little bit on the poor side, so a lot of them were dropping out and doing manual labor. It just started to look unfair to me, growing up pretty poor and wondering what it was all about.

And facing that, at least at that time, the reality was that I would probably have to join the Army if I wanted to go to college. That was something that, even as a 16-year-old, I started to realize, "Hey, this world's unfair, and I'm not gonna get the same shake as the other kids in the town. And, oh look, those kids with the brown skin, they're gonna get an even worse time than we are. I've gotta join the military to go to college. What do I get out of that? I get to work for 40 years."



LA: Was your second album *Poverty* from 2006?

JM: Yeah, that was the second one that was officially released. It wasn't done in the studio. Once I started trying to be a full-time musician, it doesn't pay well, so it was always hard to be in the studio when you need the money that you're making from your shows to pay the light bill.

I think that one was after I got back from Iraq in 2004. I had been struggling to write new songs, and one of the things I thought was, maybe if I released these old songs that were supposed to be on a CD that I could never afford to fully produce, put it out as a bootleg and kind of clear the palate. Maybe if I had a bunch of blank pages, I'd write some new stuff.

I didn't really know what was going on with me back then. I had been home two years. I just released it. I was broken from the PTSD. I called it *Poverty* because I was too poor to ever finish all these songs. And now I've actually had a chance in

some of the most recent CDs to redo some of those songs.

LA: It seems like “Catch a Ride” has a satirical edge to it. “St. Thomas Blues” seems to be more about disconnection, alienation. “Let’s Be Passive” is an attack on complacency.

JM: Yeah, although it was a little more of an easier time for me back then. Those are the pre-deployment songs, so they’re kind of a younger protest. I was kind of disillusioned. I went to college. I left that small, ignorant, kind of backwoods town of Eagle River, white trash, poverty—we didn’t live in a trailer park, but we were poor and ignorant.

When I got to college I was expecting it to be a lot of people really wanting to do important things, change the world things. Instead, it was just a bunch of people partying, getting drunk and getting ready to be cogs in the machine. So, I was a little disillusioned by that whole experience. I’ve always been a little disillusioned by that “go to college, work, die” script. What’s it all about? I guess that’s what happens when you have a philosophy degree!

LA: In your documentary, *The 7 Things You Never Say to a Veteran*, you have the song “Trying to Find My Way Home,” which is also the title of the other CD. That song seems to be more explicitly about PTSD. You sing, “It’s Hard to Fight an Enemy That Lives Inside Your Head.” What were you were looking to do in that song?

JM: So, I got home in '04, and I couldn’t write. Something was clearly wrong with me, and I didn’t know what it was and nobody told me. It was PTSD. It affected my songwriting. I wasn’t writing songs. That’s why I released *Poverty*, all these unreleased old songs, because I didn’t understand why I couldn’t write any new songs. It had been about five years not writing, except this song I had written, “Trying To Find My Way Home,” and that was heard and shared, and then it was heard by Olivier Morel, who did the documentary *On the Bridge*

(2010). **4** He asked me if I had any more songs about the experience of going to war.

I had started a bunch, but it always led to the same thing. I'd have some emotion that I'd want to purge through a song. I'd try to write it and it would make me really sad and symptomatic, and then I'd drink or avoid thinking about it for as long as I could. I had all these notes and half-started songs about the experience. So, finally I sat down and wrote that whole CD. It was about that five years of coming home in 2004 and then just not having any idea what was happening to me. That's what I was going for.

LA: In *On the Bridge* you were featured as one of the seven participants. Toward the end of the film you sing "Hold On." You mentioned that you wanted to stay away from the song; it was screaming and ranting. But it was also about holding on for one more day.

JM: I had been working on finishing that one about five weeks before I attempted suicide, so that was always a difficult one. That's the song that affects the most people because that's not specifically about PTSD; it's about depression and sadness and suicidal ideation. I get the most emails about that one from people who aren't military. They say that listening to that made them understand they're not alone and got them through a tough time.

LA: Some of your songs are about PTSD and the military, but they can expand to trauma or depression.

JM: Yeah, and oftentimes those are emotions that overlap. Insomnia or depression is something that people with PTSD suffer from, but people without PTSD suffer from it. And sadness, feeling like you want to end it all, is something that, unfortunately, a lot of people have felt to varying degrees and for varying reasons.

The goal now, as I write new songs, whenever possible or as

I'm producing the CDs, I always try to make them as vague as possible to reflect as many situations as I can. But that song really was just about sadness. I didn't have a lot of thought into the other songs back then, as I did with "Trying to Find My Way Home." That was just pretty much raw emotion. I just opened my mouth and "hold on" came spilling out.

LA: Maybe we can talk about the CD *Love and Life*. You have some songs about loss and disconnection, but others are a little more hopeful.

JM: *Love and Life* was 2013, the one after *Trying to Find My Way Home*, and that was when I started traveling the country. *Trying to Find My Way Home* came out in 2010. I start traveling the country and doing all the work with Warrior Songs and helping veterans, and I'm hearing all these stories and collecting all these stories for volumes 1 and 2, and it's just a lot to deal with. I'm not trained in PTSD or trauma work. And I'd just survived a suicide attempt in '08, so it got to be a bit much.

I was trying to separate my work helping trauma recovery through Warrior Songs and my own Jason Moon stuff. Where's the line between the fact that I write songs about traumatized veterans for a living? Am I still entitled to write a song about smiles for fun? Where do I put the fun songs, or the funny songs, or the love songs? And I actually found myself writing more of those because I don't need to deal with sad topics, because I do that at Warrior Songs. So, my songs that I was writing personally were becoming more and more happy.

That CD, *Love and Life*, was intentionally an attempt to take a sharp break from Warrior Songs, and I just made a CD of positive songs. They're not all happy, but they're not sad.

LA: They talk about family and relationships.

JM: Yeah, and it's essentially supposed to be, "here's what you get. Here's why you do all the hard work." *Trying to Find*

My Way Home is about pushing through all the horrible shit you suffer from after a deployment to war. Well, why would you want to push through that? Well, you get what's on *Love and Life*. "Rise Up" is on the new CD that comes out this February.

LA: What's the title of the CD? Is that *The Wolf I Fed*?

JM: It's a personal album. It's a Jason Moon album, but it's the first time I've tried to integrate the veteran side with the personal. It's not released through Warrior Songs, but on my personal label, Full Moon Music, but it's got some stuff about the work I do with veterans. For the first time I tried to integrate the whole experience. The individual Jason Moon is not like *Love and Life* where I'm all happy. I'm inundated in veterans' work all the time because of what I do at Warriors. I was trying to figure out, I don't know, where I stop and where the work begins.

That's how it's different. This is the first time I've integrated the healing work I do with veterans into my own person music and not kept them separate. And I've also tried to take an honest look at like: how did I go from a young man who just liked to party and play guitar around a campfire to someone who runs a nonprofit that's helped some thirty-three suicide preventions? What's the road you walk to go from a poor kid who has to join the Army and isn't really going anywhere fast to nationally recognized veterans advocate known for preventing suicides? That's kind of what the song is. The CD is an exploration of how I got here.

LA: I really appreciate your time to discuss your work.

JM: Yeah, no worries. I thank you for looking into it. I'm hoping that more of the world will wake up to the understanding that we can do a lot of good healing trauma through the arts.

▪ See <https://jasoneklund.com/> and <https://www.lilrev.com/>

- <https://warriorsongs.org/track/1906473/see-me>
- For example, see Edward Tick, *War in the Soul: Healing Our Nation's Veterans from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (2005) and *Warrior's Return: Restoring the Soul After War* (2014)
- Olivier Morel, *On The Bridge* (<https://www3.nd.edu/~omorel/jason.html>)