New Poetry by Ricardo Moran: “ABBA-1975” and “On the Street”

TAG EVERY WALL / *image by Amalie Flynn*

ABBA-1975

Abba’s lyrics, like water
shot from La Bufadora,
mingle with volcanic steam
from metallic pots of corn.

And the scrape on my knee
from chasing the seagulls
bleeds, but does not hurt.

On this Sunday, the ocean breeze slips
in gossip between vendor stalls
as young men in speedos walk past.
Tables of silver bracelets tap my eyes
and ABBA’s Spanish melody
carries on my tongue
before any English syllable
ever arrived. Before the summer ended
when it tore me
from the sands of Ensenada
to a desert north of the border,
to a land with tongues
unfamiliar and stiff.

And now when I fall
chasing my shadow, my ABBA
lyrics cannot permeate
foreign soil. Cannot stop the pain.

On the Street

Run naked through the streets
and shout, “Make love to me!”

Tag every wall in a turf war
with quotes from the palatero,
from the child who yearns for love,
from the gay son who hopes his father
will welcome him,
this time.

With your sharp and fast tongue, mesmerize
passersby as they get caught in the gunfire
of stanzas and sonnets,
popping the air.

Bellow on the street corner

of how love abandoned you,
how your life is empty,
how you aborted your dreams.
And every day it rips into you
of every opportunity you threw away.

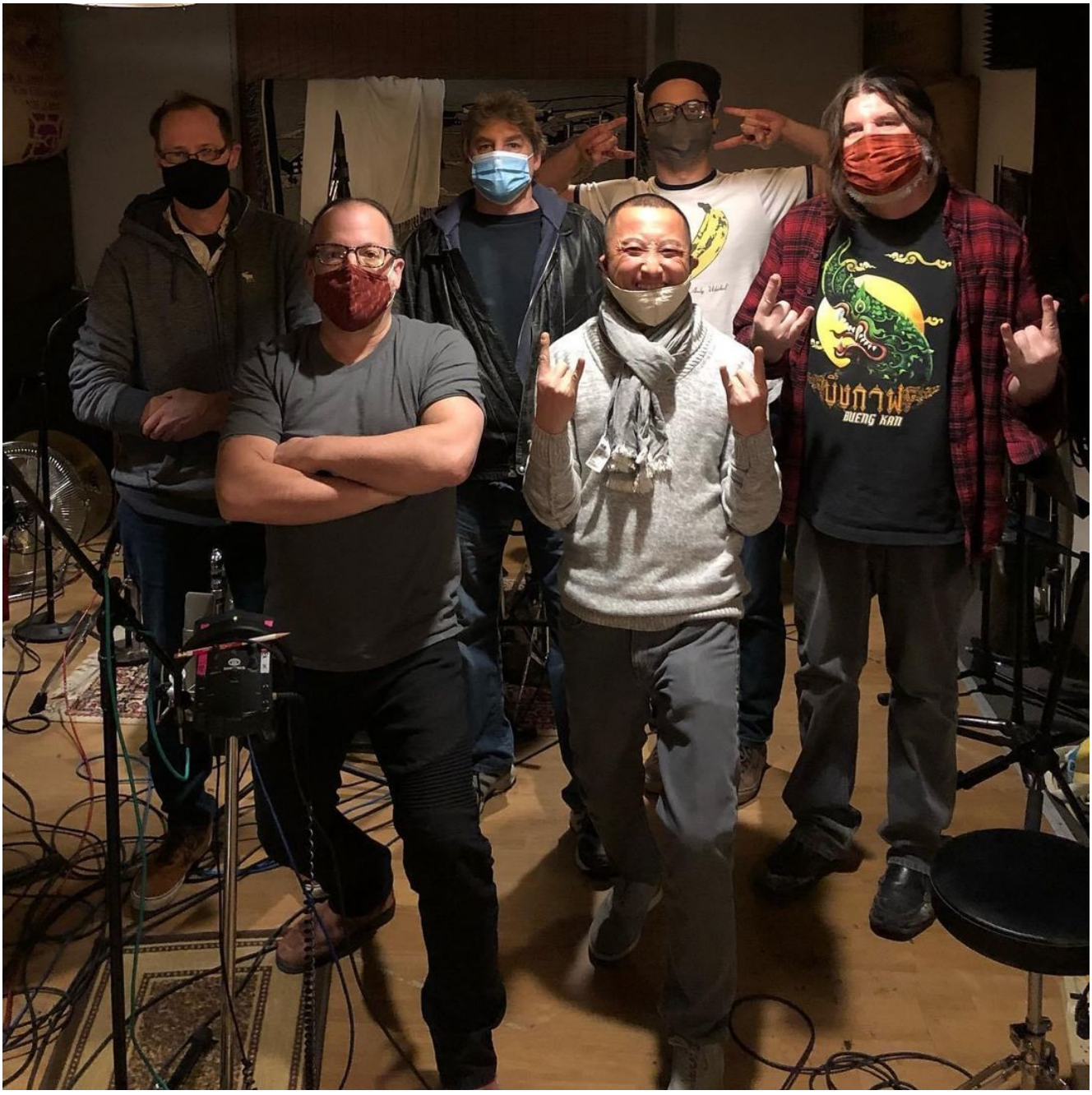
I want that on the wall.
I want all the pain and hurt
to get out of bed, to grab that bullhorn
and run naked through the streets.

Larry Abbott on Warrior Songs, Vol. Three: "The Last Thing We Ever Do: Vietnam Veterans Speak Truth"

Warrior Songs is a series of albums created under the direction of Iraq War veteran Jason Moon, profiled here in Wrath-Bearing Tree (October 2020). With the release of Warrior Songs' third CD, this time focused around the Vietnam War, journalist Larry Abbott wanted to revisit this collective effort among veteran-musicians to create musical anthologies around their experiences.

The Last Thing We Ever Do: Vietnam Era Veterans Speak Truth will be officially released on August 8 to coincide with the 57th anniversary of the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. The CD, featuring 14 cuts, is a collaboration of 19 Vietnam vets with 21 professional musicians and songwriters to create an eclectic compilation of rock, jazz, blues, and

blue grass-inspired stories of the war and its aftereffects. The project involved 81 studio musicians and 14 studios in the United States and Vietnam. A total of 109 artists, 17 of whom are Vietnamese, were involved in creating the CD. The diversity of musical styles mirrors the diversity of the stories, from the Selective Service System to combat to coping with returning to the U.S., civilian life, and moral injury. In all, the songs on the CD chart the three stages of war: “going, there, and back.”



“Conscription” tells of the “going” phase of war and was a

group effort by members of Vets on Frets and Lisa Johnson. The original poem was written by John Zutz and concerned the anxiety of waiting for one's draft notice or lottery number. The question of going and returning (or not), is at the core of "Conscription," the first song on the CD. The narrator duly signs up for the draft at age 18 and as the lottery approaches his "nerves are taut as wires." He has seen the war on television and the conflict that looked so far away could suddenly become *his* reality, a reality of "Rice paddies, helicopters, Agent Orange and a jungle trail, . . . " Reminiscent of Creedence Clearwater's "Fortunate Son" the song also takes a jab at the privileged who scheme their way out while "The rest of us stuck in the draft are left without a plan" and have to wait for Uncle Sam's decision. There is a tone of resignation in the refrain "oh, conscription."

Other songs tell of perhaps unexpected experiences, like "Seawolf 7-6" by Kyle Rightley and Bill Martin. Martin was a helicopter gunship pilot with the Seawolf Squadron whose call sign was Seawolf 7-6. On his stops in various villages he entertained children with magic tricks and quickly developed a rapport with the youngsters, especially at an orphanage near his base. The song recounts his experiences performing his shows. At one performance a girl approached him "with unmistakable fear in her eyes" and told him that the VC were coming and that he and his crew had better leave. "This brave girl/Saved my life on that day." His experiences stayed with him: "Seawolf 7-6, in the end, it's all about the kids/And I fly my gunship high through all of my dreams./Seawolf 7-6, what a magical life I've lived. . . . "

Another song takes a different approach to the war experience. It does not deal with combat but with a subject that could be of equal importance: music. Doug Bradley served in Vietnam as an information specialist. While a professor at the University of Wisconsin (from which he recently retired after three decades) he and Craig Werner co-authored *We Gotta Get Out of*

This Place: *The Soundtrack of the Vietnam War* (2015), which discusses the music of the times and the impact of the music on the "grunt." His song, "Look Out Sam," created with Kyle Rightley, shows that music was a survival mechanism by providing an escape, however temporary, from the constant presence of injury and death : "Albums, tapes, DJs played on the AFVN/And just for a while they would help you feel at home/Look out Sam we're staring down a gun/Running through a jungle that you can't outrun/But far from home the music gave us grace/And we all sang 'we gotta get out of this place.'" The song also shows that music can create a bond among troops and be instrumental to the post-war healing process.

The after effects of war, moral injury and PTSI, felt upon the return home, is the subject of “Disquieted Mind” by Jeff

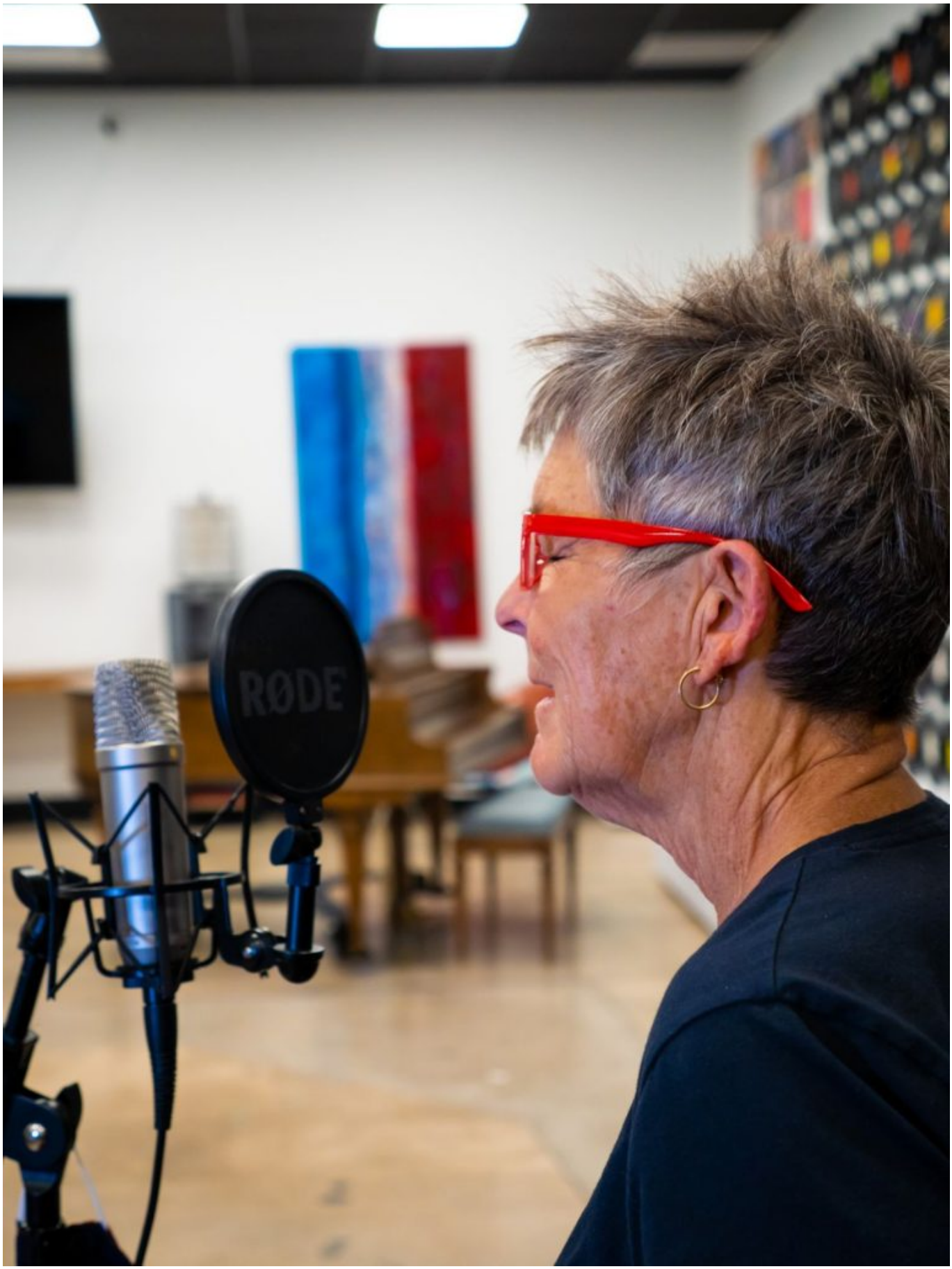
Mitchell and Steve Gunn. Gunn, who was a combat medic, talks of his moral injury but also holds out the possibility of healing and recovery, however tenuous. In what could be a memory of destruction Gunn writes “I did not look back to study your face/ And all that we were leaving behind/But now I see you/And I know what we’ve done/For I have a disquieted mind . . . .” But he also avers that “I can build you something out of my love . . . ” even if it might take the rest of one’s life.

Similarly, “Face Down,” by the Mambo Surfers, posits that the effects of war can last a life time, but also that the effects can be mitigated and lead to healing. The song, based on the story of a Marine Corps vet, tells of his sexual assault when first arriving at his combat team. After the incident he was able to psychologically survive, lead his men, and regain his true self. He still carried the experience but was able to turn the experience around to help others. His story into song generates healing:

If betrayal or deceit has left you in pain, hopelessly broken
And indifference or denial have left the wounds weeping and open
I want to reach you with this song, soothe what hurts and make it good
I want to reach you where you hurt, walk away from the edge with you

“Cracks and Patches” is based on Brent MacKinnon’s battle with the effects of Agent Orange. MacKinnon was a corporal in Vietnam from 1966-68 and was exposed to Agent Orange. As cancer took hold he sought to heal his soul through the arts and connecting to other vets. One aspect of this journey was *Agent Orange Roundup: Living With a Foot in Two Worlds* (2020), a book co-written with fellow Marine Lieutenant Sandy Scull. “Cracks and Patches,” by Paul Wisnewski and Aaron Baer, uses a final conversation with his estranged daughter to show that even though Agent Orange has taken his life there is still

hope for reconciliation: “After all these lonely years,/Cancer did what I couldn’t do./It built a bridge that spans between us/And it brought me back to you.”



The most ambitious song, “Seeds of Peace,” is by Warrior Songs founder Jason Moon, who participated in Vietnam vet Chuck

Theusch's Children's Library International 20-year anniversary trip to Vietnam. The song is about the importance of reconciliation work in healing moral injury. The recording is Warrior Songs' first multi-national effort. Son Mach, conductor of The United Saigon Orchestra, completed recordings in Saigon and Da Nang. Vietnamese school children sang the lead vocals. The song was finished in Madison, Wisconsin with traditional American instruments and a local student choir. "Seeds of Peace" was inspired by Moon witnessing a meal in Duc Pho shared by Theusch and other U.S. Vietnam war veterans with former Viet Cong. The two groups had fought against each other 50 years ago in that province. In fact, during the meal at the school where Theusch built a library Theusch pointed to a hill "over there," where during the war the two "enemies" fought and killed each other. Now they are building libraries. Moon wrote the song while riding a bus in Viet Nam, thinking about the meal he witnessed and the children who benefit from the libraries.

The new CD not only brings forth the experiences of women and vets of color but is also international in scope. Pauline Pisano composed "Orange Lipstick and Pink Uniform Taxes" from the testimony of women vets. In "Welcome to the World," Parthon explored the experience of African-American vet Calvin Wade, who faced racism after returning from war. Actor, writer, and producer Elvis Thao created a song about the experience of Hmong veteran Chai Cher Vue entitled "Bloody Mekong."

Warrior Songs was founded in 2011 by Iraq War veteran Jason Moon, who, diagnosed with PTSD, attempted suicide. He began to write songs about his experiences, and in 2010 released the CD *Trying to Find My Way Home*. This led to performances at educational sessions for non-vets and veterans' retreats, which in turn led to vets sharing their stories with him. He realized that music could be an agency of healing for others if he could transform the stories into songs with the help of

professional musicians and songwriters. He founded Warrior Songs in 2011, and the first CD, *If You Have to Ask . . .*, with Moon as executive producer, was released in 2016. The CD *Women at War: Warrior Songs Vol. 2* was released in 2018 and represents the first time in the history of modern music that a full length CD was created from the testimony of women veterans. Eighteen women veterans and two Gold Star family members supplied testimony. 17 songwriters and 64 professional musicians brought the songs to life. 13 engineers, working in recording studios across five states, created the final recordings. In total, "Warrior Songs Vol. 2: Women at War" was produced by the collaboration of 95 people, of whom 49 were women. *Women at War* won the Wisconsin Area Music Award Album of the Year for 2019.

Moon has long-range plans for Warrior Songs. Volume 4 featuring songs by veterans of color is scheduled for a 2023 release. Future themes are "Family, Friends, and Support," "Native and Indigenous Voices," "Injured and Disabled Veterans," "Rainbow Warriors/LGBTQ ," "Tales from the Combat Zone," and "Women Veterans of Color." By 2030 he hopes to release volumes 1 through 10 as a full box set. A supplementary 11th volume will explore the experiences of survivors of US wars.

The new CD, as well as volumes 1 and 2, are free for veterans and are available from Warriorsongs.org. A preview of the CD can found at: www.warriorsongs.org/WSV3

The following are some of the contributors' notes on songs found on the album.

"Conscription"

Neil O'Connor: John Zutz wrote the poem "Conscription" about his experience with the Viet Nam draft lottery. He and Lisa (Johnson) then collaborated on writing it as a song, with Lisa creating the music. Lisa and I were acquainted through both

musical and non-musical interests, and she asked me whether Vets on Frets would be interested in recording the song for the upcoming Warrior Songs III CD. We were, and we started on the project in December 2017.

Lisa provided a copy of the lyrics and a basic recording of the song. I shared it originally with Vets on Frets members Danny Proud and Mark Loder, since the three of us were the only members with access to digital/virtual recording equipment. Danny, an experienced songwriter, revised some of the lyrics, and we rehearsed the parts separately until we could set up a virtual server; that server (Jamulus) allowed us to rehearse the song together in real time. We then cut our separate instrumental and vocal tracks in our homes, which Mark mixed on his mixing equipment. We needed a 3rd voice on the verses, so we recruited Rick Larson, one of the original Vo F members; we also asked Lisa to sing on the refrains. All the tracks were sent to Paradyme Studios in Madison, WI, where Jake Johnson fine-tuned the instrumentals, and Rick, Danny, Lisa and myself recorded the final vocal tracks in April. We sent the finished song to Jason, and it will be on the CD.

I'm also old enough to have been subject to that draft lottery in 1971, so John's description of the lottery experience was very real for me (I was 52 when I served in Iraq; that's a whole 'nother story). The song very accurately communicates the uncertainty and foreboding of the times; it felt like life was on hold until you got that lottery number. I'm of the Viet Nam veteran generation, so I've always felt connected to their experiences, especially with the music of the time. My Iraq experience felt like it had some parallels with the Viet Nam vet experience, though our treatment upon returning home was infinitely more positive.

Vets on Frets came about when Danny and Mark, both Guitars for Vets instructors at the time, invited three of the recent graduates to informal jam sessions to encourage their

continued growth as guitarists. They chose to have these sessions at the Madison Vet Center where I worked as a clinical social worker; the sessions were held on the one evening a week I staffed the Center. Rick Larson (Navy-Viet Nam), and brothers Jim (Army-Viet Nam) and Joe (Army-Europe) Ballweg formed the origin of the group. After a year, Danny and Mark challenged them to perform together in public at a Guitars for Vets fundraiser in a local venue. That was a real success, and they continued with that annual event for several years. About six years ago, they asked me to join them, since I played 12-string guitar and they wanted an additional voice in the group. We expanded to play at a number of local venues, and any donations/monies we earned went to local vets' organizations (which continues to this day). Three years ago Thomas Hopfensberger (Air Force-US) joined us on guitar and vocals. COVID saw us on hiatus for 18 months, and we've just restarted performing in public again. We also recorded a song about the pandemic, co-written by Rick and Danny, titled "Swept Away"; it's been played on a couple of local community run radio stations, and been submitted to our local public radio station for an airing.

John Zutz: I was born in 1949 and served U.S. Army April 69 – April 71, Vietnam 1970. I drove a dump truck and covered the central third of South Vietnam pretty well. I was assigned by Jason Moon to write a song about the draft. I'm not a musician so he asked Lisa Johnson to work with me. I began working on the words, the message. Later Lisa provided the tune. Due to COVID distancing we worked separately with only one or two direct contacts over the computer. Vets on Frets came later, and made a few changes. So the song is the work of a committee that never met. I'm amazed at how well it turned out. The band communicates the feelings of loneliness and loss, the pressures we were under at the time.

Lisa Johnson: John and I conferred via Zoom a couple times, and he gave me some more background on his experience as well

as emailing me a copy of the poem the song was to be based on. I am a board member of Warrior Songs and Jason had asked me to work with John to develop the song (I had previously done a song on the volume 2 CD with stories from women veterans). I hardly feel like I should take any credit for this one; it is a lot of John's verbiage (and Vets on Frets added some great lines and context as well). I just put it in a kind of sequential order that rhymed, gave it a chorus and came up with a melody. I just wanted it to be as true to his experience and poem as I could. I sang/played the song over Zoom for John. It is critically important when Warrior Songs does a story-to-song project like this that the veteran whose story it is agrees that the song reflects the feeling and experience he/she had. John suggested a few changes that VOF was able to work in at the studio, and we were good to go. I had the idea that because each verse was about a different facet of the conscription process that it would be nice if different people sang each verse, and if they were veterans themselves, so much the better. Vets on Frets immediately came to mind. I knew of Neil through a concert VOF did at a local folk music cooperative, the Wild Hog in the Woods Coffeehouse where I volunteer and because his wife took my master gardener volunteer training course. As it was during the pandemic and we couldn't meet in person to have me play and record the song, Neil was very helpful (and patient!!) in helping get me set up with Jamulus software and a set of recording headphones so that I could play/record the song for him online. This took a couple weeks since I had to order various pieces of equipment, download Jamulus, and have Neil walk me through setting it all up, with various technology-related snafus along the way. Once recorded, VOF members listened to it and took it from there. They added a couple important phrases including John's suggestions and gave it their special sound. I even got to sing on the chorus when we finally did get to go to the studio! I am grateful to have had the opportunity to meet/work with everyone!

“Seawolf 7-6”

Kyle Rightley: I met Jason Moon several years ago at a folk music event called Wild Hog in the Woods when I was first doing solo acoustic music. We hit it off, and pretty soon we were getting together regularly to write songs. He mentioned his vision for the Warrior Songs project, and I was interested in participating as a songwriter, even though I’m not a veteran. That eventually led to the song “Brothers” on the first compilation disc. “Seawolf 7-6” is the story of Bill Martin. He piloted a gunship in the Mekong Delta during the Vietnam conflict, but he was also an amateur magician who would perform for children in the local villages during his downtime. Jason Moon put me in touch with Bill, and I interviewed him over the phone and by email since he lives in New Mexico and I’m in Wisconsin. Bill has lived a very full and colorful life, and really my challenge was picking the most interesting stories to focus on for this song. I would write some initial lyrics and musical ideas, and Bill would give me feedback about what was working and what wasn’t. Eventually, the song came into focus. Working on these Warrior Songs projects has taught me the power of narrative in a song. The process of telling someone else’s story through music makes me look at my own music through a different lens. Even if I’m not telling a literal story, I try to make any new song have an emotional arc with a beginning, middle, and end.

Bill Martin: I met Jason Moon at Winterfest in Angel Fire. He was performing and my group <vetsandpats.org> followed him. He wanted to include a song about me in Album 3 of Warrior Songs. His particular interest was that I performed magic shows in the villages between fire fights. I flew helicopter gunships in Vietnam with the famed Seawolf Squadron. Flew over 500 missions and popped into the villages in my sector more than 50 times. I would set up and do a show while my gunners walked around making friends and gaining trust. Occasionally I would fly to my maintenance base for repairs. There was an orphanage

with 200 orphan girls next to the base. I loved doing magic for them. I was slightly involved in their rescue from the clutches of the Vietcong during the fierce fighting of the Tet Offensive. My knowledge of trick escapes saved me from capture when two Vietcong tied me up on a jungle trail while I was performing in several villages during the Children's National Holiday. My unit was made up of all volunteers. We were there to provide close air support for the River Patrol Boats (PBRs). My call sign was Seawolf 7-6. Most of my scrambles were called by Dick Godbehere. He was a boat captain leading from two to six boats on patrols and special ops. His call sign was Handlash Delta. He was the bravest sailor I have ever met. He took the fight to the enemy and never backed down. He would carry the flag into narrow canals, expecting to get ambushed, but knowing that the Seawolves would be there when scrambled. Dick had one boat shot out from under him. He and his crew were seriously wounded on their last mission, and medevaced to the States. Because of our close interaction under extreme situations, we have maintained contact, Dick became the Sheriff of Maricopa County. He is now a high-end home builder in Hawaii and elsewhere. I think that Kyle did a wonderful job on the music. I asked if we couldn't put more of the combat into it, but Jason was more interested in the magic. I can understand that, since it is a bit unusual and has human interest. Nightmares followed me for many years. But the memories of the kids laughing keep me on track. I am honored just to be included in volume 3.

"Look Out Sam"

Jake Froelke: In terms of the collaboration with Doug, we had some phone calls and I read his book. I took ideas from our conversations and the book and put a song together. "Look Out Sam" refers to "Uncle Sam", our nickname for the government and its relationship to the military and the men and women who put their life on the line for them. It was another dark time in our country's history. I wasn't born yet but it was my

parents, and aunts and uncles, generation. I've met and talked with quite a few people in that age group. This is the first time I took a specific subject and did research in order to create a song. Usually my songs come in other ways and are more personal. The point of view through different eyes made for a stretch in my songwriting. It's good to get out of the comfort zone once in a while. This was a different approach, an interesting take on the songwriting process.

Doug Bradley: All credit goes to brother Moon for organizing this collection (and his earlier two). We wouldn't be having this conversation if he wasn't working his magic. That said, he connected me and Jake. We had a brief chat, I told Jake to read *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* (which he did), and then we drilled down a bit on what my Vietnam was like in the rear in 1970-71. As I told him more than once, music, lots and lots of music. Jake went off and did his thing, then sent me a demo. I gave him some minor (key) feedback and he wrapped it up. I believe Sam is Uncle Sam but maybe Jake has a different take?

"Disquieted Mind"

Jeff Mitchell: I've known Jason Moon for years from our overlapping time in the Oshkosh, WI folk music community and our many mutual friends. I've followed Jason's work with Warrior Songs since its beginnings. I was looking for a few things from my experience, including an opportunity to be of service, to explore my personal thoughts and assumptions on war and those involved, and also for a spur to creativity as I'd been in a songwriting slump. So, I filled out the volunteer application and (happily) was accepted.

The collaborative process with Steve Gunn started with reading assignments (chief among them *War and the* Soul by Dr. Ed Tick) followed by a long initial telephone conversation. Steve was very generous in sharing his experiences of the war in Vietnam and his subsequent path to healing from what many mental

health professionals now refer to as “moral injury.” After this call, I began my writing process, which occurred mostly during a series of hikes near my home in Milwaukee. Over the course of developing the song, Steve and I would check in and he kindly answered my follow-up questions and provided important guidance on the lyrics and the feeling of the recording. It is of utmost importance that the song should reflect the thoughts and lived experience of the veteran directing the project. I hope that I have at least somewhat approached that goal.

Steve’s healing process involved reaching out to those around him and offering his resources and talents in service of others. It seemed that the choral approach would reflect the importance of connection and community in the path towards healing and reconciliation. On a personal note, this song was created during the isolation of COVID-19. Pulling in collaborators was a wonderful way to connect with many of the dear friends I’ve made over the years of making music.

Previously, I have often centered my songwriting on my own experiences and emotions. While this song was still created through my personal process, the explicit goal was to share Steve’s story and valuable insights which may help others in their own struggles with moral injury. I can’t help but think this has expanded and deepened my creative process. I guess that remains to be seen! My main hope is that Steve’s honesty and generosity of spirit will bring some aid and comfort to at least a few of his fellow veterans.

Steve Gunn: I served as a conscientious objector combat medic with the 101st Airborne Division. I served with Delta Company, 2/506th, in the last major campaign of the Vietnam War, the battle for Fire Support Base Ripcord. My recovery from PTSI and Moral Injury involves daily meditation, service to my international meditation organization, the Self Realization Fellowship, playing music (guitar and vocal), serving with a

Veteran/Community listening circle, and mentoring people recovering from addiction. I travelled to Vietnam twice with Ed Tick and a group of veterans and engaged in philanthropic projects there as a part of my recovery from Moral Injury. As a part of recovery from Moral Injury and service to fellow veterans, I gave a TEDx talk on the subject. I am a retired social worker psychologist and personal coach. Prior to retirement, I worked for 40 years in children's behavioral health services as a therapist and administrator. I said yes when Jason Moon asked me if I was interested having a songwriter write a song about my experience. He assigned Jeff Mitchell to me and we began collaborating. Jeff and I conversed on the phone and I sent him photos, poems, my TEDx talk and he wrote the song based on that resource information. The major themes of the song are moral Injury and recovery.

"Face Down"

This contributor wishes to remain anonymous.

I am the Marine responsible for "Face Down."

It's the story of a young man who trained diligently for war and a Marine Recon team by foregoing dates and fun in high school and training by running from my home out to the prairies, doing countless pushups, sit ups, and studying metaphysical writings to prepare mentally. I then moved to Colorado after graduating and climbed 14,000 ft. mountains on my days off from working on a ranch in the Collegiate Range.

Then I joined the Marines and went through all the training and into Marine Recon school at Camp Horno. I also went through sniper school and worked with the ideas of the spiritual qualities of precision and accuracy rather than killing.

We were subjected to the brainwashing of objectifying ourselves and the enemy. We were asked to pray to kill and to

scream “kill” over every obstacle. I reversed the objectification with the spiritual reality that I could not kill the spiritual essence of anyone.

When I arrived at my combat team I was sodomized in the dark under the guise of initiation. I had no idea of what was coming until it was over. Then I had to physically fight them all. That whole team went out and they were all killed.

I still had thirty long range missions to run to find and interdict enemy infiltration coming off the Ho Chi Minh trail out of Laos and into South Vietnam. At times I had to use my weapons to protect my team but for the most part I prayed for the enemy and our team so as not to ramp up the killing and for everyone’s protection. I did not accept the objectification that I was taught as I saw the enemy as real people and not “Gooks.” I felt much remorse when killing took place and I vowed that I would not go through life as a Marine but as a conscious Being. It’s not fair how 18 year old kids were indoctrinated into war and hatred. It doesn’t just go away and then we have to work on it for a life time. Refusing to hate and oppress . . . supporting the interconnectedness of us all and all life forms . . . being as gentle and gracious as we can be with ourselves and all others. It’s a privilege to be on this plane of existence and only Love can take us where we need to go. This is not a criticism of individual Marines at all. It is an explanation of the brutality of war and what it does to our young people.

“Cracks and Patches”

Paul Wisnewski: Jason Moon sent me a handful of writings by Vietnam veteran Brenton MacKinnon. The instructions were to write a song about Agent Orange. MacKinnon’s writings were jarring to read and were primarily about Vietnam and its effects. However, it was a few paragraphs about his evolving relationship with his daughter that really stuck in my mind. I thought this relationship could be used to express his story

in a way that non-veterans could more easily understand.

Mackinnon had the following line in one of his writings:

“Cracks and patches in the ceiling plaster floated and danced above me in beautiful patterns sketching a map of my long journey from Los Angeles to Nong Son.”

The words “cracks and patches” grabbed my attention as a description of his life and relationship with his daughter. I think it also accurately describes most of our lives and relationships, so I wanted to use it as the basis of the song as well as the title.

My collaborator is Aaron Baer. Apparently I don’t get very far in my phonebook when looking for help . . . hahaha.

“The Last Thing We Ever Do”

Jason Moon: Anyone who came home who had PTSD knows something. These guys are home maybe 40, 50 years and they have some wisdom. The goal for the CD was to get that wisdom about how to live before they passed. The focus was to capture that wisdom and the different ways they processed their experiences. It’s like leaving a road map for the younger generation.

The songs are personal and express first-hand testimony. The songs are really about truth-telling. Vets are not a monolithic group. There is diversity among vets and we tried to show that. Originally the CD was planned as a double album because of so many vets we wanted to honor and to show that diversity, but COVID put a stop to that.

It was important to have an international dimension, like in “Seeds of Peace,” to show the reconciliation efforts. In Wisconsin, probably as elsewhere, there is a lot of ignorance and racism about the Hmong. I’m not sure many people even know about the sacrifices the Hmong made. It was important to have

Elvis Thao’s song, “Bloody Mekong,” as a voice for them. I wanted that story.

Artist Profile: Larry Abbott Interviews Musician Vince Gabriel

INTRO: Vince Gabriel has been making music since his high school days in New Jersey. Born in South Amboy on September 16, 1947, he learned the guitar after his father brought one home. Influenced by the rock music of the early and mid-1960’s, The Rolling Stones in particular, Gabriel played in rock bands in and after graduating high school. He was drafted in 1967, completed basic training, and deployed as an infantry man, 11 Bravo Vietnam, in January 1968, arriving just before the start of the Tet Offensive. He soon found himself in the jungle, engaging in his first firefight after only a few weeks in country. He bought a beat-up guitar, and a photo from 1968 shows him in his helmet, cradling it, M60 style. He notes, though, that he never took the guitar on patrol but that it traveled with him to base camps, where he would play with some other guitarists when he was out of the bush.

Gabriel kept playing music when he returned stateside in 1969. He lived for a time in Connecticut, California, and Massachusetts, playing in clubs, working with "name" artists, and becoming more serious about his music. After moving permanently to Maine in the 1990's he rejuvenated his Blind Albert persona and formed the Blind Albert Band.

In 2000, he released the CD *11 Bravo Vietnam*, which chronicles his war and post-war experiences. Liner notes dedicate the CD to his brothers in arms Howard Spitzer, Richard Gibson ("Spitzer and The Winemaker") **1**, Nicholas Saunders, Robert Caplan and "all those who gave the ultimate sacrifice and to all veterans who served." The album served as the foundation for a documentary he created a few years later, *11 Bravo Vietnam—A Soldier's Story*, which he calls "'a virtual scrapbook of one young man's experience in combat from the day he receives word of his induction to his homecoming.'" **2**

The song "Draft Card" is emblematic of his irrevocable life change, happening virtually overnight, from playing music in California after high school to receiving his induction notice and going to basic and infantry training. "Spitzer and the Winemaker" is a first-person recounting of an episode in which Gabriel is rotated off point with Spitzer taking the lead with Gibson. As the patrol moves out, with Spitzer and Gibson a hundred or so yards ahead, they hear an explosion. They learn

that Spitzer and Gibson walked into a minefield, with Spitzer killed and Gibson wounded. "Homeward Flight" is an instrumental; words aren't needed to express the relief of riding home on the "freedom bird." The album concludes with the plaintive feel of "Beneath the Shelter" and the relentless bass line of "Shellshock–PTSD" (included on CD 13 of *. . . Next Stop is Vietnam*). In the former, Gabriel takes on the persona of a homeless vet telling his story. He says that "I died inside but kept on living." He realizes that there will be "no more parades with ticker tape or marching bands" and that in society's eyes "I'm just a wino." In the latter Gabriel describes the personal effects of the war: his divorce, the inner demons, the reliance on "weed and whiskey" in order to get through the day. He sings in the refrain that "the war never ends for the soldier, you come home and it all just begins."

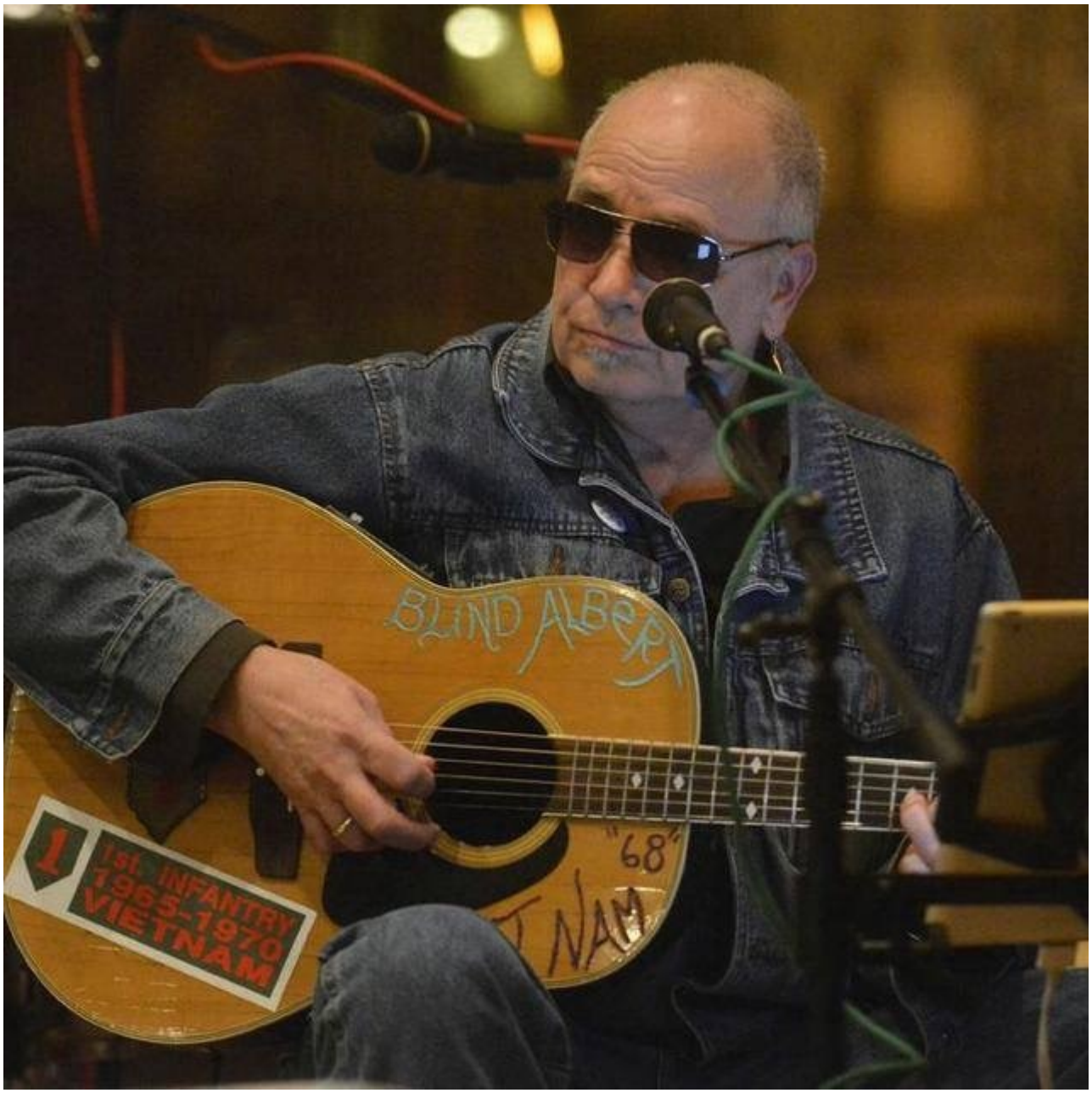
In 2002 he released an eight-cut CD entitled *Boyish Man* (playing off Muddy Waters' 1955 song "Mannish Boy"), on which he played guitar, harmonica, and percussion, as well as doing the back-up vocals. The album is more straight-ahead rock and blues with no ostensible references to his military service. Gabriel, at 72, continues to write songs, and perform solo and with his band. He has his own recording studio with which he produces the albums of other musicians.

- For recordings, see: https://www.reverbnation.com/vietnamcombatveteranblindalbert/songs
- Hugo Keesing, *. . . Next Stop is Vietnam: The War on Record: 1961-2008*, Hambergen, Germany: Bear Family Records, 2010, pp. 238-239.

Larry Abbott: In *We Gotta Get Out of This Place,* Bradley and Werner write, "music is a path to healing. Music can help heal psychological wounds." **1** Does your music have a therapeutic or a healing dimension?

Vince Gabriel: Well, my music was written about my experiences in Vietnam, so I don't know how therapeutic that would be. The concept for the CD (*11 Bravo Vietnam*) was to give someone an idea of what it was like without actually being there. I mean, that was the only way I could pass that information along. When I give someone the CD, I say, "You don't want to play that at a party, if you're trying to get the party going." [laughs] Because it's not party music. It's about being in combat, and it's basically about from the time I got my draft card until the time I came home. Each song is attached to whatever I was going through at the time. I do believe that music is a soothing method of dealing with stuff, but I wouldn't consider this soothing. It's more of an audio documentary, I would say. You can put it that way.

LA: Your songs tell stories, as you mentioned. Do you consider yourself a storyteller?



VG: In this regard, I do. I've written a lot of songs from experiences, not only Vietnam, but just life experiences. Some would tell a story, but I'm basically writing about feelings, and I don't know that that tells a story or not, you know? But the Vietnam CD is definitely a story. A true story.

LA: One thread or dimension in your songs is social commentary, like "Land of Dreams," "The Common People," and "Hey, You," which seem to reference more of what's happening in the world today, like global warming or government lies.

VG: Yeah, I guess I could call them protest songs, about what

was going on at that particular time, the early 90's. It's just my way of putting out how I feel without actually getting on Facebook and ranting and raving. [laughs] 'Cause that doesn't work sometimes. I would say I've got five or six songs that are similar to that.

LA: How did those songs come about?

VG: There was a period of time I was writing when I wrote those types of songs because I figured, I got to get some stuff out because it's really bugging the hell out of me. They were just a commentary on what was going on at the time. "One Way Street" took in a couple of subjects: veterans, the oil, fighting for oil. Every one of those, my protest songs, came from a need to get those feelings out. The best way I know how to do that is to write a song about it. That's how that stuff came about. I don't know if anybody liked what they heard, or how many people listened, but it was important that I put it out. If somebody got something from it, then that's good.

LA: In some of those songs you have a female chorus, "We need hope . . . we need the promise that things will change."

VG: Well, actually, the female chorus was me. [laughs] I just sang in a really high falsetto voice. I didn't have time to go looking for a female singer. I don't think I knew too many at the time, so I figured well, I'll just do it. And so, it's kind of a joke because I go by the name of Blind Albert. I call them the Blindettes. That's my backup singing group.

LA: On that note, how did Blind Albert come about?

VG: Well, this isn't a really long story, which is good. I used to live in Cape Cod before I moved up here and I had a studio in my apartment. I was working on a blues project. I was writing blues songs, and I needed to come up with a fictitious blues name for it. My middle name's Albert and I needed something in front of that. I didn't want to be Deaf Albert or Fat Albert, or any of these others. I figured Blind

Albert. That sounds like a blues guy. I used it for that project, but then I didn't use it anymore.

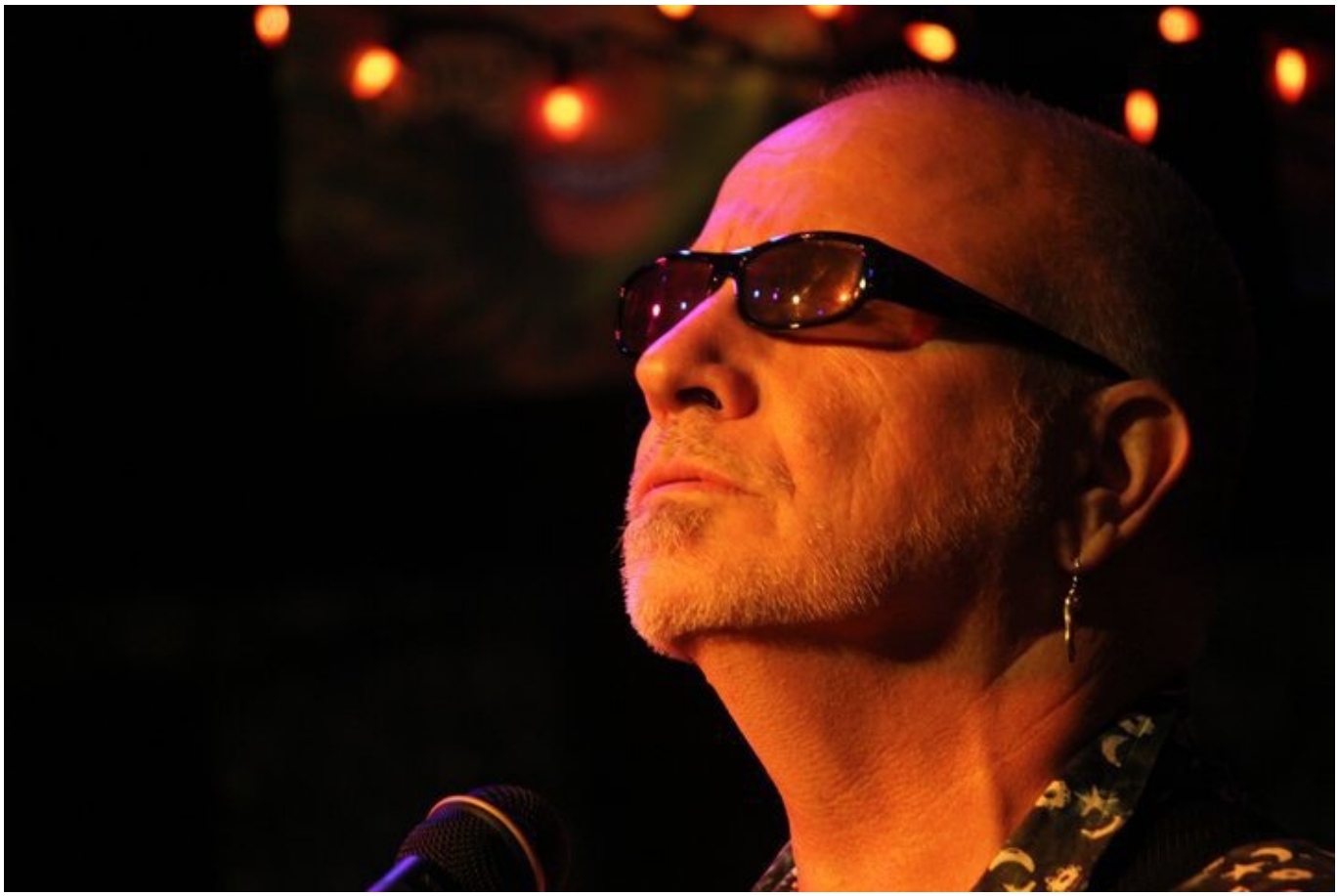
Not too long after that, in '89, I moved up to Maine because a good buddy of mine who I had played with back in the '70s was living up here. I moved out to Islesboro, and kind of aired out for about a year 'cause I had just gotten a divorce, and I needed to regroup.

I didn't play music for about a year. I didn't play in clubs for that year. I started to gradually book stuff, and realized I couldn't stay on the island anymore 'cause I was off the island more than I was on the island, playing. I put a band together and needed a name for it. Blind Albert was in mothballs and I figured, hmm, Blind Albert. I had already come up with that. I might as well use it.

And so I started to use that. And the funny thing about it is, because of the name, everybody pegged me as a blues artist. That's still the case now. But I do play some blues, but I wasn't originally a blues artist; I was a rock guitar player and singer, which I still am.

LA: I think you're known more as Blind Albert than Vince Gabriel.

VG: Oh, that's true, because I'll be talking with people and mention that I play in a band. And they'll say, "What band do you play with?" I'll say, "Blind Albert." "Oh, I saw you guys in Bar Harbor a couple of years ago, yeah." And if I told them my real name, they wouldn't know who the hell I was. So, I'm kind of stuck with it. I've been stuck with it for 25 or 30 years now.



LA: What led you to making the *11 Bravo Vietnam* documentary? You intersperse your songs with narration and images.

VG: I was actually asked by a friend of mine, who was in college at the time, if I would mind if she interviewed me about playing music in Maine. I said sure, 'cause this was a project for her and I figured I could help her out. **2** During the course of the interview, the subject matter turned to Vietnam, and it was eventually called "Vietnam Blues." I didn't really give it much thought. She told me that she had sent the interview to a couple of radio stations. I just said, okay.

And then, about two weeks later, she contacted me and said that there was a public radio station in Idaho or somewhere that wanted to broadcast it, and I said well, that's good. I still didn't take it seriously. Then about a week later, she said, "We hit the motherlode." I said, "What do you mean?" "NPR picked it up on the Sound Print program. It will be

broadcast all over the United States.” And that’s when I started taking it seriously.

I began to get emails from people I didn’t even know about that piece. I was overwhelmed by the response. I just thought, this is her college project, no big deal. But because of the broadcast I put a live performance together based on the songs on the Vietnam CD and then I decided to put together a documentary

The band rehearsed, I don’t know, for two or three months. A buddy of mine who’s a drama teacher took snippets of notes that I had written about everything I could remember about Vietnam. I had notebooks full of notes. I didn’t know what I was going to do with it, I just wrote it. I just kept writing until I couldn’t remember anything else.

When I started to put this performance together, I figured, well, now I know what I’m going to do with all that stuff I wrote. I’ll take parts of what I wrote that are kind of connected to the songs and we’ll get a narrator and have him narrate each portion. They were only about three or four minutes long, and we’ll play the songs that are related to the narration. Then we’d go onto the next song and he narrates that. The performance continued through all of the songs.

So, I booked the theater in Waldoboro [Maine] and told them I got this thing that I want to do. I don’t know how it’ll turn out or if anybody will even care. We did some advertising and while we were at the theater getting ready, I’m thinking nobody’s showing up ’cause it’s about Vietnam. I said, who’s gonna care? And before I knew it, the whole place was full of people. [laughs] So, I said man, there’s like a lot of people here. I hope we don’t screw it up.

We went out and played. It went off pretty good. I got such an overwhelming response from the audience that it was like an emotional moment. I had thought, nobody’s really going to give

a shit about this. As it turned out I had veterans coming up to me who were in the audience who said you got to keep telling this story.

So I thought, okay. I don't know how long it was after that, I got this brainstorm about bringing the show into the high schools. But because the performance was so long, it was over an hour and a half, the live performance didn't really work in that setting. What I decided to do was shorten it and make a documentary that was about an hour long.

I started to contact some high schools, and wound up going into four or five. I went to a school in Thorndike [Maine] like five years in a row and showed the documentary, and then I would open it up to questions. I said, you guys can ask me anything you want about Vietnam, I don't care what it is. You want to ask me about the drugs, I'll tell you about the drugs. I said, there's nothing that you can't ask me. That was the best part of the whole thing because we were all interacting with the story. It was great. I loved it.

So that's how the documentary came about, the DVD version. I did the live version maybe four or five other times in different places. After I put the documentary together, I kind of slackened off with the live performance. I might still do one, but right now I'm not. But I do have the documentary. The documentary is still available to do something with. **2**

And that's how it all came about. It's kind of a roundabout story.

LA: It was a long story short, or a short long story.

VG: Yeah. A long story long, or something. [laughs] But, yeah.

LA: In "Spitzer and the Winemaker," you ask, "Why am I here and his name is on the wall?"

VG: Right.

LA: And you pose some reasons: luck, skill, karma, God. But then say, “nah.” Have you answered that question, or is that an unanswerable question?

VG: I guess it was all of those. I don’t know. I mean, it could have been any one of the guys or all of them but I still don’t know. Usually I tell people I’m just happy to be here.

That’s how I answer the question because I’m just happy to be here, man. ‘Cause I could not be here. A split second could make a difference, you know? I think it must have been all of those reasons ’cause I don’t think just one of them would have got me back home. I guess something was working for me. And I don’t know what it was, but I’m glad that it did. I’m glad to be here.

LA: You see that frequently not only in the writing of the Vietnam era but also today’s wars, the idea of randomness, pure chance. You step here and you’re okay, but your buddy steps there and he gets blown up.

VG: Yeah. I guess that’s why I ask the question why I’m here and he’s not? There you go back to the luck thing ’cause it had nothing to do really with skill. Well, some of it. A little bit of skill was involved because the guys who were there longer than I was would tell you, for example, don’t walk on the path. You want to listen to what the hell they’re telling you.

A small amount of skill and a large amount of luck, because my buddy, Spitzer, was killed when he was walking point. There were occasions when I also walked point, but not that day. You question why, why that happened. I don’t know why that happened. It’s just the way it worked out. It’s a matter of stepping in one spot or not stepping in another spot. Or being told to walk point that day but not being told to walk point another day.

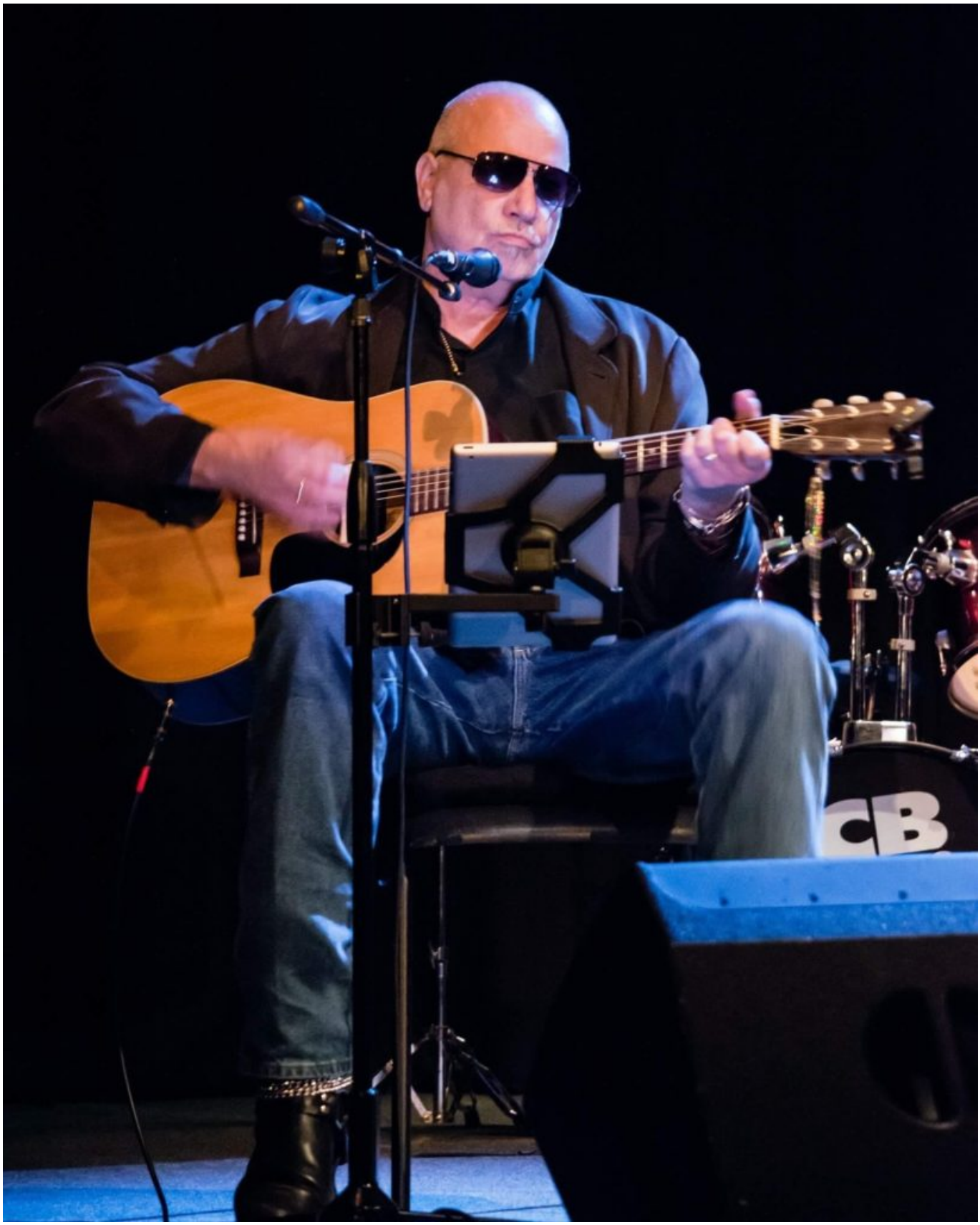
I don’t know what you call that. That’s a random act, I guess, or happening, event, or something. But you’re going to stop and wonder why it was Spitzer and it wasn’t you, you know what I mean? That’s just the way it was.

LA: Do you see your songs as having relevance or connection to vets returning today?

VG: The wars are different, but I think all the veterans and those involved in the wars now are going through the same thing. You might be fighting house to house, like they do in Iraq. When we were fighting, we were in the jungle, going through hooches. It was different but it was the same. You still didn’t know if you were going to get injured or if you were going to get killed from one second to the next. You were still in combat. It doesn’t matter the place; it was combat. You play it, no matter how you look at it.

And the other thing is the problems that you suffered after you came home were the same. PTSD, suicides from PTSD, whatever. If you compare everything, they’re pretty similar.

The wars were different, but I think some of the things that occurred to each veteran who was in these different wars were really the same thing. A bullet can still kill you. That isn’t any different.



LA: To me, one of your most moving songs is “Beneath the Shelter.” It seems to be more generalized about homeless vets, but you sing from the “I” point of view. And one of your lines is, “Yes, I am a veteran. I died inside, but I kept on

living.” In the documentary you connect the song to the art of Derek Gundy. Can you talk about that connection and how that song came about?

VG: Well, that had to do with the homeless veteran situation, and it was a while back when I wrote that song. The situation is still going on today. I mean, it’s a major problem. I’ve never really been homeless. There were some times when I didn’t have a place to live for a little while, but basically I was trying to put the information out that there are veterans who are homeless, that don’t have a place. It’s a long-lasting problem. I wanted to put that information out in a song. Maybe it will have more impact than just presenting statistics.

And Derek, who is a great artist, asked me if he could do a visual rendering of the song and I said, yeah, you can do that. He did a great job.

I didn’t have any statistics when I wrote the song. But I knew there were homeless veterans out there. I placed the song in a scene, under a bridge. There are all kinds of reasons for people to be homeless. And they’re not all alcoholics.

The plight of homeless vets was something that bothered me and I decided to write about it. I guess that’s what it boils down to.

LA: What’s your general process of writing a song? Do you have a rough idea and then keep honing it until you get to a finished product?

VG: Well, for me, I need to write the music first. Some people write lyrics and then put music to it, but I can’t do it that way. I need to come up with an emotional connection with the music. The music is what connects me to song.

Even before the lyrics, I need to come up with the music. Then, I’ll write how I feel. I need to feel the emotion first

and it’s the music that I get that from.

LA: Another song that I thought was one of your best had a bit of a reggae beat, “A Camera and A Curious Mind,” where you write, “Once Vietnam gets in your soul, it keeps you coming back for more. The sounds you hear, the smell of death, the images you can recall.” And you retrace the steps in your mind, and toward the end of the song, there is the sound of a helicopter.

VG: A gentleman asked me if I could write a song for this short documentary that somebody did about him. He was a Vietnam vet and a photographer. I watched the video and took it from there. I wrote the music first and then I wrote the words.

It’s something that, after you write it, you’re not really sure how you came up with it. That’s always a mystery to me how that happens. I don’t know where it comes from. He liked the song. I wrote it and recorded it in one day, and I gave it back to him.

He asked me, “How long did it take you to write this?” “It took me a day.” And he says, “You’re kidding me?” I said, “No, it took me a day.” I said, “There’s the song. Do you like it or not?” [laughs] And he did. I did it to see if I could do it. That’s how that song came about.

LA: You have a song, “Shellshock – PTSD,” with the idea of the war lasts forever. Could you talk about how that one came about?

VG: I think what triggered that was not necessarily my experiences, but the experiences of the veterans who were in Iraq and Afghanistan. It definitely has to do with Vietnam, too.

It was probably the last song I wrote for the CD. It came a long time after I got back from Vietnam. Having PTSD, but not

suffering as much as some Vietnam vets do, I mean, mine was bad enough, and it's still bad enough 'cause I'm taking medication for it, but it was a subject that I had to write about because I hadn't written about it.

I needed to write something, I needed to write my feelings about that subject because I hadn't done that. Until I had, the CD really wasn't complete.

Before I wrote this song, I thought, oh, it's missing one thing. It's missing the residuals that come from war and that we're all, you know, all of us who were in combat, are going through right now. The residuals are part of the whole tour.

A buddy of mine made a comment, "We had no idea that our tour was gonna last a lifetime." And I said, "Yeah," and asked him, "Can I use that?" [laughs] And he said, "Sure." So I did. It opens the documentary.

But it's true. There's the coming home part which, believe me, I was overwhelmed and overjoyed to be back alive. But then, there's all the other stuff that starts coming up after you've been home.

And you deal with it every day, and that's like still being on tour. You're not getting shot at or anything, but mentally you have a lot to deal with. You've been affected by it. You know, we're all taking medication for it. Some have it worse than others. Some of them have committed suicide because of it.

So it's really an ongoing tour, mentally, and maybe even physically, too. Not in the true sense of being over in a combat situation, but you're fighting, you're fighting this stuff every day.

LA: One of the other threads I see seems to be about relationships and love/lust. "There's Always Someone Out There," "You Started Something," or "Four Alarm Fire."

VG: What's really funny about that is, I don't know what happened. My voice somehow changed. I have no idea what caused it. Well, I might have an idea about what caused it. I might have been smoking weed at the time. I don't know if I should say that, but, uh, that's what happened. And it changed my voice.

All of a sudden, I could start hitting these higher notes that I couldn't before. That's where that group of songs came from. And I can't duplicate the vocals on them now because I don't smoke weed anymore. My voice is back to where it should be.

It was just a period of time where I used that voice change and took advantage of it, and wrote some songs that I could sing in that way. It was the weirdest thing. I don't know where that came from, but I can't duplicate it anymore. [laughs]

I don't know that those songs were written about anything I had been through, but they were just, you know, thoughts.

I put those thoughts to music. I don't even know where this stuff comes from, you know? It's better not to try and come up with an answer to that. [laughs]

- Bradley, Douglas, and Werner, Craig. *We Gotta Get Outta This Place*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015, p. 2.
- National Public Radio Soundprint "Vietnam Blues," produced by Christina Antolini, December, 2004, aired January 2005, https://beta.prx.org/stories/3436
- *11 Bravo Vietnam*. 2011, Vimeo https://vimeo.com/31821165; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKSA0TrxCQw

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.

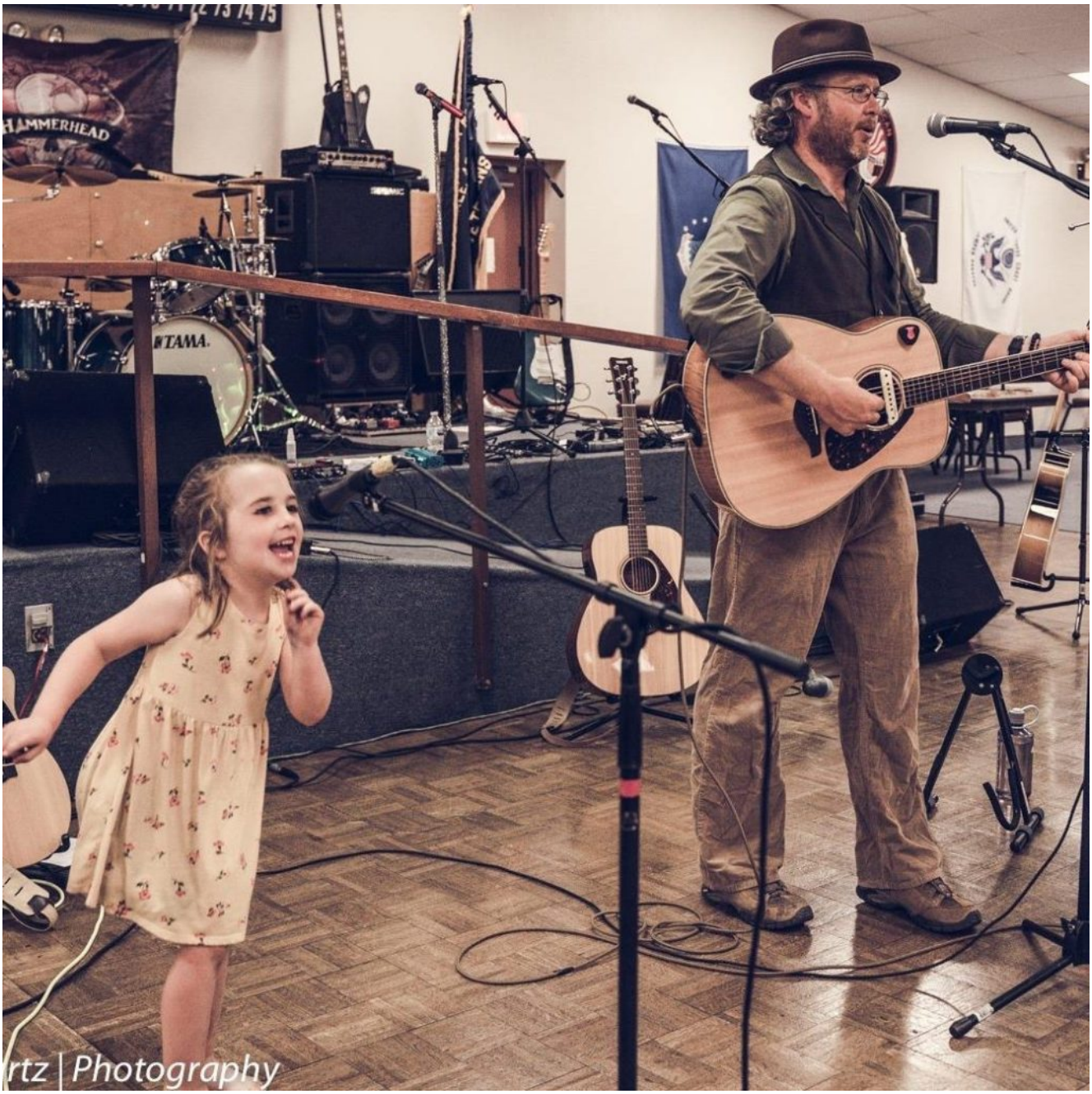
Moon's breakthrough CD is *Trying to Find My Way Home* (2010). The genesis of the album is his work with film director Olivier Morel, whose 2009 documentary *On the Bridge* features current veterans telling their stories of war and post-war life. Moon says that Morel "encouraged me to work on these songs 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.

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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 unverbalized 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.

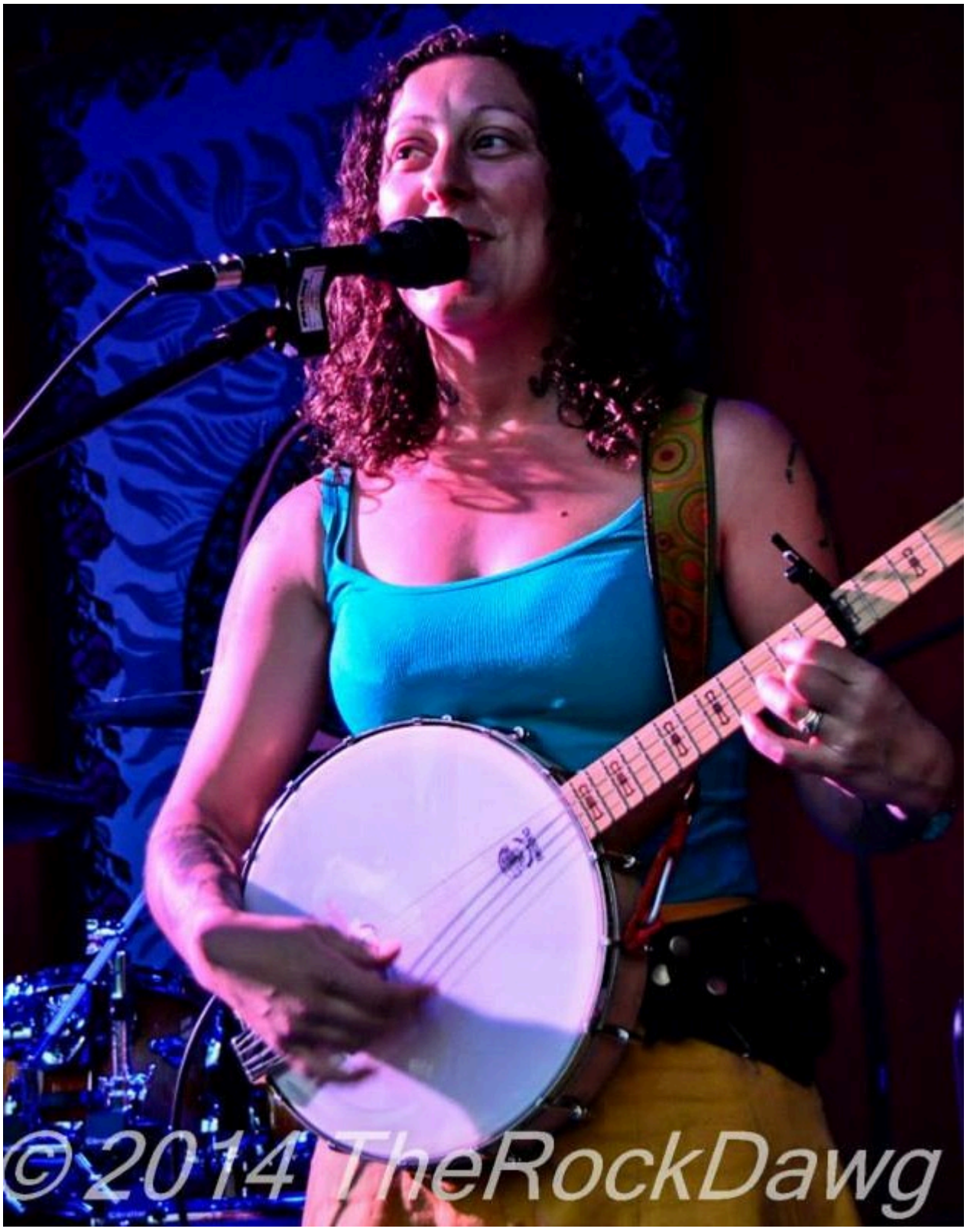
- **See https://jasoneklund.com/ and https://www.lilrev.com/**

- 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)

Artist Profile: Musician Emily Yates

INTRODUCTION

Emily Yates joined the Army at 19, spent six years in, from 2002 until her "release," as she puts it, in 2008, finishing as an E-4, and served two deployments to Iraq in 2005-06 and 2007-08. She calls herself a former "public affairs minion, writing heartwarming news stories about the Iraq War to help build fellow soldiers' morale." **1** She worked under David Abrams (author of the novels *Fobbit* and *Brave Deeds*), and as "the only snarky female specialist in his unit," she sees some of herself in the character of Carnicle. She says that she wishes to "use my experience in the military to make my civilian life richer . . . [and] help those who are struggling." **2** As a self-proclaimed "eventual ukulele superstar" she often uses humor to express her concerns, and utilizes juxtapositions of joy and disillusionment, humor and aggression, and gentleness and vulgarity to communicate those concerns, whether they be about the VA, the precariousness of freedom, sexuality, the military, certain personality types, or how "not to be a dick."



Yates works in a variety of media, also doing photography and writing. Her photographs run from “Food” to “Faces” to “Nature” to “War.” The latter document scenes from her time in Iraq, like “On Patrol” and “Perimeter Secured,” as well as scenes with children, often with soldiers. 3

Like the diverse subject matter of her photographs Yates' writing touches on a variety of themes. In "A Veteran's Affair: How Dealing With the VA is Like Dating a Douchebag" (2016) **4**, she uses humor to highlight a serious issue. "Unfortunately, because only one percent (roughly) of Americans serve in the military at any given time, there's a massive cognitive disconnect between veterans and, as we lovingly call the rest of the population, civilians. But there is hope for us yet to bridge the communication divide." In the essay she points out the multiple ways that the VA falls short of expectations.

Two essays for *Truthout* also express her concerns. "American Propagander: Six Ways Paul Rieckhoff's 'American Sniper' Column Deeply Bothers This US Veteran" (2015) Yates presents a scathing critique of Rieckhoff's praise of Eastwood's film. She feels that in his discussion of the film Rieckhoff exploits veterans and ignores the complexity of the war. In her view, he ignores the real story of the war, such as PTSD and veteran suicides (although to be fair, Kyle's PTSD is depicted), and the complexity of American involvement. She ends her essay "All of these points illustrate the larger issue that when veterans' traumatic experiences are exploited as freely by veterans themselves as they are by the powerful few who send us to war, it's a sign that we ourselves have internalized the destructive system that our bodies were used to support."

In another essay, "Who Am I, Really?: The Identity Crisis of the Woman Veteran Returning Home" (2013), she describes the psychological split she and other women face trying to "recalibrate" their lives and "relearn" how to be a civilian. "I'm referring to the particularly awkward division between women veterans and women who have never been in the military – the division that leads to women like me getting out of the Army and finding it nearly impossible to relate to 99% of other American women." 5

One of her poems, “I Am the Savage,” reflects on her war experience. She writes about the “rubble beside the Tigris river” and troops’ entering Iraqi homes, instilling fear in the citizens. But the military power she observes, wielded against ordinary citizens, is the source of her dejection:

My job is to tell the story of victory—
victory!
Victory?
But I am defeated

Another poem, “Yellow Ribbon” (also a song and video), is critical of civilians who refuse to see the reality of war, believing that a yellow ribbon on their cars and the formulaic “thank you for your service” excuses them. She feels that civilians are willfully blind to what is being done in their name, and are content to follow the trappings of patriotism. She writes “But you can’t bring back the dead by throwing a parade.” The poem closes: “Don’t make me your hero, just lend me your ear/Oh, and wipe the tears I cry/While I apologize for that goddamn yellow ribbon on your car.” **6**

Yates is best known for her music. In 2012 she released *I’ve Got Your Folk Songs Right Here* and in 2014 *Folk in Your Face*. She also released a children’s album under the *nom de musique* Fancy von Pancerton. In *I’ve Got Your Folk Songs Right Here* there is a humorous dimension to “Plant Some Weed,” where growing marijuana is a better economic choice than working at McDonald’s or taking tickets at a movie theater. “In Your Mind” and “Shut Yer Face” criticize ego-centric males who believe that they are “the best and the brightest/Your teeth are the whitest/Except that it’s all in your mind.” “Foreign Policy Folk Song” is reminiscent of Phil Ochs and protest songs of the 60’s placed in a contemporary context:

Just bomb their country
Just bomb their fucking country
Kill all of their children and destroy their infrastructure

Just bomb their country, put holes in all their history
Then take all of their resources and bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb their country.

Folk in Your Face echoes many of the themes of the first album. There is the whimsical, upbeat "Porn!" ("Everyone likes porn!") and the more serious "Just a Little Cog," in which she declares that she will no longer be a cog in anyone else's wheel, whether it be in a relationship or the military: "I was just a little soldier in your war/I'm not fighting anymore/I'm no longer just a cog in your machine."

One of her strongest songs is "You're the Enemy," released on the 2018 *Women At War: Warrior Songs Vol. 2*, as a response to the prevalence of Military Sexual Trauma (MST) and her own assault, which she did not report "because I knew the investigation, if one even happened, would be even more demoralizing than being assaulted by people I knew." She is especially demoralized that there is no escape from the situation. She sees her attacker daily and the supposed trust within a unit is meaningless:

I was trained to fight,
To kill and to die
But never thought that I'd be fighting
Someone on my side

Yates has made numerous music videos, some of performances and others more illustrative of the songs. "Yellow Ribbon" (noted above) is set in front of a recruiting station, with Yates playing a banjo. The more-active "Land of the Free" (released July 4, 2017) is in "honor of those for whom this is not the 'Land of the Free.'" It is an attack on corporate greed, consumerism, militarism, and any force that restricts personal freedom. As Yates skips through Boulder's streets draped in an American flag, she.sings "you'll be convicted for your convictions" and "you'll be tried for tryin' to speak the truth." The video ends with Yates bound with duct tape with a

strip of tape over her mouth. On the strip is written "patriot," suggesting that in the current political climate the real patriots, the truth-tellers, have to be silenced and held in check.

What Emily Yates says about her work could also be applied to artists Vince Gabriel and Jason Moon: "Through my art, I express my many opinions and observations, casually brushing aside social stigma in the interest of breaking down communication barriers and shining light on the many ties that bind humans together."

1. http://emilyyatesmusic.com/bio/
2. Syracuse.com, August 16, 2013 (updated March 22, 2019)
3. **http://emilyyatesphotography.com/**
4. https://brokeassstuart.com/2016/02/08/a-veterans-affair-how-dealing-with-the-va-is-like-dating-a-douchebag/
5. https://truthout.org/authors/emily-yates/; site includes additional essays
6. https://www.warriorwriters.org/artists/emily.html
7. (http://emilyyatesmusic.com/page/2/

INTERVIEW WITH EMILY YATES

Larry Abbott: To start, I was just wondering about your poems "I Am the Savage" and "The Yellow Ribbon." How did they come about?

Emily Yates: "I Am the Savage" was a long time ago now, but I was looking through photos that I had taken during my first deployment and thinking about how we had turned the city of Baghdad into complete rubble. Yet, we were calling the people there backwards, or savages, or just all kinds of derogatory names.

I was thinking how that was actually the opposite of what it was because only savages would go in and bomb a complete civilization, a city, a metropolitan area full of civilians. Then, mock or criticize those civilians for having to make the

best of it.

I started to think about how we as American soldiers, as U.S. soldiers, were not any better than these individuals whose homes we were occupying. In fact, we were invaders. So, I had a lot of guilt and shame around my participation there, seeing a place where civilization was formed, the cradle of civilization at the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, being reduced to complete rubble.

As far as "Yellow Ribbon," it was really almost a gut reaction. I had been involved in a lot of conversations with other veterans right around the time I wrote that song, and talking about the disconnect between people saying thank you for your service and displaying these yellow ribbons, but then not being interested in hearing about our actual experiences or opinions about the war, or asking us how we were doing, or really saying anything other than "thank you, now move along."

The yellow ribbon, to me, was sort of emblematic of that attitude, even though I know there are plenty of people who really mean it sincerely. I think many of those people are just as misled by our government as I was.

LA: You seem to be attacking the hypocrisy or phony patriotism of some civilians.

EY: Yes and no, because I understand the hypocrisy and the phony patriotism. To those people, it might not seem hypocritical or phony. They are products of a very effective national indoctrination system. They came by their perspectives honestly. I was pretty angry when I wrote that song and maybe didn't have as much empathy for those people as I do now. But it was more of just "pay attention." If you really want to be patriotic and say thank you, pay attention because none of this death and destruction needs to be happening, and it shouldn't be.

The military is a job. It’s not a service. It’s a job. We join because we need a job. We’re told that it’s some kind of noble job, but it’s not. That’s what they say so that we don’t feel bad about all the horrible things we’re being trained to do.

Some people do really have a willingness to serve, but they wouldn’t do that shit for free. I think of the work that I’m doing now, speaking out, as more of a service than anything I did in the military. That was a job I did to get money for school and life security, to get out of my hometown and have some new experiences.

But it’s a sacrifice of your own personal freedom, so I encourage people to acknowledge the sacrifice. But saying thank you, thank you for anything, it doesn’t make any sense to me. You don’t thank someone for working at McDonald’s. They’re actually feeding you. You don’t thank someone for working in a nonprofit. That’s service. You don’t thank someone for going and picking up trash on the side of the road.

Why are we thanking anyone for not having any better option than the military? Or for not thinking very clearly about what’s going on? Maybe I’m sorry for your pain. Or, how are you? Or, welcome home. Or, I’m sorry you were deceived. I’m sorry you were used.

The thanking makes me uncomfortable because the military hasn’t done anybody any favors. At all. Whether or not we’re paid for it at all. We’re not doing anything positive for freaking anyone. Other than Dick Cheney, maybe.

LA: You also do photography with a variety of different subjects. They seem to be a little disparate. You have some war photographs on one hand, and then nature on the other hand.

EY: Yeah. I try to think of myself as a multi-polar person. Maybe not bipolar. It’s got such a negative connotation. I

feel like too often, we humans are pressured to define ourselves as being one thing or another thing. I love butterflies, and I care about militarism.

I think that acknowledging the multiplicity of humans is something I try to do all the time. I try to give myself permission to be as many people as I need to be. I think the more we do that, the less we run the risk of erasing parts of people that we don't want to see.

LA: Your songs reflect that multiplicity. Some are cynical, some are critical, satirical, whimsical, political. Would this be accurate, that your songs have this multiplicity to them?

EY: I'm even veering into hopeful in the next album that I'm working on.

LA: How did you get into songwriting?

EY: I started writing songs just by accident, in a way. I was learning to play the ukulele and I had been listening to a lot of Kimya Dawson and Bob Dylan. I became aware of how songs can be anything.

The thing I loved about Kimya Dawson's songs is that they sound so sweet and cute, and they often say such powerful and provocative things. Her song, "Loose Lips," was one that I first heard when I was deployed.

It was absolutely adorable and she had the lyric, it was, "My warpaint is Sharpie ink and I'll show you how much my shit stinks." Let's see. "I'll tell you what I think because my thoughts and words are powerful. They think we're disposable, well both my thumbs opposable are spelled out on a double word and triple letter score."

She had the line, "Fuck Bush. And I'll say fuck Bush and fuck this war." She said it so cutely, and I was like, yeah. Let's just say things cute. I listened to that and I was like, yeah.

How do you be angry at that voice? How do you be angry at that song?

So, when I was learning to play the ukulele, I was practicing three different chords and thought, I bet I could put some words in here and that would make it easier to practice, and more fun. So, I did. I put in words that were an answer to the question people were always asking me at that time, as I had just gotten married.

Which was, “When are you gonna have a baby? Are you gonna have babies? Are you gonna have kids? When are you having babies?” I was just like, my answer was always, “I’ve got so much to do. How do you think I have time to have kids right now?” I would answer these questions over and over, and try to be polite.

So, when I was practicing my ukulele, I just started with, “I don’t want to have a baby,” and went from there, and wrote what I think is probably my most vulgar song that I’ve ever written.

LA: This is true.

EY: But it was cute enough to where people just kind of laughed, instead of hating me when I was done singing it. So, thank you Kimya Dawson for the influence, and thank you other people for asking me questions I don’t want to answer except in a song.

LA: You’ve mentioned that it’s better, maybe more powerful, to use humor in a song even though the topic is serious, rather than beating people over the head with a club about the topic.

EY: Yeah, I’ve always tried to use humor almost as a defense mechanism really because if you say things people don’t want to hear in an aggressive way, then they become aggressive back. But if you can make it a joke, then they laugh a little bit and maybe the proclivity toward aggression dissipates a

little bit. Maybe people are more open to hearing what you have to say if you can make them laugh while you say it.

LA: Were you a musical person growing up? What led you to the ukulele? You're a self-proclaimed "next ukulele superstar."

EY: I was not a musical person growing up, other than singing, which I did in choirs and such. My mom tried to teach me a couple of different instruments when I was a kid, but I didn't pick it up quickly. I didn't have very good hand/eye coordination. I didn't have any good rhythm, and my mom got very frustrated with me at a young age. I decided that I was just never going to be able to play an instrument, I guess.

Everyone else in my family played instruments. My brother is a fantastic musician. My mom plays cello and guitar. My dad plays hammered dulcimer and a bunch of other stuff. I never played any instruments.

Then, I started dating my now ex-husband, who was a musician, a multi-instrumentalist, and he happened to have a ukulele that he never played because he was always playing other things. But he had this ukulele and I was like, "This is so cute. I want to play it!" He was like, "Okay. Here's how you play a couple of chords." I was like, "Great."

But I didn't have rhythm until one of his bandmates decided that he wanted to go on this trip to Africa, to Ghana, and record an album. Even though I was kind of pissed that he scheduled it during the time my new husband and I had taken for our honeymoon and invited him, I was like, all right. That's kind of rude, but sure, let's go to Ghana. Fine. I don't play any instruments, but I had never been there. Why the fuck not? Sure. Let's do that. Then, we'll go to Italy. Okay. Great.

So we went to Ghana. His bandmate had set up these drumming and dancing workshops that we had to get up ridiculously early for every morning. He had set up different levels of drumming

workshops. The real musicians were in the advanced drumming. Then, the wives were in the beginning drumming class to keep us busy.

So, we did three or four days of drumming workshops, and it turns out muscle memory is a thing. I got rhythm, all of a sudden. I came back from Ghana, we went to Italy.

I picked up a ukulele at a music shop in Venice and I started strumming it. I was like, holy shit! I can strum! Neat. Then, when we got back, I picked up the ukulele again and started practicing, and wrote my first couple songs. No one's been able to shut me up ever since. Now, I also play the banjo, the bass. There you go.

LA: You called yourself a folk-punk singer. What do you mean by that?

EY: I've since learned that there's a term called anti-folk that a couple of other artists, like Ed Hamell or I think Ani DiFranco, probably relate to that is a better descriptor. I related to punk because I felt like punk rockers were also putting messages in with their songs that a lot of people didn't want to hear.

I related more to that because a lot of folk songs I knew were very sweet and earnest. I'm very earnest, and I think my sound is kind of sweet, but I'm not really, because I tend to veer more toward sarcasm than actual deep earnestness in a lot of my songs. I tend to put a lot more winking in than a lot of my favorite folk singers. I was like well, I'm not quite folk. I'm kind of folk, but I'm not quite folk.

I love punk. I listen to the Dead Kennedys and the Ramones, and whoever. I related more to that sort of aggressive style than to "the answer is blowing in the wind," for example.

Even though I love Bob Dylan, misogynist though he is. That's a whole other conversation. Although that did inspire me to

write some parodies of Bob Dylan's songs, called Boob Dylan.

LA: You said that you were influenced by Boob, I mean, Bob Dylan, but also Jonathan Richman and Eric Idle. What do you draw from those two?

EY: I feel like from Jonathan Richman, I draw a lot of openness and wonder, and a lot of I don't give a shit what you think about this style that I'm doing. I'm just gonna do it, and it might not be what you're expecting, but fine, with a lot of "wide-eyed here I am" type of vibe.

Eric Idle, I grew up with Monty Python. I grew up with the songs of Monty Python and the comedy of Eric Idle's songs. "The Galaxy Song," "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life," stuff like that that were very pointed and profound, but hilarious. I really feel like I need a solid amount of profundity in my ridiculousness. So, that's what I draw from Eric Idle. Also, just his lack of give-a-shit about who you might be pissing off.

LA: You were in the military for six years. What led you to that decision?

EY: Well, it's funny you should ask because I just finished my book draft, which is inspired by a lot of questions like that, and details my journey. So as not to discourage you from reading it . . .it's essentially inspired by all the questions people usually ask me about being in the military. Why did you join? What did you do? What was it like being a woman in the military? What was it like being deployed? Did you see combat? Were you on the front lines? I feel like it's important to show people how there really are no front lines in the current occupations that the United States is involved in.

People usually ask this blanket question, what was that like? And I'm just like, well, buy me a drink and sit down. How much time do you have? Now, I was like, fuck it. I'm just going to put all of the answers in stories and show rather than tell. I

don’t want to beat people over the head with my opinions about my experience. I just want to explain what I went through and show what I went through. You can see for yourself how I came to the conclusions I did.

Last night I just finished editing my most final draft, as I’m calling it. I feel good about it and started to send it around to whatever agents, and try to work on getting it published.

It’s around 53,000 words, so digestible, ideally. I’m not trying to write frickin’ *War and Peace*. Maybe the condensed version.

Anyway, the military seemed like the best idea at the time, a way to get college money, the job training. I wanted to be a journalist. A recruiter offered me a job as an Army journalist, which is the alternate title for Army public affairs specialist, which, if I had actually been a journalist at that time, I would have been like, hey, those two jobs shouldn’t be the same thing, actually. I learned the technical skills of journalism, but not the critical skills.

LA: You’ve said that you use humor or satire to express the serious. You wrote an essay, “A veteran’s affair: how dealing with the VA is like dating a douche bag.” The essay certainly uses humor to make your point. How did that essay come about and what were you trying to?

EY: You know what’s so funny? I had totally forgotten about writing that until you mentioned it. I think I came back from a really fucking frustrating experience at the VA, and it felt like every bad relationship I’d ever had, because I couldn’t get away from it. I had to deal with this entity that could be so much of a better institution than it is.

I have a love/hate relationship with the VA. I’m glad that I have access to healthcare from doctors and nurses who are familiar with the military experience. But at the same time, we don’t have another option.

There’s a push right now towards privatizing the VA. They’re not coming right out and saying we’re privatizing the VA. They’re just contracting out and contracting out, and underfunding the VA, and understaffing the VA, and calling it things like the Veteran’s Choice Program.

Well, if you can’t get an appointment for months, you have this amazing option of going to one of our network providers. It’s framed as this option, but what needs to be happening is the VA needs to be fully staffed and fully funded because there’s absolutely no reason for it to take months to get an appointment. There’s absolutely no reason.

And the reason we need the VA is because we need health professionals who are intimately and specifically acquainted with the experiences that veterans have. Most civilian doctors aren’t, and you have to tell them all these things. You have to explain to them.

In the military, they pretty much train you to not take your own health seriously because any time you seek help, they act like you’re trying to get over and game the system, and to get out of something. So, soldiers specifically, because I don’t really have as much experience with the other branches, are put in these positions where even if there’s something legitimately, terribly wrong with us, we’re forced to downplay it.

If we speak frankly about the seriousness of what we’re experiencing, if we are able to actually give ourselves permission to have something wrong with us, half the time we’re told that we’re making it up, or we’re exaggerating. Or, we’re forced to exaggerate because we won’t be taken seriously unless it’s seen as a huge, huge problem.

If you go into the VA and you’re like, “Hey, I’m having some trouble sleeping,” they’re like, “Well, what’s your pain level on the scale of 1 to 10?” You’re like, “Uh, I don’t know. It’s

1 or 2.” “Okay.” You immediately aren’t taken seriously. If you’re not in excruciating pain and you don’t look like you’re actually falling apart, they just stop caring or stop asking questions.

It’s like, well, maybe you’re not sleeping because you’re plagued by thoughts about your experiences. Maybe you’re not sleeping because you’re depressed. Maybe your depression is legitimate because you were part of a machine that de-humanized you. You are never able to get to the root of the problem because if you were, then every single problem would come down to how you’ve been treated like—one of my veteran friends said it best—a cog in a machine that hates you. Or a natural outcome of being in these situations that nobody should be put in in the first place.

I think that the past administration, Obama didn’t address the fact that literally every person who goes to a combat zone comes back with some kind of post-traumatic stress. It’s not a disorder, it’s a natural outcome. People are treated like they’re broken because they have post-traumatic stress because they’ve been in traumatic and stressful situations. That is an absolute dehumanization. It’s an absolute denial of the fact that these situations are inherently traumatizing.

Trump created a war crime, as did Obama. Obama bombed Yemen for his entire eight years in office. He didn’t end the Iraq war, he just privatized it. It’s absolutely horrifying to see the way these politicians talk about the situations that they put actual human beings in and expect them to come out of it okay.

Nobody is okay. None of us are okay. Some of us are better at functioning than others. Some of us are more resilient than others. But resilience isn’t a good thing. It’s just some of us have gotten better at dealing with the impact of trauma, or we’re not as traumatized, or we’re not traumatized in the same ways.

Pretty much the whole reason I do the work I do is because I am wracked with guilt if I don't. I feel like I was a mouthpiece of the Evil Empire, and the only way I can make myself feel okay about it is by trying to correct that narrative, and use my entire life to do so.

I don't feel like I can go work for any person who isn't okay with me being extremely vocal about exactly what I'm seeing. That has made it pretty much impossible for me to have any other job other than myself, or any other boss than myself.

LA: You've said that, "I want to use my experience in the military to make my civilian life richer and to help those who are struggling." So, you feel that your music can help in that process?

EY: I feel like if it's helping me, then it's hopefully helping other people. Because I see the fact that most humans are a lot more alike than we are different. Nobody's experience is completely unique.

Yes, there are differences in the specifics of what we've gone through. But if I feel comforted by a thing, then I generally conclude that someone else out there in the world can also be helped. I see the work I do to heal myself as instrumental and my ability to be a better person in the world.

If the songs I write make me feel better, then that will hopefully reflect on the way I'm able to communicate with others and understand them. I'm still an asshole a lot of the time, don't get me wrong. And I'm working on that.

I feel like if I can write these songs that help me make sense of things, and if they can help anybody else make sense of things, and feel like someone else in the world understands and is able to articulate the fuckery of this shit better in a way that helps them communicate it to others, then that's a thing that I can do.

I don’t really see any other purpose to life other than to live it, and to live it in the most authentic way possible. And to be as kind as possible, even though I do struggle deeply with kindness a lot. I feel like ideally, if I can write songs that help people, maybe that will make up for the times when I’m an asshole. I don’t know.

LA: Let me ask about your music videos. One that struck me was “Land of the Free” because at the end, you’re bound and gagged for your freedom of speech, or so-called freedom of speech. What were you trying to express in the song and the video?

EY: I was just trying to express what I’ve experienced. You get to maintain the illusion of freedom as long as you don’t actually use the freedoms that you’re told that you have. I happened to have a couple of new friends at the time who were a photographer and a videographer, and they believed in me.

I was like, “You know, Fourth of July is coming up. I’ve got this song I’ve been wanting to make a video of for a while. Why don’t we get all America-ed up and go prance around in downtown Boulder?”

LA: Your first album, 2012, *I’ve Got Your Folk Songs Right Here*, includes the “I Don’t Want to Have a Baby,” which is probably responsible for your parental advisory sticker. Two songs, “In Your Mind” and “Shut Your Face,” reflect anger against a certain personality type.

EY: Well, the parental advisory thing, it was really just like, I just put that on there to be silly because I don’t think of anything as being not for children.

I think if you can say it, say it. Truth shouldn’t be restricted to adults. Kids are more honest than everyone. I just thought it would be a funny thing to put it on there. Especially because “The Bad Word Song” is also on there, which was inspired by George Carlin’s bit about the seven words you can’t say on television. I think I put every little word in

this album that nobody wants me to be saying in front of their kids, so why not just do that?

But yeah, it was really a response… All those songs were just things that I had always wanted to say, and felt like I could just put them into a cute song and say them.

LA: "The Please Don't F with Me This Christmas" is along those lines.

EY: Yeah. I felt like I should write a holiday song. I got to get in on this holiday song market, but I don't feel like I want to say the same things everyone else does. Honestly, the holidays are a time of enormous conflict for a lot of people and I felt like that was something that I could bring to the table, and maybe other people would relate. I write the songs I write as a way of finding my people.

LA: In the "Happy Ever After" song, you seem reconciled to life's ambiguities, and to the ups and the downs of life.

EY: That one actually was the last song that I recorded with my now ex-husband, ironically before I realized we were going to be splitting up. I had started writing it a while back. Sometimes I just get lines in my head and start putting them down.

Then, a friend of mine, another musician, and his partner, who was also a musician, they were in a band together, had just split up. And another friend was going through some relationship issues.

The one friend was having a hard time, and I ran into him at a coffee shop. Before he left the coffee shop, he pulled out a piece of paper and said, "Here, write a song today." I was like, "All right. Well, here's an idea. You write down a line for me, I'll write down a line for you. We'll trade and we'll see what happens."

So, he wrote this line down and handed it to me, and I felt like I could use this to finish that song that I'd just written a fragment of. It all sort of fell into place. Then, I ended up recording it with his bandmate, who produced it. I sent it to him and said, "Here, maybe this will be comforting."

It was prophetic because I ended up going through a pretty horrible divorce after that, and actually released the song no longer on even speaking terms with my ex. So, it was interesting. It kind of forced me to come to a place of acceptance, honestly. Like oh, neat. I wrote my own divorce song. Great. Good job, Saul.

LA: You also did a kids' album in 2014, *Don't Kid Yourself*, using your alter ego, Fancy von Pancerton. Some of the songs are reassuring, like "Don't Be Scared" and "Happy Heart." "Go Out and Play" is about importance of imagination. "Just Because You Can" is a kids' version of an adult song, a couple of words changed. How did you come to do the children's album?

EY: The children's album was a therapy project. After I was brutally arrested at a demonstration in 2013, I was feeling really cynical and despondent. When I was on tour that summer, right before that arrest happened, one of my friends had told me he wanted to come to my show but he couldn't because he was just going through a pretty nasty divorce and his daughter was having a hard time with it. I was like, oh man, that's terrible. I feel like I want to write her a song.

So I wrote "Sometimes Life," the shortened title of "Sometimes Life Sucks." I wrote that and I was like, man. This is actually a kind of song that I wish I had heard when I was a kid. What other songs do I wish I had heard when I was a kid? So, I just started writing songs for my own inner child, my own past self.

Then, after that arrest, I got back to California and a friend of mine was like, “Man, I’m just so sorry you had to go through all that. Is there anything I could do to support you?” I said, “Well, you seem to have this really cool little home studio that you’ve created as a hobby. Would you be interested in helping me record some of these songs that I’ve written for kids?”

Of course, he said, “Yeah! Let’s do that!” I had only written four of them at the time. It was over the course of about a year, I’d go up to his place on Tuesdays and we would just track songs. My then-husband would come in and play all the different instruments. I had a couple other friends who played too.

It was really a labor of love and a therapy project. There are 13 songs. The last song in it, “Arise,” is one that I had written with my friend Bonnie. This song is so sweet. It’s just not like any of my other songs. I wouldn’t put it on any of my other albums, but I bet it would work on this one. So, I recorded it for the kids.

All in all, I didn’t want to release an album for kids under the name Emily Yates, and have them Google me and come up with all the songs about porn, and drugs, and militarism, and get traumatized. So, Fancy von Pancerton emerged. I also decided to make a coloring book. So, the drawings I did for the coloring book were also therapeutic.

Yeah, it was a therapy project for my inner child that I’ve been giving to all my friends’ kids. I made a little bit of money on it because I basically recorded it for free.

LA: On the opposite end of the spectrum is “You Are the Enemy,” on *Warrior Songs*. There is a lot of anger and bitterness in that one.

EY: Jason [Moon] asked me to write a song about military sexual trauma and I tentatively agreed. At first, I was

annoyed with him. I was like, how do you just ask someone to write a song about that? That's fucked up, it's terrible, it's traumatizing. Fuck!

As I started writing it, I realized that I couldn't put any humor into it. There's absolutely nothing funny about it. Absolutely nothing. Even just thinking about my own experience, I was just getting angrier and angrier. So, the song that came out was, I think, the only really purely angry song I've ever written that has no sense of humor and ends with a group primal scream because that was the only thing I felt like it could have. I specifically wanted other women musicians to play on that song with me. Michelle the drummer is absolutely fantastic, and Julie the bass player, they're fantastic musicians.

It was an intense song to record. I needed to smoke a lot of weed after that song, after I recorded it, and do a lot of long walks in the woods. But I was glad to do it.

LA: "Smoke Break" also recounts your military experience, where there is a split between having a cigarette and shooting the bull, and then a few minutes later, we go back to war.

EY: "Smoke Break" actually started as a poem that I wrote in a Warrior Writers workshop at an Iraq Veterans Against the War convention in Baltimore, I believe in 2012. We were just doing a workshop and the prompt was to take a small detail of your military experience and expand on it because there's so much power in the details.

I tend to write a lot about concepts, but I don't tend to focus in on details too much. The detail that immediately sprung to mind was sitting around having a smoke in a war zone.

It was like a tiny window of normalcy or mundanity in this absolutely surreal experience. The smoking area was right by the headquarters. We would just be sitting there and hear

mortars land, and talk about who had been killed, and about our shitty bosses, and how this fucking war was like Groundhog Day, where today is just one shitty day after another, the same shitty day every day.

The smoke breaks were the only breaks that you were able to take. In the Army, you can't just be like, I'm going on break. That doesn't exist. You go on break to smoke cigarettes so that you don't start screaming at people, and that's respected. Okay, you've got a nicotine addiction, go take care of that. Please.

I smoked when I was a teenager in high school. It was the thing that kids like me did. But I stopped during reform school. Then, when I was in the military, my first year in the Army, everyone smoked. It was the only way to get to take a break.

So I started taking smoke breaks. They were the one opportunity to regain a tiny sliver of sanity in the day. I don't smoke cigarettes anymore; I quit a couple of years after I got out. I smoke weed now.

I've actually started getting better at weaning myself off of that a little bit, as a dependency thing. I still love it, of course, but trying to not be as dependent on it as I have been.

LA: Just to finish up, what is the status of the "Try Not To Be a Dick" movement?

EY: Well, I still play the song every time in a show. I add new verses as appropriate to reflect current situations. The global "Try Not To Be a Dick" movement has a Facebook page, which I discovered is the way to start a global movement. You have to have a Facebook page and a hashtag, and you're good. I mostly use it to share pertinent relevant memes and articles that I think speak to the idea of trying not to be a dick, both the personal and the political, and the funny and furious

ends of the spectrum, and all over the place.

I could post that on my personal page, and I do a lot of the time, but I feel like having this page where I share all that stuff takes my face away from it and puts the idea in the forefront, which I like better.