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.