

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 Wisniewski 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.