

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 Wisniewski: 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: Singer-Songwriter Jason Moon

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

Moon's breakthrough CD is *Trying to Find My Way Home* (2010). The genesis of the album is his work with film director Olivier Morel, whose 2009 documentary *On the Bridge* features current veterans telling their stories of war and post-war life. Moon says that Morel "encouraged me to work on these songs that I'd begun when I returned from the war but had been unable to finish." As the title suggests, the album expresses Moon's attempt to regain a sense of "home." However, the return is problematic due to feeling disconnected and alienated, as the title track indicates: "The child inside me

is long dead and gone/Somewhere between lost and alone . . .
It's hard to fight an enemy that lives inside your head . . .
." "Alone With Me Tonight" continues the theme of the inability to reconnect to others and to society. He recalls "the mystery and marvel of a smile on a face" but this has been replaced by "broken dreams and empty bottles." All he sees are ghosts. "Happy To Be Home" takes a bitterly ironic tone when he writes that "all this 'welcome home, we're so proud of you, good job' bullshit is wearing thin." "Thank you for your service" from well-meaning civilians only goes so far until the phrase becomes an empty cliché. Other songs discuss his psychological numbness and need to self-medicate. The album ends on a cautiously hopeful note. Although the effects of PTSD are overwhelming he tells himself to "hold on" as there is always the chance that tomorrow, or the next week, or the next month, will bring him relief.

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

His newest album, his fourth solo CD, is entitled *The Wolf I Fed* (2020). Again, there are undertones of isolation and loss but out of those arise a growing sense of hope and reconnection. In "Wisdom of the Wound" Moon writes that because of the war "that person I once was, is now a distant memory." The memories of his war experience "brought him to his knees." However, the song takes a positive turn when he

realizes that in order to be free from the burden of the past he (and by extension, all veterans) has to tell his story, and that civilians need to listen: "And if you share our story then our healing can begin. Now the next chapter can begin." That healing from trauma can emerge from sharing one's story and starting a "new chapter" is seen in other songs on the album. In "You Didn't Say Goodbye," Moon looks back from a twenty-year vantage point at a failed relationship. For most of the song he is wistful and rueful, writing, "sometimes late at night I still hang my head and cry, when I think back on the day that you didn't say goodbye." However, as the song ends, Moon is happy that the relationship ended because he is happy with a wife and family. "The Sweetest Little Thing" is a whimsical lullaby to his daughter, revealing his joy in getting her to sleep. 2



Jason Moon and co-performer.

Another aspect of Moon's healing journey is *7 Things You Never Say to a Veteran*, a live presentation in which he uses songs and narration to discuss PTSD. Having given over 200 presentations from 2010 to 2015, Moon made a video of a 2016 performance at a jail health care conference in Wisconsin. About *7 Things You Never Say to a Veteran* he writes that "unable to keep up with the ongoing requests to give this presentation, I offer this DVD with the hope that it will serve to equally inspire and educate. PTSD is not a weakness, you are not alone, and we do not leave our wounded behind." In

the film he tells his story as a way of educating the civilian audience about his post-war experiences and subsequent diagnosis of PTSD. Using his songs from *Trying to Find My Way Home* as a counterpoint, he tells of his cycle of depression and drinking, isolation, and inability to sleep. He discusses the physical and psychological effects of trauma generally, and war trauma in particular, which led to his suicide attempt in 2008, which he says was an attempt to “eliminate the threat. I am the threat.” The film ends with seven statements that the well-meaning civilian should not say with six points that are helpful. His overall message is to share the burden and share the story as a way to heal oneself. **3**

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

Interview with Jason Moon:

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

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

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

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

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

LA: Do you see then your songs as stories?



Singer-songwriter Jason Moon

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When war trauma happens to people, they have no way of expressing it to their peers, so they're forced to carry it internally. The arts provide a way to bridge that gap between our un verbalized 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>)