

ALABAMA LIFE & CULTURE

Alabama songwriter helps pen song for veterans: 'Family to the end'

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Songwriter Trent Willmon, left, works with Lesley and Bruce Anderson on the song "The Man I Used to Know." It's one product of a program that uses songwriting as a therapeutic outlet for military veterans. (Rick Loomis/SongwritingWith: Soldiers) Rick Loomis/SongwritingWith: Soldiers



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Both are the product of an established program called "Songwriting With: Soldiers," or SW:S. Active since 2012, the program offers retreats in which veterans work with professional songwriters, who in turn help them put their emotions and experiences into songs. For many participants, it becomes a way of expressing things they haven't been able to express any other way, and backers believe it is a valuable tool that engages people's creativity to help them move forward after Post Traumatic Stress Injury.

What's new is that a new program, funded by the Johnson Family Fund, has been established to promote the results to the public. According to SW:S, the program "will thoughtfully select and produce music from the retreat field recording catalog to release on major streaming platforms, creating a deeper understanding of the veteran experience and raising civilian awareness of the challenges the military community faces."

The first two songs released under the program certainly seem to have the potential to do that. And in a way, they're flip sides of the same emotion.

"The Man You Used to Know" was written by veteran Bruce Anderson; Lesley Anderson, his wife for 37 years; and songwriter-producer Trent Willmon, who sings the finished work. Created in a 2022 session, the song draws on the Andersons' very personal experience.

Bruce Anderson talks about a “dark time” when he tried to figure out how – or if – he could be that man again. As the song goes:

*“Sometimes I’m still over there/ The smell of war is in the air/ Even though I’m back here home with you/
I do my best to be a dad/ A husband and a normal man/ Just tryin’ to blend in like I’m supposed to.”*

The Andersons themselves were surprised by the results. “My first thought was, ‘I can’t sing, I don’t really write music, so what am I doing here?’” Bruce Anderson says in the video. “We went there expecting nothing,” says his wife.

All the veterans at the retreat started out on their guard, he said. But then the storytelling started.

“The biggest thing I learned about myself, going through the retreat, was that there was a lot inside of me and I needed to somehow let it out and let it go,” he said. “So I learned to just release what was there, the good, the bad and whatever, and get it out and just leave it.”

The other song released for the holiday weekend definitely isn’t sad – though there is sadness behind it. Titled “At Ease,” it’s the product of a group session that involved eight veterans -- Chadrick Allen, Rhonda Chavez, Sally Griffiths, Justin Lilley, Benjamin Liotta, Carlos Gomez Perez, Robert Heathe Shumate and Tristan Wimmer – with songwriters James House, Will Kimbrough, Mark Nesler, and Terry Radigan.

It’s Kimbrough who sings the finished product and speaks in the accompanying behind-the-scenes video. A native of Mobile, Kimbrough has worked in Nashville since the ‘90s as a singer-songwriter, producer and guitarist. His credits include extensive collaboration with Jimmy Buffett, and he’s worked with SW:S for years. In fact, he said his work with veterans had a distinct influence on “Bubbles Up,” likely his best-known collaboration with Buffett.

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The song is partly about the solidarity among veterans who meet as strangers but find that they understand each other in ways that outsiders don’t. But it’s also partly about expressing a wish of peace for the fallen. Kimbrough has described it as “a gentle, soulful plea to take a break from the hurt and a tribute to those who succumbed to their wounds on the battlefield and to the wounds no one could see back home.”

Carlos Gomez Perez said that he, like Anderson, was cautious at the beginning of an SW:S retreat. But being among kindred spirits made it possible to open up about the burdens they carried, he said.

“Most of us that went into combat lost a lot of friends, or we know people that have died in combat,” Perez says in the video. “At the end of the day, you’ve got to say, every last one of them, they are just another name. That’s it. Someone else that passed away, in a foreign world, foreign country. And I was not ready for that. Everyone out there has a story. It took me forever ... to understand that I have a story as well.”

Another participant, Sally Griffiths, said that the song emerged toward the end of a retreat, when a level of comfort had been attained. Someone asked how everyone was feeling, and the answer was, “at ease.”

“It became the song,” said Kimbrough. “We kept it really simple.”

“At ease, my friends, at ease/ Lay your burden down/ Take a breath and rest/ In the new faith that you’ve found/ We came in as strangers/ We’re gathered here as friends/ Opened up and shared our hearts/ Family to the end.”

The Andersons express that the song will help someone realize they're not alone. The same is true for the veterans involved with "At Ease." "I hope, especially, other veterans realize that they're not alone, and if they reach out, especially to other veterans, that they will be seen and they will be heard," said Chavez.

It's not an easy thing to get out, said Willmon, and sometimes a song can do things mere words cannot. "Sometimes that's the only way they're allowed to tell their story," he said.

"That's the power of this, almost in a nutshell, is that someone's often difficult story is literally transformed into something else," said Kimbrough. "There's something that happens between people when they turn a story into music, and it's just kind of a magic thing. The veterans said, you know, we should write something for our brothers and sisters that didn't come back from combat. We should write something for our brothers and sisters who came home from combat but didn't make it through the transition back to civilian life."

The two newly released songs and their accompanying behind-the-scenes videos can be seen on YouTube and heard through other streaming platforms. (SW:S says that songs are co-written "with full consent and intention" and that they are shared with participants' permission.)

An extensive catalog of SW:S recordings made since 2012 can be found at songwritingwithsoldiers.org.



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I've worked as a Mobile-based reporter for the Press-Register and AL.com for more than 25 years. During that time I've written extensively about arts, entertainment, food and culture. I've also covered metro...more