

SongwritingWith:Soldiers Teams with Trent Willmon and Others to Help Veterans Process Trauma Through Songwriting

By Cindy Watts

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As we move closer to Memorial Day on May 26, SongwritingWith:Soldiers is giving music fans another insight into how soldiers sacrifice when they enlist in the military.

SongwritingWith:Soldiers aims to pair veterans and their families with professional songwriters who can help them share their experiences through lyrics, which fosters creativity, connection, and hopefully healing.

Through a new music program, SongwritingWith:Soldiers will release two soldier/songwriter collaborations on Friday. "The Man You Used To Know," written by veteran Bruce Anderson, his wife of 37 years, Lesley Anderson, and songwriter and producer [Trent Willmon](#), is about Anderson struggling to reacclimate after multiple tours in the Middle East.

"At Ease," written by veterans Chadrick Allen, Rhonda Chavez, Sally Griffiths, Justin Lilley, Benjamin Liotta, Carlos Gomez Perez, Robert Heathe Shumate, and Tristan Wimmer with help from songwriters James House, Will Kimbrough, Mark Nesler, and Terry Radigan, is a gentle tribute to fallen soldiers – those who lost their lives on the battlefield or to mental illness when they returned home.

SongwritingWith:Soldiers Will Release Two Songs Friday

SongwritingWith:Soldiers hosts retreats filled with programming for the veterans to help them cope with their experiences and relax back into civilian life. Writing songs is part of the retreat.

“It’s a safe place for them to come and take a relaxed weekend,” said SW:S Music Director Jay Clementi. “They’re going to get taken care of. They’ll write three songs with four professional songwriters. When they’re not writing songs, they’ll be doing strengths workshops, journaling, and meditation. There’s a lot going on besides songwriting that will help open them up in the songwriting process.”

While SongwritingWith:Soldiers has existed since 2012, this is the first time the organization has released songs to the public.

“We thought about this for a long time, and we ran out of reasons not to do it,” Clementi said. “We’re very careful with the songs that we choose, and they’re all recorded by the artist writer that wrote the song with the veterans. We thought it’s important to get some of these stories out, and the veterans really love the idea of getting some of these songs out where they can share them in a broader way.”

The Andersons learned of SongwritingWith:Soldiers when a representative from the organization reached out to gauge their interest in attending a retreat. Since neither Anderson sings nor has experience writing songs, they didn’t know what to expect. They were shocked to learn what the program offered and called it a “wonderful experience.”

Videos by American Songwriter





Veterans Call SW:S a “Wonderful Experience”

The couple of 37 years met [Willmon](#), who immediately reassured Bruce that his lack of knowledge in songwriting didn't matter. The songwriter/producer asked Bruce about his marriage and experience while deployed.

“We just got to talking, and before you knew it, he was writing down the words I was saying,” Bruce said. “He put my words to song, and it was amazing. I couldn't imagine my story would end up being a song of that magnitude.”

Bruce says the song is about what the title says, trying to get back to the man he used to be. He was deployed multiple times during his military career. Every time he came home, he felt like he left a piece of himself behind.

“It seemed like I was always trying to get back to the person she used to know,” Bruce said.

He believes the process worked – that he left much of his emotional baggage behind at the songwriting retreat.

Trent Willmon Considers Himself a Vessel

“I'm kind of scared to go back to New York, because I'm thinking I might pick some of that back up,” he quipped.

The experience was equally rewarding for Willmon, who said that since he never served in the military, SongwritingWith:Soldiers is his way of giving back. Writing “The Man You Used To Know” with the Andersons marked the first of many times Willmon participated in the program.

“It was pretty impactful,” Willman said. “It’s just a gift that I can give those folks, and it really seems to help those folks a lot. We’ve seen some really drastic changes amongst the couples. It’s extremely impactful for them to be to tell their story and start that healing process. I think notoriously, the soldiers, both men and women, they’re just sort of like cowboys that I grew up with. They just don’t talk about that kind of stuff.”

However, writing their experiences in song form seems to all soldiers to share on a different level.

“It’s just part of something that can open the floodgate level, let us sort out the baggage, and let them start to heal,” Willmon said. “I’m here to serve. God uses me as this vessel.”

For more information, visit <https://songwritingwithsoldiers.org/>.

Photo by Rick Loomis

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