

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

MUSIC REVIEW

‘Rifles & Rosary Beads’ by Mary Gauthier Review: Military Grade Music

The Americana star collaborates with service members and their families on her new album.



You might think there would be nothing especially startling about the arrival of a new set of songs that recount uniformed service members’ personal experiences and their responses to them. Ballads like that have come along for centuries. In the 21st century, though, they have been exceptionally rare in American pop and roots music alike, anthems taking some supporting or opposing position on the military engagements in question seeming to have filled the space where songs expressing the sentiments of today’s uniformed grunts might have been.

That rarity is only the first thing that distinguishes Americana stalwart Mary Gauthier’s new album, “Rifles & Rosary Beads” (In the Black/Thirty Tigers), out Friday. Its 11 songs are fruits of Ms. Gauthier’s work with the nonprofit “SongwritingWith: Soldiers” program, in which professional songwriters, vets and active military go on retreats to write together—often, it is reported, with life-changing results for the scarred. Nine songs were written with wounded combat veterans and active-duty Army, Marine and Navy personnel—four of them men, four of them women, and all having entered recent service between the ages of 18 and 27. Two more songs were written with groups of military wives who had wounded husbands return home from Middle East tours; as the number “The War After the War” notes, those wives received no basic training for their new role.

That the songs are bracingly unsentimental and platitude-free might be expected; that's how Ms. Gauthier has approached such subjects as alcoholism and relationships gone sour in previous outings. She sings all the numbers on "Rifles & Rosary Beads" with the unguessed but controlled emotional exactitude she has shown across her previous seven albums. But the extra passion she brings to this subject, her determination to do justice to the stories in performance, is evident.

She reaches a level of musicality in the melodies here equal to or surpassing any she's offered before, and that's paired with rich levels of musical drama that range from the quiet intimacy of "It's Her Love" (written with Marine veteran James Dooley, and expressing appreciation for the attentive wife who welcomed him home) to the relentlessly pounding of the opening, anthemic track "Soldiering On." That opener, written with Marine veteran Jennifer Marino, immediately sets the overall theme of here-versus-there connections and disconnections: "I was bound to something bigger / More important than a single human life... / My service was not a sacrifice / But what saves you in the battle / Can kill you at home."

A vital side of the story related in "Rifles & Rosary Beads" that might have been played down in other hands is that of women returned from combat in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Persian Gulf. "Brothers," written with Army veterans Meghan Counighan and Britney Pfad, directly addresses the dated, residual tendency to salute "our men in uniform," even by fellow soldiers. "I was just like you when the bullets flew..." it goes, "Brothers in arms, your sisters covered you / Don't that make us your brothers, too?" Even more pointed, and timely for the current #MeToo movement, is the song "Iraq," written with Army vet Brandy Davidson, which pulls no punches in describing sexual harassment and worse in the trenches. ("When I refused them they made me pay.")

As the details add up in these ballads, a broad, fair and unusually balanced picture of highs and lows emerges; that soldier's appreciation of what a spouse puts up with in "It's Her Love" is both countered and amplified by the wives' song of solidarity "Stronger Together," the album's closer, which makes the sort of statement that's rarely been heard before in song: "They hate it that they need us but they do... / They say no man's left behind but that ain't true... / We miss the man our husband used to be... / They're hurt in places that the eye can't see."

The replacement of ready-made, comfortable niceties about the military, or generalized criticism of that life, with riveting, occasionally harrowing specifics from real lives as lived now is the strongest sort of musical salute to those who have served or stood by them. The finesse Mary Gauthier brings to this engrossing music makes this album a landmark.

—Mr. Mazor, based in Nashville, reviews country and roots music for the Journal