

MUSIC

# LIFE AFTER WARTIME

Nashvillian Mary Gauthier's *Rifles & Rosary Beads* illuminates the veteran experience

BY BRITTNEY McKENNA

“No one can leave war unwounded,” Mary Gauthier tells the *Scene*, calling from a hotel room in New York City. She’s there

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for a number of projects — among them preparing for two TED Talks and discussing a book deal with St. Martin’s Press. But she’s primarily there to promote her latest album *Rifles & Rosary Beads*, which came out via Thirty Tigers in January.

The album finds the revered Nashville songwriter focusing on war, and its 11 songs feature collaborations with U.S. veterans and their families. The venture has its roots in Gauthier’s work with SongwritingWith:Soldiers, a nonprofit organization that brings songwriters and veterans together for special writing retreats and workshops. After more than four years of work with the organization, Gauthier realized she was sitting on a gold mine of untold stories, and *Rifles & Rosary Beads* was born.

“As the years went by, these songs started piling up and piling up,” she says. “I’ve got somewhere near 40 songs I’ve worked with veterans on. It reached a place where it’d be foolish of me not to put them into the world.”

She began incorporating some of the songs into her live sets and was moved by the powerful reactions she received from audiences. She thinks of those experiences as “the green light” to go forward with a project highlighting her work with veterans. While the high musical quality of the work is characteristic of Gauthier’s catalog, the subject matter is something new. Over the course of her 20-plus-year career, she’s come to be known for mining the more difficult details of her own life, meaning this project required her to chart new territory.

“It’s not about me at all,” says Gauthier. “It’s a collaborative experience, with very, very many people involved. I’m just a lonely folk singer with a guitar going from town to town, and this has brought a whole new level of communion with other souls into my life, and it’s brought me great joy.”

One of those souls is Jennifer Marino, a retired Marine helicopter pilot who served multiple tours in Iraq and has spent much of her retirement working to help veterans recover from PTSD and combat-related injuries. Marino co-wrote two of *Rifles & Rosary*

*Beads*’ standout tracks, “Soldiering On” and “Morphine 1-2.” The former grapples with the difficulties faced by veterans trying to reintegrate into civilian life, while the latter details Marino’s personal struggle with survivor’s guilt. She was far away when seven of her fellow service members lost their lives in combat.



“It is a tribute to seven crew members who died on an aircraft that had the call sign Morphine 1-2 in February 2007,” Marino says. “I was serving in California as an instructor pilot at the time. ... I knew the pilot and the co-pilot in that crew, and they were just superstars. So ‘Morphine 1-2’

is my tribute to all of the crew, but it’s also expressing this sense of loss and regret that I couldn’t be there.”

Marino says she’s grateful for the time she got to spend writing songs, particularly for how Gauthier helped her find words for experiences that seemed impossible to articulate. “I feel like she was able to help me clarify my perspective and my observations on what I thought the challenges were,” Marino says, “both with trying to come home and with trying to feel OK about asking for help when you’re struggling.”

The gratitude flows both ways. “She’s freaking badass,” says Gauthier. “She’s amazing. And she will not tell you about it. I had to Google her to find out. This is where the program gives so much more to me than I can give to it. ... I learn from them. Jennifer was my teacher.”

Gauthier chokes up. She says it’s hard to talk about her experiences with veterans without crying. “One of the great things about being a songwriter and not a therapist is that, if it gets really, really emotional, I can cry,” she says. “And I do cry, and we cry together. A lot. It releases the emotion and it deepens our connection and brings forth the story in a new way. In many situations, if not all, once we cry together, we’re able to get to the song much faster. Sometimes emotions just have to be felt.”

While Gauthier sees it as a privilege to make *Rifles & Rosary Beads*, she also hopes the album gives listeners a more accurate sense of what life is like for soldiers and veterans. She hopes the record challenges what she sees as damaging stereotypes perpetuated by patriotic-seeming songs — Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)” comes up in the conversation — that prioritize nationalism over veterans’ actual lived experiences.

“What I’m hoping happens with the listener is what happened with me,” says Gauthier, “that the stereotypes that I had in mind of who our veterans are got blown to bits. Somewhere in my mind, and I think because of some of these stupid-ass songs, I thought soldiers liked war. And I thought they wanted war. Soldier after soldier after soldier has told me, no one hates war more than a soldier.”

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