



VOICES IN THE HALL: THE WAR AND TREATY

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

PETER COOPER Welcome to Voices in the Hall, presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. I'm Peter Cooper. Today's guests are Michael and Tonya Trotter, the War and Treaty.

TONYA TROTTER It's really developing the intimacy of the sound together. And that intimacy has helped our marriage as well. It's helped us connect.

And whatever feeling you get from that, then you're released to do it because you see my vulnerability. I'm releasing what's inside of me.

You know I can look across the room and know if something's wrong, or if he's tired, or if he needs to leave, or if you know he's having a moment. Likewise, he can do for me.

MICHAEL TROTTER I had to learn that I work best in settings of groups of people because I'm ex-military. So, in the military you did everything as a group, you never did it alone. So, the stage, it just becomes just another platoon.

PETER COOPER It's Voices in the Hall, with the beautiful duo slaying audiences as propulsive Americana band the War and Treaty.

"Healing Tide" – The War and Treaty (Healing Tide/Strong World Ent.)

PETER COOPER "Healing Tide," from The War and Treaty, a duo that has known battles, transitions, and covenants. Michael Trotter spent childhood time living on the streets and in homeless shelters before enlisting in the Army and serving in the Iraq War. Music helped him with the resulting psychological wounds and allowed him an introduction to Tonya Blount. She's a remarkable singer and songwriter who understood and admired Michael's talent and Michael's heart. They made a treaty, and they made a son, and a duo, and they're making an impact.

Michael, Tonya, welcome to Voices in the Hall. So, where y'all from?

TONYA TROTTER I'm from Maryland. Really the Washington D.C. area originally.

MICHAEL TROTTER I'm from Cleveland, Ohio.

PETER COOPER You came together in improbable ways after improbable lives. Tonya what was Maryland like for you growing up? And when did you start hooking on to music?



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TONYA TROTTER I grew up in a little town, at that time it was a little town called Hillcrest Heights. And the community that I lived in was very, very supportive. And when I started to get into the arts, I guess I was about, I guess seriously, was in middle school. And my band teacher at that time heard me sing and just kind of thrust me out there. And the first time I sang was an Anita Baker song with the band at a high school football game. And I knew right then and there, I was like, "This is what I like to do. This is pretty cool."

PETER COOPER Wow. What was the song?

TONYA TROTTER It was called "No One in the World" by Anita Baker.

PETER COOPER So, it was the experience of being in front of that crowd with the band that captivated you? Or what was it?

TONYA TROTTER I would say, of course I grew up in church. That was the initial you know "I really want to do this," spark. I got that spark from my brother. But when I saw my friends, my peers respond, you know people who I know would say it was bad if it was bad, kind of agree and say, "This is pretty cool. We really, we like you. You should kind of do this." I knew then and there that it was something I wanted to try to pursue.

PETER COOPER Michael what was your path to music?

MICHAEL TROTTER Well I grew up in a very musical family. My mom and all her sisters, all five of them sang. And on my father's side, my uncles Zelbert and Andrew were musicians.

PETER COOPER You've got an uncle named Zelbert?

MICHAEL TROTTER Zelbert P. Trotter. And the P. stands for Penny. But. And he was probably the most influential on me, introduced me to all styles of music at an early age. I mean I can remember as far back as being two years old and learning about Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan and Patsy Cline. And then from my mom, my mother was super religious so she kind of would rig my radio in my room to only go to 800 AM in Cleveland, Ohio, which at that, those days in the 80s, it only played the classics.



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So in school when a lot of the kids were talking about all of the hip new cuts from Tupac and Biggie and Aaliyah and Mary J. and all that stuff, I was trying to get them hip to the new song called "Walk the Line" by Johnny Cash. And you know the new songs from Ray Charles, and you know the cuts from Patsy Cline and Otis Redding and Sam Cooke. And my teacher had to say, "You know those couple of folks you mentioned, they're not new artists. They are dead artists." So like oh god! Are you serious?

But church you know trying to mimic what I was hearing. And was singing in church choirs growing up. School plays and once everybody caught wind that I could get hold a note I would be singing everywhere. Just singing, singing, singing.

PETER COOPER So church music for both of y'all was big.

TONYA TROTTER Yes.

MICHAEL TROTTER Yeah. No I wouldn't say church music was big for me. I think just getting that opportunity to rehearse what I was hearing throughout the week vocally in the church was different. But I wasn't listening to it at home. You know. I did listen to Aretha Franklin. I did listen to James Cleveland. But predominantly it was just Ray Charles and Johnny Cash for me growing up.

PETER COOPER Wow. That's a pair to draw to.

MICHAEL TROTTER Yes.

PETER COOPER As Guy Clark wrote.

MICHAEL TROTTER Yeah.

PETER COOPER And you saw a commonality between Ray Charles and Johnny Cash?

MICHAEL TROTTER I did. Tragedy. That was the first thing that connected me to them because in my neighborhood growing up there were a lot of tragic situations. And losing friends and stuff like that, felt like brothers. And so when I was reading about Johnny Cash and Ray Charles at those young ages I realized that these two had a similar tragedy. Both lost a brother. And then as I would get older I would fall more in tune with



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their stories. Especially with Johnny Cash being a veteran you know and that sort of thing really connected with me, and you know with Ray Charles really just taking some of his gospel flavor from the church and putting it into a secular realm. You know I just felt like there wasn't nothing greater than that.

PETER COOPER And you're a veteran.

MICHAEL TROTTER Yes. Combat Vet at that.

PETER COOPER Combat Vet meaning?

MICHAEL TROTTER I've been to war and I've been affected by the war. You know some people don't know the difference. They think that all veterans are just the same. But there are some veterans who've never seen war. But combat vets have seen war and dealt with war. I've been to war twice.

PETER COOPER Why'd you go to war twice?

MICHAEL TROTTER They made me! No. My unit in the Army, they took me from Alaska to Germany and said that they needed me at war. So that was the first time. The second time I went back to war, I actually volunteered to go back and serve with my guys. I could have stayed home and transitioned out, but I felt like my job and my work wasn't done there and I actually asked to go back. And nobody is going to say no of course. So I went back and finished doing what I started over there the first time I stepped foot in war, back in 2004.

PETER COOPER How did music work within your experience in combat?

MICHAEL TROTTER Music, music was everything for me. It was very, very clear from the onset that when I stepped foot in war, boots on ground, I was probably the weakest link to my unit. My unit was filled, 1-6 infantry, filled with strapping young gents who were just ready for war. And then you get this guy who was so out of touch with what's going on.

PETER COOPER And where is this?



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MICHAEL TROTTER Now this part was in Baghdad at the time. Baghdad, Iraq. So one of the guys read my file who was in charge of me, and he said, "Hey man, heard you like music. Come on, I want to show you something." He took me into the palace we had took over. It was bombed up at the time. Had no ceilings. It's like a movie scene. We're crawling over brick and mortar and rot and sot [?].

PETER COOPER A palace?

MICHAEL TROTTER Yes a palace. Post-damage. Post-war. But I'm crawling over all the stuff and in the corner there in this room there's a black upright piano. And that piano actually had belonged to Saddam. He owned several all around Iraq. But this one in particular was the black upright. And he said, "Hey man, in your off times you can come down here and get some thoughts out. Come down here and feel home, feel at peace." And I did that. I'd get down there and I'd try to learn how to write and try and learn to play. I wasn't doing a good job. And then he, that guy gets killed. It was like God himself came and put his hand in my body and unlocked some things emotionally that I needed to connect to the piano.

And I wrote my song. And I asked if I could sing it to my battle buddies during his memorial. Long story short I did. My battle buddies reacted in a positive way. They loved it. The general then asked me, did I write the song? I said, "Yes." He says, "Good. Now that's your job. You're going to go around Iraq, go to as many memorials as you can. You're going to learn about the fallen. You're going to write songs, and you're going to perform at the memorials. Then you go to the next one and so on and so on." That then became my job from 2005 to the time I would get out of the military, which brings me to the point of when I said I asked to go back.

I was supposed to get out of the military so they would leave me at home so that nothing could stop me from getting out. But I felt like I wasn't done, like I had another song to write, another song to sing. I could put smiles on soldiers' face and I could kind of calm down people who could hear my voice. So I went back. And that's what music did for me. It changed my life. It literally gave me purpose.

It wasn't about trying to write a record. It wasn't about trying to sell songs. It wasn't about copyrights and all these things and trying to get a record deal. It was literally about trying to tell someone else's story to people who could appreciate it. And that's what music did for me.



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“Love Like There’s No Tomorrow” – The War and Treaty (HT/Strong World)

PETER COOPER That was “Love Like There’s No Tomorrow,” by my guests, The War and Treaty... Michael and Tonya Trotter. Music business marriages don't always go well. Hate to break it to y'all.

TONYA TROTTER That's what they say. We're nine years in. We've been married for nine years, singing together for two. And I think even in the business side of it, it's really knowing, because Michael is military, there's order in that. You know there's a general, there's colonels and sergeants and then you know soldiers and you have to know your role.

And you know we don't like that word "role" anymore. You know as women we're fighting for our rights because the word "role" has been looked at you know as such a derogatory thing. So we're fighting for that. But there's a role in every household. There's things that Mommy does, Mommy's the nurturer and Daddy's you know probably not the nurturer. If you do something he's going to tell you to get up and dust your knees off and go back outside. So I think that's a role within itself.

So I've had to learn that, and Michael's had to learn that there are areas that I'm strong in as you know as a woman and there's areas that he's strong and as a man. And then you know some things aren't necessarily gender specific. It's whoever has the knowledge at that moment. You know and that's what you, if you want to win a game, if I'm a female on a basketball team and I want to win a game you're going to pass me the ball because I can shoot better than you, you know if you're a man. So I think it's really knowing your role.

PETER COOPER You're talking about gender roles. Race plays a part in everything in our society. I can't think of an African-American couple that has had grand successes in Country music or Americana music. What is it like to walk out on the Grand Ole Opry stage in front of a probably 98 percent white audience, full of people who don't know who you are, to face that and then get up and perform and experience the reaction?

MICHAEL TROTTER If I may. Let me tell you. As an African-American, when I heard Johnny Cash and saw he and his wife June Carter on YouTube clips and stuff singing at the Opry, and then I saw Ray Charles, I was floored. And then I thought, “Well that's it.



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Nothing's going to come after that." And then I saw Darius Rucker, tears of joy getting inducted into the Opry. Mickey Guyton...

TONYA TROTTER Rissi Palmer.

MICHAEL TROTTER Rissi Palmer sing on there. Then we get a call and say "You guys are going to go on the air." Now let me tell you I, that was it for me. I was just like really, really shocked.

Tonya was yelling and screaming. We both crying. You would have thought we got inducted into Opry or something though. But to be able to stand in that circle and feel the ancestry rooting you on. Not just African-Americans but human beings you know cheering you on, saying, "You can do this, you can do this." Whew, it's no. You can't explain that.

TONYA TROTTER You can't explain that, yeah.

MICHAEL TROTTER It's history. No one's going to be able to take that away or write us out of that and say, "No, they weren't there." I mean man, it's a beautiful thing. You know in our country we have a very very tough time with race because we don't understand that look, you got a pair of eyes, you got a pair of lips, you got noses and ears and head and a body. That means you are a human being. That's it.

So we represent not just the many many many black artists that will never have that chance and opportunity, we represent them many many many many people who won't even understand what that could mean. And I think what we were happy about is that my mom was there. You know and her mother listened to the Opry faithfully. You know for her to be able to, my grandmother can't hear now and she's older. She's 86. But to see my mother's tears and say, "You did it son," like, man. What do you think honey?

TONYA TROTTER Yeah. It was, it was just mind blowing. Rissi Palmer sent us flowers. So to come there in the dressing room there's another artist who went through the same journey and path to get to that stage. It is. It's a bridge.

MICHAEL TROTTER Jerry Douglas just happened to be there the same day.

TONYA TROTTER Yeah. Yeah.



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MICHAEL TROTTER And then Larry Gatlin who we had met at the induction ceremony. I don't know.

TONYA TROTTER It's breathtaking. It was so hard to even describe or put into words.

MICHAEL TROTTER But there was a young, young black kid watching that. And it's his first time seeing the Opry. His first time seeing the Opry is with people that look like him. And that's my son.

You know. That is a major thing. In our country? You know I'm going to say this. We can't ignore that people are trying. This is just something so crazy. WWE, you know Vince McMahon, their number one champion that they just crowned at WrestleMania is a black guy named Kofi Kingston. That has never happened before. And I didn't know how, as a fan how that would impact me emotionally. But how it impacted everyone. There were white people crying, black people crying. The announcers was crying. And we all know this is scripted. But what it meant you know.

And they were saying, "For those of you," the announcer was saying, "For those you were told it can't happen, you don't even know how it looks to happen. You've gone through so much. This is that moment!" And the things they were saying. And I was just. Tonya was there. I was just in tears. I said "Well done, man. Well done." We're trying.

PETER COOPER I mean, Buddy Miller produced your record. Emmylou Harris, Country Music Hall of Fame member, wanted to sing with you because she thought it would up her credibility. How do you go into those situations with people that you hold in such high regard and interact with them on a human level?

MICHAEL TROTTER For Tonya and I, I think the thing that we've gotten in a process of doing first is stepping back and realizing what's happening. You know like Buddy Miller gets wind of us through Don Was. And you know right before, in 2013 we get a phone call from Aretha Franklin to come and do her father's homeless concert that he started years ago. You know. And you can go "Yay! People are starting to know me!" Or you can go, "What's happening? What do I need to learn?"

And I'm going to tell you what it is. Tonya and I, we suspend all awe, you know all of that, and we get our pen and our pad, mentally, and we let them teach us without them



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even knowing it. Buddy's first thing he told me was what he was about. And Buddy says "You know Michael, Tonya, I just want to know that I'm all about collaboration." So. And then Emmylou, before she sang one note, she took note that it was my birthday, the day we started recording, March 15. What does she do? She comes home, bakes brownies, and then brings them to the session for me.

TONYA TROTTER And she also, before that with the Americana Fest, used her name to introduce us. So, what you learn from these people is that they know how to guide their energy and they're light. You know. You can use the light for yourself or you can use the light for someone else that you believe in or that you feel within your own spirit that the world needs to know. And I think that's, with Emmylou and with Buddy, the way that they just guide their...

MICHAEL TROTTER Sam Bush.

TONYA TROTTER Yeah.

MICHAEL TROTTER Jerry Douglas. You know Jerry wrote on Instagram, on Twitter. He said, "The War and Treaty are my new best friends," but he doesn't know what that did for us mentally. You know because then you think "Okay, now the responsibility is the association. I don't want to embarrass them. I don't let Emmy down. I don't want to let Buddy down. You know Jerry down. Any of these folks. I want to make sure that I am being what they think I can be." And that I'm searching myself and my wife, and we're looking at just how humble they are how approachable they are, but how they remain, you know their posture. It's always in a position of, you know...

TONYA TROTTER How can I serve?

"Here Is Where the Loving Is At" – The War and Treaty (HT/Strong World)

PETER COOPER "Here Is Where the Loving is At," by The War and Treaty, featuring Emmylou Harris, who brought homemade brownies to the recording session. Emmylou Harris is a member of the Country Music Hall of Fame of course.

Each year, we induct three new members into that Hall of Fame. Michael and Tonya, in 2018 I asked you two to perform "Lesson in Leavin'" for Dottie West, in honor of Dottie's



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entry into the Hall. You accepted, and you absolutely wrecked the house. How do you feel connected to Dottie West, who was a child of poverty and a child of pain?

MICHAEL TROTTER Yeah, and she was also the oddball there a lot of her life. And for us to being able to be put in the position where no one really knows who we are. Not only is that taking place, we're in the company of some hardworking people who have worked so that people will know who they are. But then when you're looking around that room you also understand that there's not many that look like you.

And then you're there. And then you struggle with the thinking of, "Do I belong here? Am I worthy of this opportunity to induct this powerful woman?" And you go through all that in seconds flat. And then you think about it and go, "It's not about me. It's not about her. It's about Dottie. And we just want to make the people that believed that we could do it proud." Like you and other folks. And you know and that's the special part about being not just an artist but being us. We really look to people. You know we really look to say, "Did we represent you well? Did we do a good job?"

TONYA TROTTER You know we love to connect that the human experience, that soul connection. You know when you see a person, you know you have the phones and you can connect that way, but when you look a person in the eye, or you're on that stage and you get an opportunity, the lights are up long enough for you to look you know 10 rows back and you can see those eyes and you can see the emotion, that's what we look for.

MICHAEL TROTTER Or at each other.

TONYA TROTTER Yeah, or we look at each other.

PETER COOPER Yeah. I remember right after y'all got off stage at the Medallion Ceremony, Dierks Bentley came back and wanted to meet you and said "You know I got to go out in ten minutes and follow Garth Brooks. And I'm just so glad I don't have to go out right now and follow y'all. It was a special moment.

"Lesson in Leavin'" – The War and Treaty (Recorded live at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum's Medallion Ceremony, in honor of Dottie West's entry into the Country Music Hall of Fame)



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PETER COOPER That was Michael and Tonya Trotter, The War and Treaty, recorded live at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum's Medallion Ceremony, in honor of Dottie West entering the Country Music Hall of Fame. 98% of the people in the CMA Theater that night had never heard The War and Treaty, yet 100% of the people in the theater were standing and clapping before the first verse was over. A testament to the power and immediacy of this incredible duo, who's here with me in the studio.

Michael and Tonya, so much has happened in two years. You've had an album produced by Buddy Miller with Emmylou Harris singing on it. You've experienced acclaim and grand exposure, and so many great opportunities. What do you do next?

TONYA TROTTER We just keep touching people. You know we're in the business of humanity. So we will always run into another person. As long as we're on the road and people want to hear us, that's the business right there. You know, seeing another smile or kissing another baby or welcoming our fans who send us things all the time, "Hey I'm having a baby. My child's dancing to your record!" I mean those are the things that, seeing someone on Instagram's little baby hold their bear and they're playing "Love Like There's No Tomorrow." That's the next. You know.

MICHAEL TROTTER And that's the always.

TONYA TROTTER That's the always.

MICHAEL TROTTER That's where we live. We live in the always. Like I love that. And I just love getting on the road with you.

TONYA TROTTER We have fun. When we get home we're like, "What are we going to do? Wash dishes?"

MICHAEL TROTTER I love to see new things about you that I learn, whether it's on the road whether it's an Instagram post, Twitter post, just seeing your strength and character and knowing that there's honesty there. Knowing that that's, who you are out there is who you are at home. It don't get no better than that for me at least.

PETER COOPER For the people listening, Michael is talking to me.

MICHAEL TROTTER Well yes Peter, that's exactly what I mean.

PETER COOPER This is where the love is at.



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TONYA TROTTER This is where the love is at. Yes, it's magical being on the stage with Michael. He is definitely a general. If he's not charged up and ready he's that fire that ignites in all of us. Just go for it.

MICHAEL TROTTER Unless that Achilles start hurting.

PETER COOPER Michael, you wear the nicest shoes of anybody I know. I'm afraid that may have something to do with your Achilles problems.

MICHAEL TROTTER That might be it.

PETER COOPER I'm going to take your shoes from you.

MICHAEL TROTTER There you go.

PETER COOPER Michael and Tonya Trotter thank you so much. The War and Treaty, thank you for being here on Voices in the Hall. It's just such a great pleasure and honor to have you in our building.

TONYA TROTTER Thank you so much.

MICHAEL TROTTER Thank you.

TONYA TROTTER It's an honor for us to be here.

MICHAEL TROTTER Always.

PETER COOPER Learn more about Michael and Tonya Trotter, The War and Treaty, at our website VoicesInTheHall.org. And use the handle @VoicesInTheHall to find us and to follow us on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

On my next podcast, I'll have a special interview with the great Linda Ronstadt. She has some awesome remembrances and unique insights. To set the stage, check out my Linda Ronstadt playlist on the website.



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Voices in the Hall is produced by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in collaboration with Ben Manilla and Jennie Cataldo of BMP Audio. The show is recorded by Alan Stoker. I'm Peter Cooper. Thanks for listening. We invite you to visit the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville, Tennessee.