Liner Notes: 1973

Song of the Year: “Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree” by Tony Orlando and Dawn

Number of U. S. soldiers in Vietnam at year’s end: 50

Number of men drafted into service: 646

*Billboard* Chart Sweep for 1973

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8zPRgtITEMI>

Just before the start of 1973, the United States Army turned over my former base at Long Binh to the South Vietnamese Army. We packed up all of our gear — and there was lots of it — and left. On March 29, 1973, the last U. S. soldier in Vietnam departed. And in less than two years, the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong would be taking up permanent residence in Long Binh and everywhere else in Vietnam. The “American War,” as they called it, was over.

Hunkered down in grad school, I remained dazed and confused by all I was witnessing. But I met the love of my life in Pullman, Wash., that fall, and she has been by my side ever since. Pam is the reason I ever recovered from Vietnam.

America wasn’t recovering, and it hasn’t since. Vietnam was our second Civil War, and, much like the first, we’ve never followed the admonition of Abraham Lincoln to “*bind up the nation’s wounds.”*

We remained and remain a wounded nation. You could see it in 1973 at Wounded Knee, the return of the POWs, the Watergate hearings; in the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court ruling, the Yom Kippur War … even as O.J. Simpson was running for 2,000 yards in the NFL. And you could hear it in the music, too, with practically a new No. 1 song every week, none head and shoulders over the previous or the next, distinguished only by the forgettable tribute to returning POWs, Tony Orlando and Dawn’s “Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree.”

Maybe that’s why *Dark Side of the Moon* by Pink Floyd was the one record everyone listened to in 1973. It seemed as if we were living on the dark side of the moon.

But, there were glimpses of hope, and of healing. The incomparable Curtis Mayfield, formerly of the Impressions, touched a nerve among Vietnam vets with his album and its title track “Back to the World.” The “world” was how we ‘Nam vets would refer to the U.S.A., and Curtis put his fingers perfectly on the pulse of our struggles.

*“I’ve been beaten up and robbed/soldier boy ain’t got no job/back in the world,*” Curtis bemoans in one chorus. In another he cries out:

*Had a long stretch of sacrifice*

*Getting’ back home will be awful nice*

*Child your woman has long been gone*

*The doggone war just lasted too long*

*People don’t give a damn*

And then the dramatic close:

*Forgiveness instead of amnesty*

*Simple words that seem so clear to me*

*Forgive our country,*

*Forgive your man, wastin’ love for hate*

*Truth from honesty is true*

*We don’t seem to know what to do, do*

*Yeah, yeah, yeah*

*Back in the world*

Most Americans didn’t hear that song or listen to that album. Vietnam vets did, especially Black vets. *Back to the World* went to a No. 1 ranking on the *Billboard* R&B Albums Chart and reached the Top 20 on the Pop Albums Chart.

And maybe it’s not too late for us to get back to the world.

* [*Doug Bradley*](http://origin.kcts9.org/vietnam-war-timeline/about.html)