



**PHILIP S. PEEK**  
**Ancient Greek I**  
A 21st Century Approach



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Cover image: Athenian Fragmentary votive sculpture of Dionysus (?) Greek Ashmolean Museum. Photograph by Mary Harrsch, CC BY-SA. Cover design by Anna Gatti.

## Guest Feature 3

# Joe Goodkin, Singer and Songwriter

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Singer and songwriter Joe Goodkin tells his story in his own words.

I will never forget the first time I read Homer in Ancient Greek. I was in my fourth semester as an undergrad at UW-Madison. I intended to major in Psychology but my freshman year I took Ancient Greek on a whim and fell in love with it. By my sophomore year, I was a declared Classics major and that fourth semester in the Ancient Greek sequence brought Homeric epic into my life. We read selections from the *Iliad* and more than twenty years later I still have the text with my hand-marked dactylic hexameter scansion. I remember very clearly that the weight of the poetry, the meter, the language, surrounded me as if it was a living organism and made my head and heart simultaneously explode with joy. Ancient Greek is a time machine to me, a thread back through human history to understand and connect with people who lived 3000 years prior, people who wrestled with many of the same questions with which we wrestle today. And the more I learned of Homeric epic and how (many suppose) it was composed and performed in something like a song form, the more I became interested in seeing if I could combine one of my interests (Ancient Greek) with another (music and songwriting) and honor the epic tradition with an updated take on the same myths.

Though I read the *Iliad* in Greek first, I was more immediately taken with the story of the *Odyssey*. I saw in it an accessible and modern (for lack of a better word) narrative with issues and relationships I found more universal and more easily represented in the modern folk and rock song idiom. Not long after I graduated with my BA in Classics, I wrote a one-man “folk opera” song cycle consisting of twenty-four songs, each sung from the perspective of a character from the *Odyssey*. Odysseus got the most songs, but I also wrote

songs through the eyes of Penelope, Telemachus, Athena, Alcinous, and Demodokos. The main thrust of my take of the story is that it's an exploration of identity and over the years performing my *Odyssey* for high school and college audiences as a modern bard became a big piece of my identity. To wit, I became "a man who goes around telling stories about a man who goes around telling stories" and this elegant merging (and maybe even blurring) of performer into subject furthered my insight into the complex relationship between bard and hero we are often invited to consider by the text of the *Odyssey*. My work around the *Odyssey* is collected here:

<http://www.joesodyssey.com>.

Almost from the beginning of my time performing the *Odyssey* (now nearly twenty years and over 300 performances ago), audiences wondered if I might create a similar adaptation of the *Iliad* and for most of those years, I suggested I wouldn't. My reason was that I wanted to keep my *Odyssey* as something *sui generis* but in reality I was afraid of the *Iliad*. It's a brutal story in a way that the *Odyssey* isn't, and because my approach to interpretation involves getting inside characters of the story, mining them for emotional resonance, and writing in the first person about their experiences, the idea of taking on warriors at war and a whole community of people impacted by war was, well, terrifying.

In his beautiful 2020 *New York Times* tribute to John Prine, Jason Isbell (a brilliant songwriter in his own right) wrote that "songwriting allows you to be anybody you want to be, so long as you get the details right" and when it came to the *Iliad*, I was worried that I couldn't get the details right. And I knew that for these characters deep inside the machine of war, the details were a matter of life and death because "the details" were "truth": their individual truths and a larger truth about war.

In 2014 I started spending time at my local VA hospital in conjunction with a charity called Guitars for Veterans. I was a volunteer guitar instructor, teaching guitar to veterans as part of recreational PTSD therapy. My experiences there interacting with veterans started to give me the vocabulary, the details, to consider writing about war in a way I felt was real enough to honor the *Iliad*. By March of 2018, I decided to go for it and started working in earnest on what became "The Blues of Achilles."

For almost a year, I didn't write a single song but gathered source material of both classical and other associations. This material included the following items:

- Achilles in Vietnam (2010), Jonathan Shay
- Achilles Unbound: Multiformity and Tradition in the Homeric Epics (2018), Casey Dué
- All Quiet on the Western Front (1929), Erich Maria Remarque
- An Iliad (2013), Lisa Peterson and Denis O'Hare
- The Best of the Achaeans (1979), Gregory Nagy
- Catch-22 (1961), Joseph Heller
- Dear America, Letters Home from Vietnam (2002), edited by Bernard Edelman
- Devils and Dust (2005), Bruce Springsteen
- Dispatches (1977), Michael Herr
- For the Most Beautiful (2016), Emily Hauser
- If I Die in a Combat Zone (1973), Tim O'Brien
- Iliad, Homer and translations by Stanley Lombardo (1997) and Caroline Alexander (2015)
- The Iliad or The Poem of Force (1939), Simone Weil
- Machine Gun (1970), Jimi Hendrix/Band of Gypsies
- Memorial (2011), Alice Oswald
- On the Iliad (1947), Rachel Besspaloff
- The Silence of the Girls (2018), Pat Barker
- The Singer of Tales (1960), Albert Lord
- Slaughterhouse Five (1969), Kurt Vonnegut
- Soldier's Heart (2013), Jacob George
- The Song of Achilles (2011), Madeline Miller
- The Things They Carried (1990), Tim O'Brien
- Vietnam Blues (1995), J.B. Lenoir
- War is Starting Again (1969), Lightnin' Hopkins
- The War That Killed Achilles (2009), Caroline Alexander
- What's Going On (1971), Marvin Gaye

Every one of these pieces gave me something to consider in how to work my way into the Iliad. But I still lacked a basic empathetic window. This came when I was lucky enough to interview a Gold Star father whose son was a US soldier killed in action in Iraq in 2006. His son's body was unrecoverable so he went to Iraq several years later, got as close to where his son was blown up as possible, and collected sand to bring home in place of a corpse. He was, in word, emotion, and action, no different from King Priam on a desperate journey to recover Hector's body.

Here was my window. I wrote my first Iliad song called Hands of Grief, sung from Priam's point of view as he begs Achilles for Hector's body. Here are the lyrics from the debut performance of the piece:

#### HANDS OF GRIEF

(Priam's song to Achilles)

I'm before you on my knees  
Kissing the hands of my grief  
My son was cut down in the fighting  
And your hands took him from me

He was strong as a lion  
With a full head of hair  
Now it's caked with dust and rotti  
But I still see him everywhere

If he had listened to my warnings  
Maybe he'd still be at my side  
He knew the risks but fought for glory  
And when he fell part of me died

I don't have much more to give  
To a world that's bled me dry  
I don't have much life to live  
Or many tears left to cry  
So think of someone who you love  
Who might someday be like me  
Grant mercy to my son's body  
And put it in my hands of grief  
Put it in my hands of grief

Once this window was open, most of the rest of the songs fell out of me very quickly. I realized that what I was attracted to most was

(somewhat paradoxically) the love that permeates this story of horrendous violence and suffering: love between father and son, mother and son, soldier and soldier, brother and brother, husband and wife.

As I have Achilles sing in his song, “Wrong from Right,” mourning Patroklos’ death “I’ve got grief as deep as the love that we shared” and indeed, “grief” is sitting right there in Achilles’ name (*achos*). Homer’s *Iliad* is about the anger of Achilles, my *Iliad* is about the grief, the blues of Achilles.

To watch Joe Goodkin perform “Hands of Grief,” follow this link:

Hands of Grief.<sup>1</sup>

To watch Joe Goodkin perform “Wrong from Right,” follow this link:

Wrong from Right.<sup>2</sup>

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1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oY6cgxoKm-U>.

2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRBHd2dqWjU>.

