

The Scholarly Utility of Songwriting

Field Notes from the No-No Boy Project

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THE songs of No-No Boy are based on the remarkable characters I found in my doctoral research: big band musicians at Japanese American internment camps, Vietnamese teens turned on to rock and roll by American troops, a Cambodian American painter painting only the most beautiful landscapes of his war-torn home.¹ The over 100 songs developed from my archival and ethnographic research became the foundation of my dissertation² and a set of commercial recordings. This hybrid artistic/scholarly work has gained a solid listenership, critical praise, and a surprisingly warm reception from academic colleagues, considering how rarely we encourage our students (and ourselves) to engage in creative, multi-modal, and public-facing work (before tenure).

The following pages are intended to serve as a guidepost for those who long to do something more creative inside the academy and exemplify how working in the medium of “popular music” can benefit one’s scholarship as well as add layers to the music being produced. Though a few No-No Boy songs will be discussed, this chapter focuses not on content but on process and method. A series of auto-ethnographic vignettes will help us consider how the various mediums available to the “popular” musician—songwriting, recordings, concerts, radio sessions, music videos—supplied a stumbling grad student with motivation and direction and extended the reach of my research.

Songwriting and record-making have proven effective tools for bringing my research to new and diverse audiences. These practices have also connected me with a network of academics and artists with whom I would never have crossed paths otherwise. In short, this project has led me down a scholarly path that has made my academic life more collaborative, sustainable, fun, and productive and has greatly benefited my art.

Joe’s Pub, New York City, Spring 2024

*We can play the old music
We can dance to all the old songs
But I’ll never walk with you through it
What a cruel, cruel task to belong*

¹ No-No Boy, 1975 (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2021).

² Julian Saporiti, “The No-No Boy Project: A Multimedia Investigation of Asian American Histories Through Sound, Songwriting, and Filmmaking,” *American Studies Theses and Dissertations*, Brown Digital Repository, Brown University, 2022, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:645cmgfs/>.

Applause fades as the band ends our opener, “Khmerica.” The song is inspired by a Cambodian refugee’s American daughter trying to connect to a past her father does not want to burden her with.

Behind the band, vivid images of traditional Khmer dancers fade out.

“Thank you, and good evening. My name’s Julian. That’s Emilia on the keys. Michelle on the bass. That’s Alex on the drums. Thank you so much for coming out. . . . For those of you who have never been to a No-No Boy concert before, you have been tricked. This is actually my dissertation. So you’re gonna learn some stuff tonight.”³

Nashville, January 2017

It was the last winter break I would spend in my childhood home back in Tennessee. I was thirty-two, and my life still ran on a student’s calendar. I only meant to go to grad school to take a breather from making records and touring, but a two-year master’s program at Wyoming had turned into a PhD at Brown. Like many fledgling grad students, I was routinely underwater. My time in Providence had proven far less enjoyable than back in Laramie. I wasn’t sure if I could stick it out. The readings were overwhelming, and on top of this, I was constantly reminded to be worried about my future résumé. From day one at Brown, I kept hearing about “preparing for the job market.” Professionalization seemed as important to the grad school as our intellectual training. This added an air of unspoken competitiveness—“he got this grant, she got this published.” On the advice of many, I anxiously started applying to conferences to beef up my CV, conferences where I’d present underbaked and overcompensatingly dense second-year papers to no one. This was not the kind of scholar I wanted to become.

Boston, 2005

As an undergrad at the Berklee College of Music, I took a class called “World Revolutions” taught by a crotchety old Marxist who once spent an hour red-faced and railing against jet skis and how they should be banned to combat global warming. That semester, he took us to see Howard Zinn give a talk on Newbury Street. Since Professor Banthejetski was old pals with Zinn, we got to meet the great historian after his talk.

In high school, I had read *A People’s History of the United States* because it was on Rage Against the Machine’s reading list. I was a Rage acolyte, to the point where I also slogged through that big Che Guevara biography and *a lot* of Noam Chomsky. Meeting Zinn was a big deal to me because he was a big deal to my favorite band. When we met Howard after the talk, I asked him, “Uh, do you have any good advice for a young person?”

He said, “Never be afraid to quit your job.”

Washington DC, November 2016

A decade later, I was turning over Zinn’s advice. It was a week after the 2016 election and I was at the big Ethnomusicology conference in Washington, DC. I was presenting on a jazz band

³ Joe’s Pub (March 29, 2024). *March 29th, 2024, 7:00 PM—No-No Boy* [Video], YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/live/tnIMjoDWW_k?si=UY_hao9yDHzc4C5i.

in a Wyoming World War II Japanese American Incarceration Camp.⁴ It was an interesting and under-explored subject, but I was doing the musicians a disservice with my nervous, over-theorizing prose. During my presentation, I looked at the sparse audience and I kept thinking, “When I was in a band, I used to play for hundreds of people a night. Now, I actually have something interesting to say.”

I was frustrated because I wasn’t communicating this research to the best of *my* ability. I kept thinking, this should be a movie or something. I also thought, why does every academic basically write the same way? Given the climate around race and immigration, this story of scapegoated and vilified musicians behind barbed wire seemed relevant. It was a story that people should hear!

I had been finding many stories like this one, where bands across Asia and the Americas created music against the violent and bludgeoning backdrops of twentieth-century empires. These stories three-dimensionalized otherwise flattened populations of “refugees” and “immigrants” who are only ever sinister or sympathetic depending on the time period and political point of view, and whose specific histories and multifaceted cultures are little regarded. I wanted to keep pursuing this research, but I feared losing my spark if I kept writing these bloated papers.

Throughout the conference, I kept hearing “job market,” “first book,” “CV,” “post-doc,” and “network.” Those words kept my bravery in check. Zinn had said never be afraid to quit your job. I was paralyzed by the fear of losing a job I didn’t even have.

Nashville, January 2017

A quiet winter break dedicated to transcribing interviews swirled into a flurry of creativity. Sitting at my mother’s dining room table, the songs flowed freely. A guitar was nearby. I picked it up and started strumming. I had my headphones on, listening to conversations about music and empire, incarceration, romance, daily life, jazz, war, and rock and roll. The scent of lemon grass and other typical Vietnamese ingredients wafted in from the kitchen. Interview transcriptions became lines of lyrics. Histories began turning into songs.

I had been a serious songwriter for over half my life at that point, so the craft was second nature—who is dissertation writing second nature to? Songs proved to be a more fluid way to interact with my research than my academic writing. They liberated me as a thinker. They allowed me to examine events and characters from greater depths and different angles. My thoughts flourished as the songs continued to pour across the dining room table. This was motivating and fun. I rummaged through my archival sources: photographs, newspaper clippings, and government records. They all now had the potential to work their way into a song!

As I distilled my collection of primary sources into music, I realized that by doing this, I could visit them again and again, adding new questions, thoughts, and revisions. These songs seemed to animate the archive. Through songs, I could enter history with greater ease and spend more time considering the topics I was investigating. This was the kind of scholar I wanted to be, guitar in hand.

⁴ I alternate between calling this event “Japanese American Incarceration” and the more colloquially known “Japanese Internment.” The former has been agreed upon by modern scholars and activists, but the majority of folks who I have known personally who were in these camps tended to call it internment. Neither term is 100 percent definitionally correct.

Providence, Spring 2017

When I returned to school for the spring semester, I had written about a dozen songs. I shared them with friends and began to envision a concert. Something intimate and familiar with no intellectual barrier to entry. The performance would be simple, folk songs and storytelling, and maybe some old home movies and archival photos shining on a wall. I would use the comfort of Americana and these familiar forms to create nostalgia for history we never learned in school. I could do this on the cheap, no grant money needed, just a guitar and a room, anywhere for anyone.

Youth and the Young Republic

I grew up in Nashville because my dad, Bob, worked in the music industry. He and my mom, Jacqueline, a Vietnamese French artist, moved there in the early '80s from San Francisco. An Italian American originally from Boston, my father proved himself an excellent radio promoter, driving southern highways with a box of seven-inch singles, looking for radio towers and convincing stations to play his artists. When I was born in 1985, he took a salaried gig at Warner Bros., where he eventually worked his way to a senior VP position. Because of my father's job, I have great childhood memories of hanging out with session musicians, songwriters, and country music stars.

Coming into my own out of this charmed childhood with two artist parents, it was an easy choice to pursue music—not a typical “Asian American experience.” As a teenager, I got a digital 8-track recorder and began making records with my friends. We'd sell our home-burned CDs to our classmates at school or after our gigs at Guido's Pizzeria, talent shows, and any other all-ages venue we could play at. After high school, I took a year off to work at the Tower Records on West End, write music reviews for the *Tennessean's* alt-weekly *The Rage*, and work on my songwriting. Music was life.

During my first week of college, I formed a band. It was an Americana-y, indie rock outfit with a huge Belle and Sebastian-y-sized lineup. We were called the Young Republic and were pretty good—all very trained Berklee Music School kids, some of whom have gone on to do great things in the industry. Sophomore year, we got lucky, and a UK label signed us. This allowed us to tour Europe several times and put out vinyl records (my dream come true). Over our seven-year career, we made two albums I'm still deeply proud of, opened for some great bands, and even got invited to play Glastonbury. Of course, we broke up acrimoniously, which is what drove me to grad school.

As a young man, music was my *raison d'être*. It was my identity. Yet, I never felt comfortable in the musical scenes I was in, not the way my friends (or father) seemed to. In my head, the way I looked was at odds with being a real folk singer, indie rocker, or even a Nashvillian. Like many young people who grew up with some kind of “marginalized” identity in the '90s and '00s, a true sense of belonging eluded me even in spaces (music scenes) that traditionally cater to the non-belongers.

I don't want to demonize my fellow musicians or Southerners nor overplay my marginalization because it was relatively minuscule. My childhood was safe, loving, and full of privilege. But there were enough moments of racially tinged confrontation—playground scraps, name-calling, mocking—to develop a complex around my “Asian” identity. The most lasting psychic damage happened when I witnessed, on several occasions, gangs of young men hurling violent insults at my mother in public places in broad daylight. These painful moments were internalized and became evident in my songwriting.

When I listen back to the songs of the Young Republic, I can't hear myself. My life experiences are there, but they are channeled through a narrator who looked more like Stephen Malkmus (Pavement) or Carl Newman (New Pornographers)⁵ than me, the kind of skinny white men I would envy backstage at gigs or festivals. My own lyrics from this era render me invisible and replace me with a false body. Michelle from Japanese Breakfast once told me a similar thing about her early writing.⁶

Whenever I saw photos of myself on a blog or in a magazine, I wished I was someone else. I didn't meet many older artists who looked like me to look up to or identify with.⁷ Toward the end of the Young Republic, I began painting my face white. I called it an homage to Dylan on his 1975 Rolling Thunder Review tour but I just didn't want to be seen. All the success I only dreamed of as a kid was tainted by my non-whiteness. It's crushing to think back on.

Rock Springs and Heart Mountain, 2013

When I lived in Wyoming, I spent every weekend outdoors, traveling around the state to hike and climb. I read books, climbed rocks, and sang songs. I thought this was what being a scholar was! If only. . . . Living out west exploded my horizons. Before I started my master's at Wyoming, I wasn't much of an outdoorsman. I also knew next to nothing about Asian American history. It's fitting that it was on one of my weekend climbing excursions that I visited two historical sites that jump-started my interest in the field.

In 1885, in the town of Rock Springs, twenty-eight Chinese miners were killed by a white mob. I'd never learned about this in school and I soon learned that neither had many people who grew up in Wyoming. Today, there is a small memorial that marks this event. On that first trek to Rock Springs, I stood where the city's old Chinatown had been set ablaze. But I tried to see past the murder and fire and imagine hundreds of nineteenth-century Chinese immigrants just living their lives. This exercise, of deep historical listening, became central to my research and songwriting for years to come. I'd grown up never being around more than a handful of Asian people at the same time, and here I was, looking, listening, feeling back through history and finding hundreds of them in the state where I now lived. The West was scattered with ghosts who looked kind of like me.

From the massacre site, I drove north to Heart Mountain. Fourteen thousand Japanese-Americans, most of them American citizens, once lived there. They were relocated from their homes on the West Coast and stuffed into hastily constructed barracks behind barbed wire. During the war, it was the third-largest city in the state. Now, there is a small museum.

The little "interpretive center" is decent for its size. It mostly caters to local school kids and military history-obsessed Dads on their way to Yellowstone. But in the middle of that little museum, I found a picture that changed my life.

A dozen or so Japanese-American guys playing horns, drums, bass. . . . The band was called the George Igawa Orchestra. My mind turned on. I had gone to a music college, a jazz college at

⁵ Please know that these iconic skinny white guy indie rockers are two of my favorite songwriters ever. Also, at the risk of shortcutting the cultural-emotional arc of this essay, in 2024, a friend shared with me a recording of Carl Newman covering my song "The Best God Damn Band in Wyoming."

⁶ Julian Saporiti, "In Praise of Hanbocks and Stratocasters: A Conversation with Japanese Breakfast," Earthquaker Devices Blog, 2021, <https://www.earthquakerdevices.com/blog-posts/ghost-echoes-japanese-breakfast>.

⁷ I liked Japanese American James Iha from the Smashing Pumpkins and Filipino American country star Neil McCoy, but I thought he was Native American. There were two Koreans in the Young Republic but I never identified with them since their upbringing was *actually* Asian.

*that, but I had never learned of any Asian American popular musicians. This picture opened a door for me as a scholar, musician, and person. Over the next few years, I returned to Heart Mountain many times. Digging through the archives, I began stitching together the story of this band.*⁸

The George Igawa Orchestra was the greatest Wyoming band that no one ever heard of. Through my research on Igawa, I learned about the prewar West Coast Nisei⁹ jazz circuit that the tenor saxophonist and his band, the Sho-Tokyans, used to play. I learned that these American musicians traveled to Japan to play for a Japanese jazz scene that went back to the '20s and that there were equivalent Filipino and Chinese music scenes on both sides of the Pacific.¹⁰

Two of the band members were still alive. Over the phone, trumpeter Yone Fukui told me about daily rehearsals and how Igawa masterfully arranged stock sheet music they'd order from a store in Cheyenne to sound like their favorite big band recordings. Vocalist Joy Teraoka recalled how George wrangled this group of mostly high schoolers into a formidable big band that played every week in camp and how people from around Wyoming invited them to play gigs in Lovell, Powell, Thermopolis, and maybe even Laramie. "The thrill of a lifetime," Joy told me, recalling bittersweet memories of being feted with venison dinners by kind townsfolk only to be bussed back to their camp after the gig. Over the years, Joy told me all she remembered and became like family, randomly checking in on me and signing her emails: "Love, Your Japanese Grandma."

Although I never got to hear them play, Igawa's band is one of my favorites. Their story is heroic in a small, relatable way. Relatable not because they were Asian—Vietnamese people historically don't feel akin to Japanese people for good reasons—but because they were musicians in Wyoming. They were outcasts, different looking, but musicians all the same doing what musicians do, even in the worst of times. This was instructional: look for joy and never stop playing.

I eventually turned all of this research into "The Best God Damn Band in Wyoming," a song that has traveled the world and taught the band's story to more people than I could have dreamed. In 2019, my research provided the foundation for a short documentary and exhibit at that little museum back in Wyoming.

Providence, Spring 2017

The first No-No Boy concert was academically and artistically satisfying. Maybe forty people came. This modest turnout was more than my fall 2016 conference presentation. The audience was receptive, and I was relieved. It was also personally cathartic and unexpectedly emotional. The concert's setlist jumped around between songs about Vietnamese, Cambodian, Japanese, Hawaiian, Korean, and other seemingly disparate diasporic American communities. As we crossed oceans and continents, parallels emerged between

⁸ No-No Boy, 1975.

⁹ Second-generation Japanese American.

¹⁰ E. Taylor Atkins, *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan* (Duke University Press, 2001); George Yoshida, *Reminiscing in Swingtime: Japanese Americans in American Popular Music, 1925–1960* (National Japanese American Historical Society, 1997); Claire Reynolds, *Searchlight Serenade: Big Bands in the WWII Japanese American Incarceration Camps* (KEET, 2010), film, <https://www.pbs.org/video/searchlight-serenade-3rtbwb/>.

everyday characters navigating war, displacement, and interacting with colonial power. New themes emerged through the pastiche of the setlist.

Anyone who has spent hours making a mixtape or sequencing a thoughtful playlist knows that in the process of listening back to each track and finding its perfect fit within the anthology, new ideas arise out of the juxtaposition and recontextualization of the songs in this new setting. This mixtape methodology proved handy as I stitched together sets and, eventually, albums of songs focusing on distinct communities and individuals, bound together by the themes of empire and inviting solidarity. Or sometimes there was no connection, and that is also a point to make. Between the songs, the singer, and the audience, there were meaningful cross-cultural conversations to be had.

The first show's centerpiece was a song written the month before called "Boat People." I composed this as the first Trump administration pushed for border walls, deportations, and a Muslim ban. The term "Boat People" refers to the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese who attempted to escape after the war on rickety little fishing boats. I crafted the lyrics for "Boat People" from a 1979 radio interview with a doctor who left Vietnam with his two kids, enduring a treacherous journey at sea before resettling in Montreal. Like "refugees" or "immigrants," "boat people" is a flattening and reductive term. One of the main goals of the No-No Boy concert was to use individual stories to unflatten, expand, and maybe crack conceptions of "Asian America."

During the time I was writing "Boat People," I was scrolling endlessly on my phone and because my algorithm is overeducated, liberal, and depressing, I was seeing graphic photographs of Syrian refugees—people of the Asian continent absent from almost any course in AAPI Studies—fleeing on boats that, from a distance, looked like the Vietnamese Boat People. These images bled together in my head and the song expanded to hold the past and present. Songs are good at containing multiple layers, of people, time, and histories—think of "Tangled Up in Blue." They can hold a lot. Though "Boat People" is centered on the story of one man, it keeps one foot in 2017 and another in 1975, gesturing across the expanse of a continent that has not been free of American military intervention since 1898.¹¹

As a performer, I registered how some of these songs resonated with the audience. It felt as though I was on to something. This concert of stories, folk songs, and grainy images invited a gentle but immersed contemplation of difficult histories. In grad school, I didn't resonate with a lot of the headier work I interacted with. Blame it on the Tennessean in me, perhaps. I craved more simplicity. The No-No Boy concert was comparatively easy to take in. It was proof of how one could handle dense academic research and prickly cultural topics with accessible art forms, in this case, a "popular music" presentation, and reach a broader audience. Had that gig been a one-off, the project still would have been a success and, I would think, a completely valid end product of a PhD.

After the show, Bob Lee, an OG Asian American historian, shook my hand and said, "That was *really* great." He smiled and nodded, sort of thinking to himself, and then proposed, "Why don't you come over to American Studies and work with me, and we can do this for your dissertation."

So, that's what happened. The concert had won me a champion. I completed my coursework and exams in Brown's Ethnomusicology program, where I benefited immensely from the faculty and my classes. Then, I nominally finished my PhD in American Studies, where Bob provided cover for an unorthodox dissertation which ended up being composed of short

¹¹ The annexation of the Philippines.

films, music videos, two written chapters about sound and music at Heart Mountain, and a vinyl LP.

The album I presented as part of my dissertation is titled *1975*, for the year Saigon fell. Smithsonian Folkways released the album before I handed in my dissertation, which helped assuage (not a small amount of) skepticism from my department. As a lifelong collector of physical media, I've always enjoyed the entire production process of making records. With *No-No Boy*, I wanted to use every artifact around the music—liner notes, artwork, music videos, T-shirts, stickers—to teach. If even a dozen people pored over my album the way I pored over Radiohead albums, that would be the equivalent of taking one of my classes. Everything associated with this project became a teaching tool. Each set list is a pedagogical exercise. At the merch table, we have bookmarks with reading lists (a nod to RATM). The band name itself, *No-No Boy*, was chosen to get people to look up John Okada's novel.¹²

As *No-No Boy* caught the attention of the press, I took a teacher's mindset every time I had an interview. One of the best examples of this is the second live session we did with KEXP, a Seattle radio station whose popular YouTube channel has helped break several high-profile bands, including yellow-face groovesters Khruangbin. Jim Beckmann, the creator of *Live on KEXP*, told me he wanted to convey the historical aspect of my songs. So, after our in-studio session, host DJ Morgan and I visited a historic Asian American hotel in Seattle and used this setting as a history lesson to weave into the video.¹³ I'm very grateful that my music has been able to Trojan Horse history lessons onto the radio.

Joe's Pub, New York, April 2024

Let's rewind seven years. I'm in Paris. I'm hanging out, just playing music on the street, busking, just having a grand old time. And my mom emails me—all our family except for her were Vietnamese who went to Paris after the fall of Saigon and I grew speaking French with her and my family over there. It's like kind of my second home[town].

So, she says, "Hey, I just reconnected recently"—the way old people do, through Facebook—"with my friend Robert, I went to high school with him. You're starting to learn about all this stuff in Vietnam, maybe you wanna go chat with him or something."

And I wasn't really feeling it you know, meeting my mom's old high school friend . . . but then she says, "Oh, he owns a restaurant," and I was like alright, let's do it.

I went to Robert's restaurant in my American tourist outfit, the tank top, salmon-colored shorts, the Adidas slides, and man, I was woefully underdressed because Robert owns the *nicest* Vietnamese place in Paris,¹⁴ which is an obnoxiously nice city to begin with. But all was forgiven because Robert loves music. And the way he and my mom had reconnected was he found one of my old indie rock band's records in the Paris library and he saw my last name Saporiti, that was my mom's married name, and that's how they reconnected and he really loved that record.

So, he just talked to me over the first four courses—it was *that* kind of a meal, my friends. "What was it like to play these festivals, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah . . . have you met this person, blah, blah, blah, blah," I said, wait! H-h-hold on a second. . . . Robert, I'm here to check my own history out, like what was this crazy experience that you had growing up

¹² John Okada, *No-No Boy* (University of Washington Press, 1981).

¹³ Morgan Chosnyk, "Immigrant Songs: No-No Boy," KEXP Blog, 2022, <https://kexp.org/read/2022/6/29/immigrant-songs-no-no-boy/>.

¹⁴ Tan Dinh.

during a war? What's that like? . . . what did you and my mom go through? I wanna know. And he told me something that changed my life. . . . He said, "You know, I was also, in a band . . .".

Again, he had the nonchalance of a guy who has an incredible wine cellar and a couple Basquiats hanging on the wall. He was speaking in French and he just kept saying, "*bien sûr, bien sûr* (of course, of course)," after every sentence like it was no big deal, but this is the story he told me.

"Well you know, the Americans, they loved rock and roll, right? So, they needed bands and they would buy us instruments. They would buy us drum sets and guitars, all this stuff. . . ."

And Robert loved rock and roll. He'd loved it since the French had colonized and he had heard some pop records and stuff like that. He loved American music, but he was very conflicted because he sympathized with the North and the communists but he *loved* American culture. And so, it was very interesting for him. So, his job in the band was to play bass because he was the worst musician—no offense, Michelle. (*Audience laughs.*)

He also was the only one who spoke really good English, so he was tasked with transcribing [the lyrics] phonetically, like Rolling Stones records and stuff. . . . He'd have to write down what he thought he heard Mick Jagger was saying. . . . (*Audience laughs.*)

"Yeah, you know, we'd get our instruments and, *of course*, we'd pile them into the helicopter"—as if that's a normal way to get to a gig—"and the prostitutes would come in the helicopter and the piles of drugs would be put in and it'd be us with amps stacked around us. And then, you know, we'd take off, *of course*, and we'd be flying over the jungle, *of course*, and the Viet Cong would be shooting at us, *of course* . . ."—and I was like, I just tour in a Subaru. (*Audience laughs.*)

And then he said, "We'd land in these clandestine army bases, all around Southeast Asia and we'd play Jimi Hendrix while the world was on fire around us."

Fucking phenomenal. So, again, this is a story that deserves some good book or a movie or something, but you'll settle for this song tonight.

Emilia triggers a sample from the conversation with Robert I've been paraphrasing:

"I was, you know, pro-communist and extremely pro-American because I really loved rock and roll."

The band kicks into "Imperial Twist."

I look around the packed venue and smile. This usually happens once per show where I find myself in happy disbelief that a room full of strangers have come out to sit through my dissertation. This moment often happens during "Imperial Twist," as it's the song where people tend to light up. Most of our set is quieter, contemplative folk music, but "Imperial Twist" is styled as a vintage rock tune. It's the closest the project gets to grooving. It's also one of the densest lyrics in the set spanning four decades and moving between multiple narratives of Saigon teenagers forming rock bands to entertain their occupiers and dealing with death, displacement, and cultural erasure.

*I've been back to old Saigon
But how much of you is lost
When they change your name?*

At Joe's Pub, another room is singing along and bobbing their heads. Behind the band, images of Southeast Asian rock musicians overlap with napalm explosions. The text is thick.

Two buzzed Asian bros in the front row hold up their whiskey glasses and sing along when we hit the chorus:

Ohhh, Oh, Oh, Ohhhh-whoa Saigon teens . . .

Songs are amazing, aren't they? They can do amazing things, including getting a room full of strangers to tap their toes and sing along to lyrics about the overlapping loyalties of colonial subjects, localizing and reinventing the music of their imperial oppressors. Really, the only way I could explore a history so deeply complicated and personal is through music, composing, performing, communing, singing. There are no heroes or villains in history, not really, and in the "Imperial Twist," people occupy both sides at once by finding liberation in the music of their occupiers. That's hard for me to express in a paper.

"Imperial Twist" is also a set highlight because I get to switch to the electric guitar and play with my FX pedals. These devices have become intertwined with my scholarship. I think of my pedalboard in terms of historical metaphors. Sonic effects¹⁵ are fabulous concepts for historians since history is just the process of sorting through delay, echo, fuzz, and distortion, often in loops. When I'm producing in the studio, it often feels like homework for a Sound Studies seminar (in a good way).

During the live set, Emilia creates beats made from audio samples recorded from historical field sites. These sounds are made from internment camp suitcases, ICE detention center barbed wire, American artillery fire, immigration station walls, and dozens of other sound libraries I've recorded in the field. Much like the diasporic community of "Imperial Twist," these sonic textures were recorded everywhere, from Wyoming to Paris to Texas to Saigon. Bringing the sounds of history onstage is a powerful additive to the performance.

The New York show was great. Good crowd and a good band, including my longtime drummer Alex Raderman, and bassist Michelle Bazile, who along with my now wife Emilia Halvorsen Saporiti was one of the first musicians to help me record the initial No-No Boy demos. We were also joined by musician Treya Lam, one of many Vietnamese artists whom I've connected with during this project.

At the merch table that night, we greeted fans and signed albums and T-shirts for about half an hour. Several people told me they heard our music through our KEXP sessions and I smiled, thinking about Jim and DJ Morgan. A set of parents told me they had brought their kids to the city because they wanted them to see someone who looked like them, and I thought about Bob Lee's "Against Invisibility" class. Several school teachers and librarians told me they found inspiration from our music, and I thanked them sincerely for doing the real work.

The club gigs let me see the impact of No-No Boy on the audience. During the show, one couple said they got married to my song "Two Candles in the Dark," so I sang it to them. Later in the set, a little kid handed Emilia a hand-drawn poster for an unreleased song, "Panda Scout," and it reminded me of when I was a young person drawing posters of my favorite bands. The music had found people, and at least for some, the history behind the music had found them, too. The job was done.

¹⁵ Andra McCartney and David Paquette, *Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds*, ed. Augoyard Jean-François and Torgue Henry (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005).

Grains of Sand

As a genre, American folk music is filled with the same kind of historical songwriting that I do, so Folkways, our country's institutionalized repository for this music, is a fitting home for No-No Boy (although we'll see if it survives the second Trump administration's cultural slash and burn). Around 2018, the label had gotten a grant to curate their *first ever* Asian American music releases and they were looking for three artists. I was discovered by them when an intern in the Natural History Museum sang one of my songs for a Music in the Museum day and one of the series curators inquired who wrote the song. The great drummer Sunny Jain was also commissioned to make an album (*Wild Wild East*), as was my subsequent friend Nobuko Miyamoto (*Not Yo Butterfly*).

Nobuko was a dancer and actress (*West Side Story*) before becoming one of the original Asian American activists in the '70s. In this circle, she is legendary. She is also remembered for contributing to *A Grain of Sand: Music for the Struggle by Asians in America*. This was the album of folk songs Nobuko recorded with fellow East Asian American activist musicians, Chris Iijima and Charlie Chin.

When I began sharing my songs, several East Asian American academics, including my advisor Bob, kept telling me that my project reminded them of *A Grain of Sand*. I had never heard of this album. When I listened to it, I cringed at the comparison. *A Grain of Sand's* songwriting is of its time. The musicianship is solid, and their political conviction is admirable, but the lyrics are shallow, too on the nose, and driven by surface-level political statements with little nuance (e.g., "Imperialism Is Just Another Word for Hunger"). However, through my friendship with Nobuko, I grew to appreciate the history behind *A Grain of Sand* and what it meant to her and her contemporaries in the 1970s Asian American movement. At the same time, I realized that the kind of Asian American point of view most Asian American activists and academics have has nothing to do with me as a middle-of-the-country, mixed, Southeast Asian. This distinction is important to center and expand upon if the field of Asian American Studies wants to be taken seriously moving forward. As I finished my field exams, I could see the imbalance of my reading lists, how entire populations (Central and West Asians, Asians in Latin America, Pacific Islanders) were marginalized in the literature by the stories of East Asian Americans (aka the rich, educated ones). You can see this reflected in No-No Boy's catalog with so many songs about Japanese Internment. This is because (1) that's where grant and commission money came from and (2) the literature for this small three-year period is huge and continues to be prioritized as a core subject of the field. Ironically, it was my Asian American Studies professor introducing me to *A Grain of Sand*, the seminal work of Asian American folk music, that played a large part in my no longer identifying as Asian American.

Unlike *Grain of Sand*, I wanted No-No Boy's songs to be able to stand on their own and not rely on a dedicated activist/academic community to value the music as primarily a work of identity politics or representation. When I meet people at concerts who come because they like one of the songs and have no idea about the larger context of the project, this makes me very happy.

In my songwriting, I prefer little moments, human moments. I'm not concerned with big numbers or monoliths. I like nuance and complication. The archives are full of this. The No-No Boy songs are largely composed by plucking lines directly from primary sources and weaving them together through poetic and compositional practice.

Q&A

During the post-show talkbacks that follow our concerts, a common question—mostly from grad students and professors—is “How did you convince people to let you do this for your dissertation?”

Well, for one, I had champions. This is important when trying to do something creative in academia. Bob Lee and several other professors (and a dean) at Brown saw promise (and good publicity) and encouraged me to do my thing, even if there weren't many models to cite.¹⁶ I gathered up the spare work of fellow creative academics such as A. D. Carson, who rapped his dissertation, and Renato Ronaldo, who deftly combined ethnography and poetry, but even citing these works, there was hesitancy to be sure. One advisor worried about how I would “make this legible to academics,” which I found funny since I thought academics were supposed to be smarter than normal people and normal people had no problem understanding songs. What he meant was to make sure I would still be hireable, which is a fair concern for an advisor. There were a few professors who were quite rude and dismissive of my work, which hurt me deeply, but you'll probably never hear them on the radio.

One person who immediately saw the promise of what I was doing was George Lipsitz, the sociologist and popular music scholar. George and his partner BT were two of the first people I played these songs for. They were visiting Brown on my invitation to lecture about their idea of “accompaniment” as scholarly practice,¹⁷ imploring us as privileged academics to not just study and take from the communities we research but to accompany them the way a piano player lays down the backing music for a soloist. “Accompaniment,” along with Lipsitz's other musically borrowed concepts of improvisation and collaboration,¹⁸ connected with me when I first heard him speak at Wyoming. During that visit, I was the grad student charged with driving him around, and we became pals. He spoke like no other academic I'd met, brilliant but clear and constantly referencing music.

George and BT heard some of the first No-No Boy songs in a cramped grad student office. Almost immediately, Lipsitz began championing my work. He introduced me to like-minded, creative academics and invited me out twice to UC Santa Barbara to give concerts. Although I often feel that academia is too gatekeeper-y, rigid, and not a welcoming place for work like mine, Lipsitz provided vision and hope that there can be more creative, collaborative, and artful spaces within the academy.

Another frequently asked question at the Q&As is, “What is the most interesting thing you found during your research?” Vague, but generative. Some nights, my answer might be personal: a family story, like the one my aunt told me about watching the fall of Saigon from a window and seeing southern Vietnamese military “uniforms shed like snake skin on the ground.” Other nights, I recount the interview subjects who became friends, like my “Grandma” Joy or Jim “The Onion King” Mizuta. But most often, I say “Tony Ramone.”

¹⁶ A. D. Carson, *I Used to Love to Dream* (University of Michigan Press, 2020); Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Duke University Press, 2007); Renato Rosaldo, *The Day of Shelly's Death* (Duke University Press, 2014).

¹⁷ Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz, “American Studies as Accompaniment,” *American Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2013): 1–30.

¹⁸ Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz, *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation* (Duke University Press, 2013).

Chinatown, Early '80s

Tony was a badass, at least in my head. I've only ever seen him in a black-and-white photograph, posed in front of a stoop on Catherine Street, New York City, 1981. His hair looks like he might be running with Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*. He's got a cool lean, and he's wearing a black Ramones T-shirt (the cartoon version of the band, not the typical "Ramones Seal" logo). A lucky rabbit's foot dangles from the side of his waist, holding his keys. No smile, sinewy, cool. I would have killed to have this photograph hanging on my wall when I was a teenage punk rocker. Tony's portrait was one of dozens in a collection by Bud Glick taken in New York's Chinatown in the '80s. Glick writes:

From 1981 to 1984 I worked on a documentary project in New York Chinatown. . . . An older, primarily male community (due to racist immigration laws . . .) was being replaced by a rapidly expanding new influx of immigration of young families. . . . This work is particularly relevant now when, as an echo of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, xenophobia and racism have been normalized, spreading lies and fears about immigrants. The same racist, anti-immigrant politics that led to Exclusion are alive and well in our current, toxic times.¹⁹

One of the first classes I took at Brown was Bob Lee's "Against Invisibility." In this course, Bob provoked us to investigate Asian American family albums and other overlooked visual collections to speak against the "invisibility" of Asian Americans in twentieth-century popular culture. I began scouring online and personal archives for home movies or amateur photos—dining room tables, musical performances, street scenes, festivals, and other slices of rarely seen, everyday "immigrant" life. Many of these visuals became the projections behind my concerts.

When I first came upon Glick's photos, I was mesmerized. This collection captured a historical time and place, yes, but more so, its portraiture pushed against stereotypes of filthy immigrants, over-sexualized females, meek men, or quiet model minorities.²⁰ There was the Cat Sweater lady hawking sandals on Mott and Grand. The Fish Mongers smoking on Henry Street. The old-timer alone on a cot in a bachelor's loft. One of my favorite photos shows a young guy working a table at the 1983 San Gennaro Street Fair, indicating the historical, cultural, and geographic push and pull between bordering ethnic communities in lower Manhattan (in this case, Italian and Chinese). Each one of these photos offers a similar point of entry to a world ripe for a songwriter's exploration.

The next time I visited Manhattan, I brought a map marked with the locations of my favorite photographs. I traipsed around Chinatown and Little Italy, holding up Glick's photos in front of where they'd been taken. I looked past the renovated facades and thought about the first generation of bachelors who once occupied the spaces behind them. I was somewhere between 1981 and 2017 and 1924, thinking about the last boys who could remember the Tong wars and the opium dens and the immigration raids and how these old men were washed away by new waves of better-assimilated families and their American kids. I walked up and down Mott and Henry and Grand, and I searched vainly for Tony down on Catherine Street.

¹⁹ Bud Glick, "New York Chinatown," <http://budglickphoto.com/new-york-chinatown/>.

²⁰ Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Temple University Press, 1999).

When I returned to Providence, I set up my projector next to a stack of Chinatown history books and projected Glick's photos on my wall. I sat with a guitar and stared at the images and wrote a song called "Tony Ramone."

Songs are magic little things. They can possess and be possessed by others more than the writers themselves. In that way, they are sticky. They can lodge inside of us and stay there, sometimes when all else fades. I remember singing to an old man in Los Angeles. He had been in one of the camps and someone thought I'd like to meet him. His memory wasn't what it used to be, to put it politely. But when I sang "I'll Be Seeing You," one of the songs Joy Teraoka told me she used to sing at Heart Mountain, I saw him mouth the words and afterward, memories came flooding back. Songs can do this because they light up different parts of your brain; it's not just information recall, but emotional recall.²¹ As professors, wouldn't we kill for our students to internalize lessons the way we internalize our favorite pop songs? Apart from their stickiness, songs are powerful for many reasons. They can swing moods, share ideas, or instigate feelings. They can travel any distance and breach any border. They move swiftly and are digested with relative ease. Songs can even earn you a tidy speaker's fee to visit the same elite institution that once rejected your grad school application.

New Haven, Spring, 2023

The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University is not the best place to put on a concert. From inside the imposing Star Wars–esque monolith, the semi-translucence of the marble walls makes it appear as if the building is breathing in the sunlight. It's one of the coolest spaces I've been in, but the acoustics are terrible.

I performed on the mezzanine, staring up at the glowing six-story glass enclosure where all the rare books are kept. A fellow ethnomusicologist, Ian MacMillen, had invited me. My concert and talk were part of the library's Art and Protest series. The crowd was sparse and the gig would have been altogether forgettable if not for Bud Glick.

Bud and I had corresponded briefly after I sent him a recording of "Tony Ramone," one of the few songs I wrote directly from a visual archive. Normally, I edit archival projections after I've written the song, but Tony and the other characters were such strong muses, that I needed only to sit with them for music to appear. When Bud emailed me a month earlier and told me he was coming to the New Haven gig, I had to put "Tony Ramone" in the set.

At the concert, Bud was moved by the recontextualization of his photographs and we got to chat over the post-show Ivy League charcuterie spread. It so happened that the Chinatown photos were being shown while I was in town. So, after a morning lecture—I usually do some teaching when I visit campuses—Glick met me at the local gallery showing his work. He regaled me with his memories of the project, his equipment and techniques, and stories of the people I'd only known by faces and captions. He said he kept up with a fair few of his subjects. We walked through 1980s Manhattan looking in on the exhausted laundry woman, the stickball kids, the funeral procession, and two old ladies strolling arm and arm around the neighborhood. And there was Tony, my punk rock distant cousin, beautifully printed in shades of silver, always young. To me, he was David. It was the highlight of my spring.

A year later, just as I was about to head out on a two-month national tour, I received a large flat package at our house in Portland. I opened it and grinned. Tony was staring up at me, cool as ever. The note attached was from Bud, thanking me. He said that after my performance at

²¹ Amy M. Belfi and Kelly Jakubowski, "Music and Autobiographical Memory," *Music & Science* 4 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/20592043211047123>.

Yale, someone from the Beinecke contacted him and asked to house his Chinatown photos in their collection, preserving this important archive under the oldest of guards. So, historical preservation, that's another thing a song can do.

No-No Boy residencies like the one at Yale have taken me far and wide. Usually accompanied by my wife and co-producer Emilia, we have worked everywhere from elite universities to a small Inupiaq village in Alaska²² to refugee camps on the Mexican border²³ to high schools back in Wyoming. In all of these places, we do a mix of performing, teaching, and engaging with the community. I try to stress that the important work is not sharing the specific content of *my* research but the method behind it. No-No Boy is a handy model to show people how to transform *their* local histories into art or media that they can in turn share with a larger community. Encouraging folks to become historians themselves is the main objective, and I'm pleased every time I receive an email or meet someone after a show who tells me they were encouraged to have a conversation with a family member, or visit a historical site, or engage in their own project because of my work.

Pomona, Winter 2023

In 2021, I received an email from a mariachi instructor in California who asked if I could send the chords and lyrics for "The Best God Damn Band in Wyoming." This was Dr. Jessie Vallejo, an ethnomusicologist at Cal-Poly Pomona. Jessie herself had worked with Folkways on an album of Ecuadorean flute music. She said that "The Best God Damn Band . . ." reminded her in form and spirit of a *corrido*, a traditional Mexican storytelling ballad, and it would be a useful way to teach her mariachi students about another culture with ties to the region. Jessie had found a deeply local connection to the song. During a pandemic jog, she was stunned when she heard the "Pomona" in the lyrics of the first verse.

*The flyer read "musicians needed"
so young Yone grabbed his silver mouthpiece
tracked down a kid who brought a trumpet to Pomona
Let Yone have it on a free two-year lease*

Before the George Igawa Orchestra performed at Heart Mountain, Wyoming, they had first formed to play talent shows at the Pomona Assembly Center. This site, where the LA County Fair is still held, was hastily converted into a holding pen for thousands of Japanese Americans in the spring of 1942 while the larger camps, like Heart Mountain, were being constructed away from the coast. Ever the pedagogical innovator, Dr. Vallejo thought mariachi-fying this song would be a nice way to teach a local cross-cultural history through embodied performance (playing the song with her students). Two years later, Emilia and I were in Pomona upon Jessie's invitation.

That week, amid co-teaching and playing music, Jessie and I proved to be kindred spirits. As a half-Mexican kid who grew up in Syracuse, New York, she recognized herself in my more personal songs exploring mixed-race identity. We both knew the *in-between*. But

²² Julian Saporiti, "Shishmaref: A Short Film and Field Notes from a Native Alaskan Village," *Folklife Magazine*, 2021, <https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/shishmaref-native-alaskan-village-documentary>.

²³ Albert Tong, Smithsonian Folkways, *No-No Boy—A Documentary on 1975* [Video], YouTube, https://youtu.be/ECTUu4q7r1I?si=HpOo45LRN_ExwTPD.

more than anything, Jessie and I were *huge* Weezer fans in high school, and that is a deep, deep bond.

I was excited to visit the Fairplex and see where the band at the center of my research had formed. I called Grandma Joy before my trip and asked her if she remembered much about those talent shows. Having joined the band in Wyoming, she said she took them in as a spectator, and it was “amazing” to hear live music in those depressing conditions.

It was sunny as we drove from campus to the Fairplex. Jessie and I were joined by a small group of professors, Fairplex staff, and city council members. Guitar case in hand, we walked for about ten minutes before stopping in front of the grandstand. This was the spot where the George Igawa Orchestra had first played. I performed a short set that included “The Best God Damn Band in Wyoming” and a couple of jazz songs the Igawa band performed at this site. I looked at my small but distinguished audience. This felt very much like the culmination of the project I began in Wyoming almost a decade prior. Together, we were activating the history of this place. It was a popular music pilgrimage, an act of fandom, and a spiritual act. I looked into the empty grandstand and saw a teenage version of Grandma Joy—hallucinations and mental illness became common during my fieldwork and concerts. Maybe too much time in the archive. Too much time with ghosts.²⁴

Jessie, I, and our colleagues spent the morning discussing the history of the Fairplex, the city of Pomona, and the different cultures who inhabited this space under trying circumstances. Jessie pointed out the exhibit hall where she had recently performed mariachi music for immigrant kids who, like the Japanese Americans eighty years before, were detained in this space. This was the reason Jessie related so deeply to the Igawa band. While not equivalent, there is a striking parallel between George Igawa performing for World War II incarcerated and Jessie’s group performing for detained immigrant youth in 2020s. Both Jessie Vallejo and George Igawa played humble but important roles as musicians who used music to lighten spirits and stave off boredom in dreary circumstances.

To conclude our Cal-Poly residency, Emilia and I got to perform live with Jessie’s mariachi ensemble. Before the show, the Mariachi de los Broncos played in a courtyard as a sizable audience entered the auditorium. I watched them with an old Wyoming friend, Angel Adams, a saxophonist with whom I played jazz gigs around the state seven decades after Igawa did the same thing. After a few songs, I retreated to the green room to chill. A loud knock interrupted. One of the event staff said I was needed on stage. To my surprise, great honor, and mild embarrassment, the mayor of Pomona had come to the gig to present certificates of recognition to Jessie, Emilia, and me:

On behalf of the City of Pomona, California, we hereby congratulate you on your commitment to social justice and civil rights through critical scholarship, music, and storytelling. We commend you for your dedication to singing stories of communities that have been historically silenced.

For the concert’s encore, Jessie and Mariachi de los Broncos joined us to perform “Las bandas más chingon en Wyoming,” a bilingual reimagining of “Best God Damn Band in Wyoming” that Jessie had translated and arranged. Later that year, Folkways would release it as a single. To accompany this release, Jessie made sheet music available for music teachers along with detailed notes on performance, history, and terminology.²⁵

²⁴ Julian Saporiti, “The Ghosts of No-No Boy in a Nation That Still Imprisons Immigrants,” *The Margins*, Asian American Writers Workshop, 2020.

²⁵ “Las bandas más chingon en Wyoming,” <https://folkways.si.edu/no-no-boy/la-banda-mas-chingon-en-wyoming>

The Cal-Poly visit was a privilege and a pleasure. This was my version of scholarship: fun, collaborative, interdisciplinary, and focused on community. Jessie and I worked together to engage the city with a forgotten local history and connect it to the culture and heritage of the current population. We collaborated musically to create a song that addressed the overlapping historical bonds of unique SoCal communities. Cal-Poly was the closest I've come to fully realizing the goal of the No-No Boy project. It's important to keep in mind that none of this would have happened if I hadn't turned my research on the Igawa band into a song. As I keep telling you, songs can do amazing things.

Later that summer, Jessie texted me a bunch of photos and videos from the LA County Fair. After our visit, the staff curated an exhibit highlighting the site's World War II history and specifically the George Igawa band. In the center of the exhibit was a television monitor playing the music video for "The Best God Damn Band in Wyoming."

...

Had Bob Lee not come up to me after that first No-No Boy show nor George Lipsitz championed my work, things might have turned out quite differently. Without an artistic outlet for my research, I wouldn't have felt the same sense of purpose. I reckon the professionalization of academia probably would have driven me out the door and left my research unfinished. Or maybe I would have stuck it out and confusedly slogged through a terrible dissertation I never wanted to engage with again. Luckily, my artistic practice and the forms of popular music forced the best out of my scholarship and opened a path I'm still excited to travel today. I can't tell you how grateful I am I followed the music.

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Author's Note

Many grad students have asked me, "How can *I* do something like this?" To any young scholar reading this, hungry to do something more creative, more personal, or more fun, I say, just do it! Most of you have advisors more sympathetic and encouraging than you think and if they're not, maybe it's not a good fit for you in the first place. One piece of advice: make sure your research is top-notch *and* your art is well crafted. That balance is key. After that, please, pursue your scholarship boldly and creatively, and use your talent, whatever that is, to make your graduate work as meaningful to you *and* as accessible to others as you can! The future health of the academy depends on departments with different kinds of thinkers *and* doers. Make scholarship more fun. Make it more collaborative. Make it part of your community. Keep up the inspiration! And if you do get pushback from your advisor, at least you can cite this chapter and say, hey, it's worked before.

Please keep in mind that I find traditional academic writing, even the most jargon-laden theoretical kind, to be exciting as a reader and hundreds of traditionally written papers have formed the basis of many of my songs.