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### **Asian-Americana and No-No Boy's *Empire Electric***

Released in September 2023 through Smithsonian Folkways, *Empire Electric* is Dr. Julian Saporiti's third and likely final album as No-No Boy. Having first adopted the moniker to release graduate-research-turned-folk-songs, the Vietnamese American songwriter quipped to *Portland Monthly* after this album's release: "I was going to end this project when I left grad school... Making the wartime traumas of my family the centerpiece of an identity seems like a pretty shitty way to live." But despite his self-deprecation, the enthusiastic response to his music proves that his albums are more than just doom-and-gloom. His first two records, *1942* and *1975*, cover heavy topics such as war and displacement by zooming in on how we cling to joy: Japanese prisoners forming a jazz band in an internment camp, Saigonese teenagers dancing to Jimi Hendrix as their bars are bombed. His discography continues to build as his audience, moved by his performance, approaches him with family anecdotes they wish to hear in song.

*Empire Electric* signals Dr. Saporiti's transition from academic to artist. His first two albums are packed with historical name-dropping and references to his PhD research, but *Empire Electric* is the first No-No Boy album that feels like pop music and not a song-ified graduate thesis. That Saporiti has translated a dense dissertation into compact colloquial stanzas and not an epic poem already demonstrates his expert storytelling. But *Empire Electric* draws its language—lyrically, musically, percussively—from outdoor sauntering and bodies of water, from the cleansing natural world, rather than rigorous institutional study. This time around, the music videos are stitched with personal recordings and home videos, rather than archival films. Five of the ten songs on the record are still based on unearthed histories and academic research. Unlike

before, they were written by someone moving away from academia, someone starting anew after a week's reflection in a rural Buddhist monastery. The remaining five songs are written as personal narratives, fictional character studies, confessional poems. This batch of songs start from the ground up, instead of beginning from a thesis, allowing for the autobiographical and open-to-interpretation lyrics that make a pop song accessible.

Sonically, *Empire Electric* is No-No Boy's most immersive album yet. Each song is a soundscape that mixes folk music's archetypical banjo and acoustic guitar with more diverse samples: electronic synths, Chinese string instruments, archived audio notes from anthropologists, field recordings of wind and water, Vietnamese vocals in the melancholic style I heard every so-often growing up. The layering of sound is rich and cinematic: the instrumentals are as thick as tropical air, panning between the left and right channels like rain. "Mekong Baby"—which I heard live before it released as the first single—features the vocals of Thái Hiền, beloved Vietnamese singer and, as Saporiti writes, "Viet musical auntie." The song was primarily recorded on a sampler at Tryon Creek State Park, Oregon, mixing the chirps and coos of wildlife and the rustle of wind with Saporiti's harmonized vocal line and the waterfall-like cascade of the Vietnamese stringed instrument đàn bầu. This record is not just a folk record: it borrows sounds from psychedelic rock, shoegaze, and indie pop, remixing the tropes of Western genres to document little-known anecdotes of Asian American history.

No-No Boy is co-produced by film composer Seth Boggess and Saporiti's wife, Emilia Halvorsen Saporiti, who contributes instrumentals and backing vocals. (Although the name is singular and gendered, when I refer to No-No Boy I am referring to, not just Julian, but the performing duo composed of both Saporitis.) Both Julian and Emilia Saporiti are biracial with Asian and European ancestry. In July 2023, No-No Boy performed on the National Mall for the

Smithsonian Folklife Festival, accompanied by Michelle Bazile on electric bass, playing a few songs from *Empire Electric* two months before it was released. “Feel free to dance at any time!” said Julian Saporiti when he took the stage, before clarifying that the notion of us dancing to his “very sad songs” was a joke. But some of the songs on *Empire Electric* I feel like I can dance to, or at least sway. The music videos for the three singles, which stitch comically exaggerated lip-synched performance with silly slice-of-life meanderings with the Saporitis, are far from traumatic. They supplement the music delightfully by not taking themselves as seriously—Emilia sitting on a tractor strumming a Gibson as Julian flails around waving the sign of the horns—as you’d expect from academics.

On first listen, the most joyful track on the record is “Sayonara.” As the eighth of ten tracks, it arrives like a train into vibrant city life after the album’s more meditative midsection. The jubilation at the third verse feels explosive, but it is, of course, about imperialism. The lyrics sprung from a conversation with Halvorsen’s grandfather about the abuse he suffered in his childhood Taiwan by Japanese imperialists. Yet in the liner notes, Saporiti writes that the song is a “sayonara” to empire, a call to forgiveness. By 1942, the Japanese empire had occupied Korea, Taiwan, most of Northern China, and modern-day Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia, and the Philippines through brutal imperial violence. Who is Saporiti—who grew up in the States, half-white and a generation removed from the Japanese empire—to ask for forgiveness? In an interview with Michelle Zauner, Korean American frontwoman of Japanese Breakfast (see the irony?), Saporiti remarked: “My mom hates the Japanese.” Zauner replied, “Everyone in Asia hates the Japanese!”

Yet the stage name No-No Boy is a tribute to Japanese American history. During World War II, the U.S. government subjected Japanese Americans to a “loyalty questionnaire” where

questions 27 and 28 asked them to pledge their loyalty to the U.S. military. Thousands of military-aged men answered these questions *no* and *no*: these men were called the “no-no boys.” John Okada’s historical fiction novel *No-No Boy*, written in 1957, is the musical project's namesake and considered one of the first works of “Asian American literature.” Much No-No Boy’s discography also references Japanese culture and Japanese American history, including “The Onion Kings of Ontario,” “Western Empress of the Orient Sawmill,” “Sayonara,” and “Minidoka”—four of the ten songs on *Empire Electric*. In comparison, only three (“Mekong Baby,” “Nothing Left but You,” and “Little Monk”) center Vietnamese American history, which intersects with Saporiti’s own background. This makes me raise my eyebrows, having grown up in the generation where “cultural appropriation” is a dirty word. In older Japanese American communities, the term “no-no boy” brought shame. In a 2019 essay, Saporiti reveals what one woman told him in reference to a song he wrote about her father’s experiences: “My father would be rolling over in his grave if his name was associated with No-No Boy.”

The majority of No-No Boy’s songs are based on true stories. But Saporiti writes his songs in collaboration with their subjects, and his discography grows and grows as Asian Americans of all different backgrounds ask him to write a song about their family. “The Onion Kings of Ontario” and “Western Empress of the Orient Sawmill” were written for research friends and colleagues; “Minidoka” was commissioned by the National Parks. “Sayonara” never claims to be a firsthand narrative about the Japanese American experience: its lyrics are more abstract, its references to Japanese culture presented by not a first-person narrator, but an unnamed “you.” Saporiti writes extensively about the interviews he conducts to write his songs, and acknowledges the source of his lyrics in liner notes and live performance. His songs, and performances, always center those who lived the history. During the Smithsonian Folklife

Festival show, he talked about the Cambodian students in his undergraduate Asian American studies class who asked him to write the song that became “Khmerican.” One Cambodian woman in the audience gave a whoop. Saporiti dedicated the performance to her.

So when Saporiti bids “sayonara” to empire, maybe he isn’t asking colonized Southeast Asians to forget Japan’s imperial history. He isn’t accepting forgiveness on behalf of people across the world but rather, depicting the forgiveness that already binds the diaspora. He is recounting the casual story his Taiwanese grandfather-in-law spun over sushi lunch out of what should have been an atrocity. He is asking Americans of his mother’s generation to let go of the resentment they carried with them overseas, because in this county, the Japanese, Koreans, Vietnamese, and Taiwanese alike have “eyes like mine.” He is asking Asians in America to stand, if not even in solidarity, in peace with each other.

“Little Monk,” what Saporiti describes as the center of the album, opens in a way that I can’t decide whether is pacifist or simply passive. “So, it’s the end of the / world, once again / What is it this week? Protests over this / Riots over that?” These lyrics could have referred to anything, but as I write this review, the demonstrations surrounding the Israel-Hamas war are front of mind. On November 4, an estimated 300,000 protestors came from across the United States to D.C. in an anti-war rally organized by the Palestinian Youth Movement. At the rally, I saw (among many, many others) members of the Asian diaspora standing in solidarity with the Palestinian and Arab community. As they marched, they embodied the violent legacy of U.S. military intervention from the Middle East to Southeast Asia, chanting: “From Palestine to the Philippines / End the U.S. War Machine.” “There is no ‘Asian American politics’ without justice for Palestine,” poet Chen Chen tweeted a month prior, referring to Palestinian American scholar Edward Said’s foundational book *Orientalism*. Published in 1978, this book established the

concept of “orientalism” while Asian American studies was still emerging as an academic field.

I came to Freedom Plaza on November 4th after reflecting on my family’s relationship to the U.S. military and the anti-war rallies protesting American soldiers in Vietnam. Like Saporiti and myself, the titular “Little Monk” of the No-No Boy song is a member of the Vietnamese diaspora: Thích Nhất Hạnh, founder of the Blue Cliff monastery in New York. Saporiti sings, “Do you remember at the monastery / When the outraged child cried / And Little Monk just sweetly smiled back?” The song puzzled me. Surely, Saporiti wasn’t demeaning public protest. How could anyone marginalized in the United States—much less someone who spent part of the music video wearing a panda head—be serious in their critique of rage?

My limited understanding of Buddhism comes from what my mother lets trickle down: she didn’t raise us with the religion, and is barely practicing herself. I remember what she said recently, responding to the bombings in Gaza: “When someone slaps you on the cheek, you turn the other way so they can slap your other cheek.” She told me it was a Buddhist thing. I looked it up later and found out it was a botched regurgitation of Matthew 5:39. Regardless of its origin, I thought the idiom was an oversimplification of the conflict. That my mother kept out of politics and only turned on the news for white noise didn’t help. I know enough about Buddhism to know that it preaches nonviolence, but didn’t monks self-immolate in South Vietnam when their Catholic president Ngô Đình Diệm suppressed their religion?

To enjoy peace after your ancestors escaped war is complicated. Peace—as in absence of war, as in enjoying a stroll—is complicated. Saporiti notes this nuance in the song’s closing: “Watch as they sweep the park / Trash the tents while it’s still dark / Though once I lived out of a car / I wouldn’t say I’m mad / To have the sidewalk back.” Likewise, especially now, I’ve

wondered: my peace comes at the expense of whom? Who do I owe for my peace? By nature of being Vietnamese American, I am sure Saporiti wonders the same. “Little Monk,” I realized, represents an aspiration: a state of “zen” that Saporiti (and most of the audience) is still working towards. Whether we are at a demonstration or a stroll through the park, our minds away on things much bigger than our bodies, Little Monk reminds us: “Be where your feet are now.” This line, at the conclusion of the chorus, resonates with me most.

Saporiti grew up in Nashville, Tennessee and is now based in Portland, Oregon. I can hear the influence of both regions in his music—the rustic echoes of the American South and the outdoorsy melancholia of the Pacific Northwest—so maybe it’s entirely self-projection that I link him to the D.C. area. Maybe that’s the triumph of his latest album, and pop music in general: the freedom to self-project onto *Empire Electric* as an angsty Asian kid from anywhere. Yes, he frequents the nation’s capital thanks to his connection to the Smithsonian Institution, but his visits are more meaningful to me in a historic way.

“My field research sites, a lot of times, are my concerts ... If it’s in a city with any kind of immigrant population, a lot of the people in the audience will have a story to give back,” Saporiti told *Portland Monthly*. The D.C. metropolitan area is home to the largest Vietnamese American community on the East Coast. Every Viet kid growing up here has been to the Eden Center in Falls Church, the Virginian equivalent to the “Little Saigon” that Saporiti sings about. When Saigon fell to the communists in 1975, my father’s family was among the first wave of Vietnamese refugees to escape to the States. They came to Alexandria. Much of my family is still in the area today. So intentional or not, when No-No Boy performs in the nation’s capital, they are performing on land that is essential to Vietnamese American history.

I keep referencing No-No Boy's Smithsonian Folklife Festival show in D.C. because that was the first time I saw them performing live. For that show, I invited my family to watch it with me. I didn't tell my family anything about the performance, and my father probably assumed it was in line with my heavier music taste. He and my younger siblings arrived just as Saporiti was introducing his song *Saigon Twist*. At first, my father took a polite seat near the back; by the end of the show, he was standing up with his camera, recording every song.

Knowing that my father was moved enough by No-No Boy to document the performance meant a lot to me—but not for the reason you might expect. Yes, he was born Vietnamese, but he came to the U.S. when he was seven. He speaks English with no accent. My mother's parents call him the “all-American boy”: he introduced me to Marvel movies and rock and roll. I was glad to introduce my all-American father to a sample of my music taste in turn. No-No Boy's *Empire Electric* is as much about being American as it is about being Asian, and I find my relationship to American pop culture reflected in Saporiti's writings. I've come to adore this playlist that Saporiti curated for *TIDAL Magazine* for Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month in 2021. It features names familiar to the Asian American indie rock scene, such as Mitski, Japanese Breakfast, and Jay Som, as well as deeper cuts from Saporiti's Smithsonian colleagues. But it opens with the blazing embodiment of all-American rock and roll, performed by the biracial Indonesian-Dutch virtuoso we know as Eddie Van Halen. As a whole, Saporiti's work makes us question: what does “Asian American music” even mean?

Fifty years before *Empire Electric*, Charlie Chin, Chirs Iijima, and Nobuko JoAnne Miyamoto released *A Grain of Sand: Music for the Struggle by Asians in America* (1973). The album contains twelve stories of struggle and solidarity expressed through harmonized vocals over acoustic instrumentation. They are beautiful folk songs. *A Grain of Sand* is considered the



first “Asian American music album”—even with the Korean Kim sisters and Filipina-founded Fanny gaining commercial pop success before—and is now part of the Smithsonian’s collections. Chin, Iijima, and Miyamoto adhered to more traditional, acoustic folk instruments in *A Grain of Sand*, even building their lyrics with the language of American folklore. Vietnamese American artists to this day, including No-No Boy’s contemporaries Thao Nguyen (of Falls Church) and Ariel Bui (of Nashville), are drawn to the folk genre, hybridizing their sound with the derivative genres of folk-rock and folk-pop. Their parents’ generation did the grueling labor of uprooting themselves from their homelands, planting them in the American South. And folk music is what grows from this transplant.

The second time I saw No-No Boy live was at Rhizome, a DIY arts venue in D.C.’s Takoma neighborhood, shortly after the album’s release. Not unlike the Smithsonian Folklife show, No-No Boy performed with archival footage and photographs projected in the backdrop: watercolor paintings of Cambodian temples, black-and-white snapshots of Japanese jazz musicians, videos of Vietnamese women in glittering dresses, dancing for American G.I.s. But for our smaller crowd, Saporiti told longer stories, spending more time to explain the media behind him. Near the end of the show, he confirmed that No-No Boy would conclude with a final tour in the spring. He appreciated his audiences, and everyone who connected with his music—but, Saporiti explained, each show was “such a drag.” It was exhausting to sing about generations of oppression, no matter how much joy the audience brings. Through the computer screen, I was sad to read that Saporiti planned to end the project. In the intimate venue, watching him close the show with a quiet murmur of “get home safe,” I understood.

When No-No Boy tours, although Saporiti sings of displacement, we can feel the rootedness of his musical influence. We are drawn to this rootedness, especially those of us who

are still finding our foundation in American soil. That is what is most audacious about Asian American folk music: in a land that tries to erode their history, these artists latch on to their piece of it. Folk music is such a fitting medium to preserve oral histories, to immortalize true stories heard on tour. I don't believe that there is anything fundamentally Asian about music made by Asian Americans, but the fact that Saporiti sings of our history, infuses Asian traditional instruments into his soundscape, *and* stays rooted in American folk, is subversive. *Empire Electric* simultaneously defies stereotypes of what "Asian American music" should sound like and what "Americana" should sound like, whatever those terms mean.

But really, I would like to see Saporiti happier after his shows. Less weary, more enthused. No-No Boy was a good project, an essential project for himself as a scholar and for the thousands of people moved by his music. And I doubt that this last album means the end of No-No Boy. Saporiti hinted that he may release a song in 2025 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. I trust him to continue championing hidden Asian American histories, and I wonder if he may perform a No-No Boy song from time to time throughout his career. I hope to see No-No Boy one last time in the spring. But beyond? Whether Julian Saporiti continues as a songwriter or a teacher—hell, if he decides to become a Buddhist monk and retreat into the woods—I am grateful to have been in his audience. From my vantage point right outside the nation's capital, I am grateful to have witnessed what No-No Boy unearthed about America.

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