

ABLAZE

MARCH 10 · 7:30PM

Windhover Hall | Milwaukee Art Museum



Julian Saporiti: *No-No Boy*

1. “Instructions To All Persons” from *1942* (2018)

The title of this song is a direct quotation of an infamous poster plastered up and down the west coast in the spring of '42. It instructed all Japanese Americans to report to assembly centers so they could eventually be moved to concentration camps across the US. One of the main ideas behind this work is to break down big, unprocessable numbers like these 120,000 incarcerated Japanese Americans hastily sent to these camps, to unfocus the large narratives and black and white arguments around which we have constructed history and community legacies, and instead, refocus on individuals, as a way in for the listener and student. The three verses of this song are taken directly from three conversations I had with Sachi Kuwatani, Tats Nagase, and Roy and Miriam Hatamiya, while kicking around San Francisco in early 2016, all of whom were children or teenagers in the camps.

Instructions to all persons of Japanese...

Instructions to all persons of Japanese ancestry

I think of my friend Sachi, now, Mrs. Kuwatani

Telling me stories in the old folks home

Like the time she was a little girl

and climbed above the rest of the world

Scaled the tower at the Santa Anita racetrack

Where not even the boys dared go

And she felt good for a moment or so

I think of my friend Tats

fishing scorpions from the hot

Colorado River Indian land

Would be casanova

Walking three girls home from the dance

Well after midnight

Singing harmonies, til one by one they'd leave

And leave Tats to stroll back in the moonlight

Singing ballads to the stars all his own

And he felt good for moment or so

Instructions to all persons of Japanese...

Instructions to all persons of Japanese ancestry

I think of my friend Roy, a farm kid, teenage boy

Mr. Tanaka inviting him to join the dance band

In a place called Tule Lake, then, later on at Amache

He found a group of kids to find trouble with

Some little slice of living

Through a clerical error, his friends and him

Got a bunkhouse to themselves, they called the “Loafers Inn”

Playing cards and telling jokes

They felt good for a moment or so

2. "Instructions To All Persons" from 1942 (2018)

I originally wrote this song about dancing with an ex-girlfriend at a music hour in an old folks home in Laramie. The clumsy waltz, boot color and title are all that remain from the original draft. I repurposed the song in 2017 after visiting the root cellar at Heart Mountain. I felt some kind of inspiration standing in that impressively large, crumbling structure about the size of a football field which the incarcerated dug out themselves to store vegetables. I wanted to set a story there, in that room. Two kids dancing in the dark. As I rewrote the lyrics, I poured over copies of the Heart Mountain Sentinel, the newspaper published in the camp, and listened back to tall tales I had recorded of men who were boys in the camp. I looked at old photos from the museum archive. With guitar in hand, I sat with all these glimpses of the camp, looking for small actions, characters and feelings, and wrote this song. The song's hero is a pretty bad ass young woman like when Olivia Newton John wears black at the end of Grease but you know, Japanese and in a concentration camp, who guides a nervous narrator, a farm kid, on a trip around the camp and beyond the barbed wire. She is his Virgil. He is probably my friend Jim Mizuta who was a teenager at Heart Mountain. The pair finds a little time to exist underground in this root cellar. Past the sounds of the issei men singing Japanese songs in the bathroom, past the ice skaters, past boredom, lighting a little fire, keeping sadness at bay, they sway in the dark like a Springsteen song.

*Don't it feel like a movie, teaching this girl how to waltz
Left feet, she might have three, but she sure feels nice in my arms
Old folks sing an old song, play in the agreed upon key
My eyes are stuck on her, her eyes don't leave her feet*

*This girl, no class ring, maybe this is more than a lark
Brown boots, a dirt floor, dancing like two candles in the dark*

*Pretty outlaw call a quarter past, light knuckles on a barrack door
She got a brother down in Topaz, I saw that name once in a jewelry store
Wind around past the skaters and pond, looking for a cut in the wire
She's got a key to the cellar door,
don't ask questions, man, just stand there inspired*

*This girl, gets why, I miss the garden at the Golden Gate Park
Young blood and old songs, dancing like two candles in the dark*

*I tell ya man it's like some movie and she's just tailor made for the part
Lamps licking the roof beams, she's got good looking down to an art
Hear the old folks sing them old songs, the background just fades away
Our coffee can fire's almost gone, she says, "I gotta get out of this place"*

*This girl, a pin point, that moment ya feel a spark
Brown boots, a dirt floor, dancing like two candles in the dark
Dancing like two candles in the dark
Dancing like two candles in the dark*

3. "Nothing Left But You" (unreleased)

This is an unreleased song about changing flags and vanishing countries. Tonight I'll dedicate it to Kyiv.

*What perfect harmony still shakes me to the core
Begot the cynic's soul to rumble?
It was in your voice*

I had no choice

*But to rise and ring out too
When those records play
All the clutter fades away
There is nothing left but you*

*There are no labors that can reset space or time
It's beyond sacrifice or school
I've learned a lot
I've given up almost all I got
I keep a passport I can't use
There's no soil to kiss
Those old borders don't exist
There is nothing left but you*

*Ain't there some crest of a wave, oh, way out on the sea
In the back of a godhead's ocean of ancient memories
That lifts some sacred boat
And it's sailor, at least, a charming ghost
Who earned your heart when it was first free?
He was callous and cruel
But he bought your dreams and saw them through
To own the past, forgive the fool*

*What steady rhythm still doth move me at this hour
To put my pen to page and pray?
For the reconcile
To crack a joke and catch a smile
Why keep my fingers clenched dear muse?
Because, once, I died
And came out the other side
And there was nothing left but you*

4. "Imperial Twist" from 1975 (2021)

Robert Vifian was a high school friend of my mom's back in Saigon. In the spring of 2016, I met him in Paris at the fancy Vietnamese restaurant he owned. Over lunch he told me, "You know, I was in a band.... We would play these concerts for the GIs. They'd fly us out over the jungle in helicopters filled with music equipment and drugs and prostitutes, and people would be shooting at us." Then, as if he hadn't begun the coolest story ever, he just sort of trailed off. I pressed him for more. Like every other part of the world colonized by the West, rock 'n' roll flourished in Southeast Asia. Teenagers picked it up from the French and later the occupying Americans. They learned it well, and often made it their own. "I was pro-Communist and extremely pro-American because I really loved rock 'n' roll," Robert told me. "Nobody forced us (or said), 'you should listen to that.' We came to it naturally.... We liked the music and we wanted to reproduce it." When I returned to grad school that fall, I dove into Viet and Cambodian rock bands of the late 1960s/early '70s. The records I found expanded my concept of artistic authenticity and broadened my borders of where art belongs and whom it belongs to. His story also connected me, as a musician, to my mom's experience growing up in Saigon in a more emotional and electric way. One band I discovered particularly blew my mind. The CBC Band was a family group with origins in northern Vietnam who came south after the French were defeated in 1954 and the Communists took over. They filled the entertainment needs of American GIs who had money to spend. This song interweaves Robert's stories with a tragic CBC Band gig. During the opening riff of Hendrix's "Purple Haze," a bomb

went off. It wounded several servicemen and killed one of the drummer's friends. Soon after, with the South's defeat looming, the band fled, eventually making lives in Houston. Beautifully, 40 years after their violently abbreviated gig, veterans who were at that concert organized a reunion at a bar in Houston, and the band finished "Purple Haze." They still gig to this day.

Can you give the world a twist just by doing the twist?

At the moment the bomb went off,

They were playing "Purple Haze"

I met Robert at his restaurant,

Septième arrondissement

The Doors still echo in the jungle

He said, "Your mother brought back 45s from Paris in '65

and we learned 'em note for note."

Broken english Rolling Stones

Fenders, girls and dope

America provides

Oh, Saigon teens

Oh, Saigon teens

Can you give the world a twist just by doing the twist?

Can you save the world with Acid Rock?

I didn't know my mother's maiden name

That time in Texas when we were detained

Been back to old Saigon

How much of you is lost

When they change your name?

Oh, Saigon teens

Oh, Saigon teens

Oh, Saigon teens

Oh, Saigon teens

Half a world away

the band got back on stage

Four decades to the day

"Purple Haze"

5. "Boat People" from 1942 (2018)

"Boat People" comes from an archived Canadian Broadcast Corporation radio story I found from 1979 focusing on the harrowing journey of Dr. Tuan Tran, a Vietnamese refugee who eventually who resettled in Canada. Like hundreds of thousands of other Southeast Asians, the doctor fled Vietnam in a rickety fishing boat, thus branded one of the "boat people." The song's narrator sings firmly from 2017. 1 The straightforward true-to-life escape narrative is interspersed with my own present day numb/dumb moments of scrolling through a Facebook feed filled with articles about Trump's "Muslim Ban." There is also reflection on my Mom's Vietnamese refugee story.

Forty years ago, the doctor left on a boat

Never seen the snow or felt it in his hand

Sail until you see dry land

*I can't get off the news, I can't get off the floor
The "good folks" go inside when we need them most
What do prayers do behind locked doors?*

*Tuan went back to rebuild, only to watch Saigon fall
He climbs up Mont Royal, makes a life in Montreal.
Donated winter coats and Barbie dolls*

*Wrap myself in books. They're talking bout this ban
I linger on bell hooks. She helps me to understand
Some of this ain't new, no, ma'am.*

*Fourteen hours by car, cargo trucks and cabs
Just to shake the cops, Mom had to stay back
A Chinese safe house and covered tracks*

*Eighteen meters long, two hundred bodies full
A simple compass and a map from a kid's geography book
Forget Ferdinand or Captain fuckin' Cook*

*Bodies bobbing in the rough South China Sea
Ran across a Thai pirate ship scavenging
Ripped the doctor from his kids, bleeding*

*Hours under gun, then tossed into the water
He swam back to his son, held on to his daughter
Drifting through the night...*

*As the daylight broke, a mountain in the dawn
Off the Malaysian coast, sweet Pulau Bidong
Never cried so hard or so long*

*I can't get off the news. I can't get off my phone
My mother came here, too, forty years ago
If you see somebody's cold, give 'em a coat*