<table>
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<th>No.</th>
<th>Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>THE ONION KINGS OF ONTARIO!</td>
<td>3:21</td>
<td>JULIAN SAPORITI/WEST MEADE MUSIC, ASCAP</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>NASHVILLE</td>
<td>4:35</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>4:02</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>8</td>
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Produced by JULIAN SAPORITI
Empire Electric is a wandering; a letting go. A search party. For sounds, for history, and for self. It is a coming back.

When my wife Emilia and I finished our respective programs at Brown University, we couldn’t leave campus fast enough. Sometimes you just need to empty out and split. So we pointed the car west and drove. The first place we stopped was a monastery in upstate New York called Blue Cliff. A good place to recalibrate.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the founder of this monastery, played an important role in my life. His slim books were constant companions during my Wyoming years. I wore out their bindings and dusted their pages on hiking trails and mountainsides all over the West. Thich was the first Viet writer I ever came across and his teachings helped me mightily, connecting me with my spirit, nature, and our shared war-torn heritage. Visiting his monastery was next level and that’s where this album really begins.

During our week with the monks, we ate in silence, meditated, walked a lot, drank tea, did chores, and slept outside. It was raw, sometimes difficult, but healing. After ten years in grad school, my thinking was deep but narrow. That world had stripped a lot of joy, wonder, and purpose from me. Sitting with the monks at Blue Cliff, learning like a child, it was humbling and profound. For the first time since I had moved back east, I felt myself returning. The calcified mask of the intellectual professional began to crack open. Light started pouring back into my brain. I was taught tricks for patching up a leaking heart. Daily lessons provided much-needed perspective. The air felt clean, again.

I came away from this experience a scholar on my own terms, clear-eyed on how I wanted to use the immense amount of studying I’d done. While I still collaborate with many colleagues in the academy, I won’t go near the brutalizing job market or hoop-jumping tenure process, nor publish in the gatekeeper-y, jargon-filled journals of my
fields. Why would I when I can share my research through music with so many more people (including other scholars)? Would you read my dissertation? No, but you are listening to it.

Taking what I learned from the monks, I attempted to enter the next phase of my life with joy and curiosity. To experiment more, think less, spend more time in nature, and get back to pursuing music fully—much easier when you’re not working on a PhD. Empire Electric is what I made along this new path. It is a more adventurous album than the previous No-No Boy LPs. Musically, it’s more realized and I really enjoyed creating the deep layers of sonic pastiche—“traditional” American folk sounds, Asian instruments, electronics, and field recordings—that make up the album’s instrumentation.

Extra time in the studio, as well as extensive collaborations with my co-producers Emilia Halvorsen Saporiti and Seth Boggess, yielded sounds I hadn’t made (or heard) before, sounds which genuinely surprised me. This was exciting! I leaned into acts of mutation, blending, and mixing. A lot of this record is still “folky,” but each track contains some musical element that begs listeners to complicate their understanding of what folk music can be. At the end of the day, I wanted to create something reflective of my multicultural American background. Empire Electric’s sonic diversity allowed me to convey the trans-Pacific histories I study as a scholar—stories of refugees, immigrants, in-betweener, balancers—through music, as well as the lyrics.

Like previous No-No Boy material, these songs are based on my research, pulled from archives, oral histories, and site visits. Place is a central component of these songs. A triptych of Oregon pieces (“Onion Kings,” “Western Empress,” “1603”) explores lesser-known histories in my new home state. “Nashville,” named after my birthplace, incorporates autobiography in a rewrite of an old song I never got right, but wanted to reckon with once more.
“Empire” extends deeper into Asia than my previous work. “Mekong Baby” and “Nothing Left But You” focus on my family’s Viet lineage—balancing war, memory, and childhood. The lush field-recording collage “Jakarta” was inspired by my coursework on Southeast Asia. “Sayonara,” an indie-rock-meets-’80s-city-pop-taiko catharsis, works through the brutality of Japanese imperialism that still scars many older Asian folks to this day. “Little Monk,” the album’s center, returns us to the monastery.

In common folk fashion, I built most of these songs around acoustic guitar, but there’s also a lot of banjo on this record, a nod to the diverse foundations of American folk music. Nestled alongside the banjo are intentional pepperings of lap-steel guitar. While many folks now understand the banjo’s African origins—see Smithsonian Folkways label mates Jake Blount and Rhiannon Giddens—the imperial origins (Hawai’i) of the slide guitar are lesser known but equally essential to the foundations of Americana or roots music. The first electrified form of the guitar was in fact based on this Asian American Pacific Islander invention. Growing up in Tennessee, I often felt pangs of racial inauthenticity due to the overwhelming whiteness of the indie, folk, and country music scenes in town. Little did I know all this music was built on Black and Brown innovation and belonging to all.

On “Nashville,” lap steel and banjo purposefully intermingle with samples of Chinese pipa, guzheng, and dizi. Mariachi violins appear during the instrumental section and throughout there are beds of dreamy indie guitars. All of this is layered over an interlocking rhythm of hand claps, Arabian and West African percussion, and a drumbeat leaning heavily on toms, originally known as the “Chinese tom-toms,” and brought to the United States by 19th-century Chinese immigrants. This is how America sounds to me.

Empire Electric stitches my research on culture, immigration, and empire into every song. As with No-No Boy’s previous Smithsonian Folkways release 1975, I cultivated sound samples from sites of my historical research.
These samples were sometimes turned into percussion or pitched instruments and manipulated by electronics (chopping, reversing, granulating, pitching, delay, reverb). On *Empire*, I also incorporated a lot of field recordings from natural spaces—lots of water, forest sounds, and birds—on this album. Adding these textures was a key component in situating these songs in historical and geographical contexts.

All these sound layers serve the purpose of investigating/expressing a very mixed-up identity, but, getting back to the monastery, these songs also sound out a call to practice *deep listening* (Pauline Oliveros riffing on Buddhism). If you find this music to your liking, I invite you to settle in with good headphones or a stereo and listen closely to all the sounds present, to unravel them, to take time, to breathe, and hopefully to listen beyond even the music, to yourself, to the world around you, to history, to your community, to nature.

Thank you for listening.

Sincerely,

Dr. Julian Saporiti (2023)
THE ONION KINGS OF ONTARIO!

Julian Saporiti, lead vocal, instruments, programming; Emilia Halvorsen Saporiti, harmony vocal

← shakuhachi + koto in reverse ← strains of a forgotten pastoral…for my friend

Jim Mizuta + his community in eastern Oregon who made good lives after the camps. Onion fields and Buddhist churches. Written during a residency at Surel’s Place in Boise. Thanks, Gregg.
Table set old country style
Hoist the banner and leave the light on
Western treasure valley child
We’re all waiting for your arrival!
Your, your arrival
Sunday pews, worn Buddha Bible

Tend the fire and clean your rifle
Sow your field Issei survivor
We’re all waiting for your arrival!
In praise, we sing
The onion kings!
Till the land for miles
Time shall bring a reckoning
Oh, time shall bring a reckoning

Waiting for your arrival
Your arrival
In praise, we sing
The onion kings!
Till the land for miles
Time shall bring her reckoning
Waiting for your arrival
We’re all waiting for your arrival!

NASHVILLE

Julian Saporiti, lead vocal, instruments, programming;
Emilia Halvorsen Saporiti, harmony vocal; Kristin Weber, violin, additional vocal; Hamilton Berry, cello

Wrote this song once before (2007). Despite the autobiography, I still couldn’t find myself in the lyric until I fictionalized it and turned the leads Brown. My heart will always belong in Tennessee. For Neil McCoy, Iwan Fals, and my Pops.

Cane sugar Magnolia sweet
Mama dressed like a Pinay queen
Kara Oki could sing anything
Like some mockingbird in the morning

She’d been touring the southern land
Cut her teeth in a backing band
Manila born, raised in Birmingham
She cried when they played on the Opry

Three flights from Mindoro, so he could

Catch Dwight at that Ryman show

Then Grimey booked him for a Slow Bar slow night

To open up the bill

Sore thumb at the honky-tonks

But that kid he lived for the songs

And Fiddles falling into steel guitars

He wore a tattoo

Tennessee

She had played a million shows like this

But she had never heard no songs like his

He told her, “Baby, I’m a Dylan kid

But my favorite song is ‘Maaf Cintaku’”

(look it up)

He loaded out just before her set

Wrapped in a cloud of cigarettes

He heard a voice that you don’t forget

She sang, “Meet Me in the Morning”

Not 56th and Wabasha just the Donut Den over by the mall, she said

Brother, sometimes I miss it all, he nodded

Looking at the modded F-150s

He told her, “Baby, I’m a Dylan kid

But my favorite song is ‘Maaf Cintaku’”

(look it up)

He loaded out just before her set

Wrapped in a cloud of cigarettes

She bought him tickets to the hall of fame

Sometimes it takes a tourist to reframe

Gram’s jacket up there on display

“Oh, sister, you live in a goldmine”

Singer said to the singer

As they stumbled up to Capitol Hill

You and I, we will always have Nashville

He worked concessions for the Sounds

Kara hustled, made the music row rounds

Called him soon as the deal went down

“Meet me at RCA B in the morning”

Singer said to the singer

As they stumbled up to Capitol Hill

You and I, we will always have Nashville

He worked concessions for the Sounds
Picked up a band that could do no wrong
She taught him how to sing
That record bought ’em both big backyards but
The years passed, the city lost its charms
The condos swallowed up the boulevards
He only stuck around for her

I reckoned I had my fill
Oh, we had it for a good long run
But now, the bridal party’s making me ill
You and I, remember when we had Nashville
You and I, oh, once we had Nashville
You and I, we will always have Nashville

Somewhere on the endless road
He decided to leave the show
+ 63 he changed a country code
You gotta know when a goldmine is gutted
Singer said to the singer
No, I don’t think we’ll be sharing the bill
This town is a shell of a shell

Father and Son, Julian and Bob Saporiti, Nashville, 2022
MEKONG BABY

Julian Saporiti, lead vocal, instruments, programming;
Thai Hien, vocal

All praise to Thai Hien, a Viet musical auntie who lends her voice, grace, and grounding to this looking back. Hien’s father was Phạm Duy, famed Viet ethnomusicologist and songwriter. I actually recorded most of this on a portable sampler one afternoon at Tryon Creek State Park waiting to pick up Emilia from law school next door. For Tata Nicole, my mom, and their mom.

Ngày xưa ta rất dại khờ
Sail away Mekong baby
Cùng ra khơi
Cháu con dòng Cửu Long
Sail away Mekong Baby

How your charm offensive tested
And you were younger once
All I own are second guesses
And so it goes
Fighting on the beach
And so it goes
Violence in our teeth

Năm mươi con có về vùng núi non
Nửa bầy con năm mươi về đại dương
Sail away
Cháu con, Cháu con Cửu Long sông

Cháu con Cửu Long sông
Sail away Mekong baby...

Ngày xưa ta rất dại khờ
Cháu con dòng Cửu Long
And I was younger once

And so it goes
Fighting on the beach
And so it goes
Violence in our teeth

Cháu con Cửu Long sông
Mekong Baby
WESTERN EMPRESS OF THE ORIENT SAWMILL

Julian Saporiti, lead vocal, instruments, programming;
Emilia Halvorsen Saporiti, harmony vocal

True story of Miyo Iwakoshi, first Japanese settler (1880) in Oregon. Buried for decades in the Gresham Pioneer cemetery next to her Australian-Scot husband Andrew McKinnon with no headstone (b/c not white). Only marker was a Japanese Cedar—still there, mighty tall, today. Thanks to Wynn Kiyama for telling me about this story and asking me to write this song. Wynn and Portland Taiko performed on early versions of several of these songs and I used samples of many of their instruments for this album and 1975.

Oregon Nikkei
First of the forest
Steam-powered sawmill town
Patience and patience now
Samurai plowshare
Old Nagasaki
The Scotsman makes funny sounds
Turning the language round

Learning enough for asking her out
Rafts made of hardwood
Wide as the river
Orient girls confound
Like Monarchs on frozen ground
Miyo buried Andrew’s body
Gresham Pioneer

Tama and the Kyoto salesman
Married earlier last year
Pose for a photo
Oh, how the years go
Flanked by two grandsons proud
Jewels and a modest gown
Long for the islands
Welcome the workers
Burnish a simple crown
Patience and patience
now
Patience and patience
now
Hakujin lover, baby,
let's go, oh,
I ain't leaving now

Miyo said I crossed a
goddamn ocean for you,
Bury me, Japanese cedar
tree
Bury me, Japanese cedar
tree
Fifty years before the
Western empress brought 'em underground

Trail blazed and timbers
down
down

Bali: last before us
Get ready, Bill!
Get ready, Bill!
Julian Saporiti, lead vocal, instruments, programming

Psychedelic daydream during Southeast Asian studies class. Sampling anthropologists sampling locals... jumping beats across bar lines like imperial watercolors running across maps of the continent and archipelagos. Laughing at Clifford Geertz. In utter appreciation of birds and their amazing music.

Old Dutch song, the slowest serenade
Got the notes all wrong, we smiled anyway
Two days drive, Bali lies before us!
Get ready girl
Get ready girl

The strange man Geertz, behold, the Harvard poser
We dropped him off, the villagers ignored him
A Sunbird’s call took us to the sea
Get ready girl
Get ready girl

And wear your lonely feather
Dressed by the sun in the window
NOTHING LEFT BUT YOU

Julian Saporiti, lead vocal, instruments, programming; Emilia Halvorsen Saporiti, harmony vocal

(Việt Nam) again… again… remembering / never knowing / family /
Bloodline vibes
organ made from đàn bầu / guitar + habit = chase bliss
Boggess made the last verse’s orchestra
still here, mutation, displaceman, reformation.
still here—still there, too.

What perfect harmony
still shakes me to the core
Begot this 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
And 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 this passport I can’t use
There’s no soil to kiss
Those old borders don’t exist
No, 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 its sailor, at least, his 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 I came out the other side
And there was nothing left but you

LITTLE MONK

Julian Saporiti, lead vocal, instruments, programming; Emilia Halvorsen Saporiti, harmony vocal, lap steel; P.T. Banks, harmony vocal; Kristin Weber, violin

Little Monk was a real guy at the monastery.
He was very wise and looked like a cartoon monk.
The children gave him the nickname. He is very small.
Hear Coach Saban but this once, “be where your feet are.” (go vols!)
Slow down, listen deep, look clear at your own hypocrisy
Take down the yard signs, people. Give up on perfection or success
Carry hats for the homeless.
Shout less, sing more.
Empty out. Do kind. Wine less.
Eat well. For Thich and the monks at the monastery.
So, it's the end of the world, once again
What is it this week?
Protests over this
Riots over that

Do you remember at the monastery
When the outraged child cried
And Little Monk just sweetly smiled back?
Oh, how and when do I get so zen?

Light the way from your small apartment
Quiet days, worry within your reach
Tend your garden, do not harden
At the cruel and constant spinning of your mind's demands
Pro-tip for a good heart
Be where your feet are now

So, it's the end once again of the world
the sophomores bellyache
And demonstrate
Over everything but class
Red suns and ash cover
Half the state of California
Little Monk just meditates
And slowly walks the path
I can't control what I can't control

Light the way from your small apartment
Quiet days, worry within your reach
Tend your garden, do not harden
At the cruel and constant spinning of your mind's demands
Pro-tip for a good heart
Be where your feet are now

Light the way from your small apartment
Quiet days, worry within your reach
Tend your garden, do not harden
At the cruel and constant spinning of your mind's demands
Pro-tip for a good heart
Be where your feet are now

Pro-tip for a good heart
Be where your feet are now

So it's the end of the world
But I don't feel so anxious this week
Drawing Canvasbacks
And sitting on the grass

Watch as they sweep the park
Trash the tents while it's still dark
Though once I lived out of a car

Julian and Emilia Saporiti, Blue Cliff Monastery, New York, 2019
SAYONARA

Julian Saporiti, lead vocal, instruments, programming;
Emilia Halvorsen Saporiti, harmony vocal

Talking to Emilia’s grandad about being marched around as a boy on his polio leg by some wicked Japanese in Taiwan. (See Korea, China, Southeast Asia too.) Brutal shit. He told the story over a sushi lunch. “Asian America” is an amnesiac, imbalanced (and for me, honestly, useless) term. Trace back your bloodline, cast off colonizers, sayonara 2 empire, and forgive everything. We’re all all right / you’re one of one, too.

I never knew you but I love you, kid
Man, that’s the way it goes
What’s more lovely than some secret hid
Who doesn’t want that ghost?
But oh, bloodlines, some eyes like mine
A denim coat, a yellow knife
Under Taipei lights

You told me where I come from
Told me that I’m all right
I didn’t know what hapa meant
You said, “Oh, you’re so white.”
How does your mother feel about black men?
Babe, we’re all all right
We caught some heat climbing up family trees

Forget violin and some model minority
Under Taipei lights
You kissed my broken eyes
You showed me that I’m all right
Sa, sa, sa, sayonara
A sigh, a sigh, a sigh, a sigh was all you said
Sa, sa, sa, sayonara
An Empire’s end
An old teak bar down by
the Kabuki screens
You gave me a list of
books and an antique
Some feudal charm from
century 16
A red lacquer box
A white paper swan
Black ink in Japanese
Sigh, sigh, sigh, sigh,
sayonara
Sigh, sigh, sigh,
sayonara
Sa, sa, sa, sayonara
A sigh, a sigh, a sigh, a
sigh was all you said
Sa, sa, sa, sayonara
An Empire's end

MINIDOKA

Julian Saporiti, lead vocal, instruments, programming;
Emilia Halvorsen Saporiti, harmony vocal
Sing with me Chickie
Dance with me in Idaho
Cry for Jimmy’s dead mother in Wyoming
Bad dreams and boredoms
Peace in the outfield
Barracks in the snow
I love you, friend
(commissioned by the national parks)
I’ll never know

Some kid drowned in
the river
Now, we’re digging a
swimming hole
Yesterday, I played
center field
I needed some half-
innings alone
Doubled off the
Buddhist minister
Knocked the tying run
home
Minidoka
Bottom nine
2 - 0 count, a good lead off third
Toss me something fast and low
I dreamt I saw a model plane this morning
Flying past the boundary road
Caught the eye of able Grable
Sliding into second to beat the throw
Flurries started and I thought of the man
Who got lost from block 3 in the snow
Blanketed in white
Freezing in the night
Cursing and scared, feeling foolish, dying alone
Our first baseman got married
They rode an Army truck out to Twin Falls
Spoke their vows in a hotel suite
As a busted pump organ wheezed through the walls
Little sister butchering the “Wedding March”
Some sweet comedy to it all
Minidoka
Dressed in white
Minidoka
Snow drifts bouncing the moonlight
As the evening took the afternoon
Deep in the count, staying alive
A thousand spectators, nothing better to do
“Under diamond-cut stars, horizon to horizon
And a translucent milk-glass moon”
Minidoka
Dressed in white
Minidoka

“Under diamond-cut stars, horizon to horizon
And a translucent milk-glass moon”
Minidoka
Dressed in white
Minidoka
Julian Saporiti, lead vocal, instruments, programming; Emilia Halvorsen Saporiti, harmony vocal; Diego Javier Luis, spoken word

Diego found the crew list in a Spanish archive:
Anton Thomas, Antonio Bengala, Francisco Miguel, Christoual Catoya, Agustin Longalo, Lucas Cate, Agustin Sao.

Two centuries before Lewis and Clark (!) Asian eyes “discovered” Oregon. We road-tripped / pilgrimaged to Gold Beach to witness where Vizcaíno’s crew floated near death under the dramatic cliffs of the southern coast. Snow on the hills, northwest passage in sight, too ill to land, religious zealots. 1603, Oregon first seen by folks like us. For my brother Diego and his great research.

10
1603
Sailed as far from Malabar
As any soul has known
Peaks of snow, a jagged coast
Great giants made of stone
Two months through the Visayas
Then three beyond the blue
At California’s crest turned south

The mouth of hell we drew
Only for you
Only for you
Left the bay, the 5th of May
North to San Bernabe
Beneath a tent the sacrament
The feast was held on Sunday

Indios y Indio
A gift of tiger’s skin
The Latin Mass, our foreign past
Forgive us for this sin
Only for you
Only for you
I feel brand new!
Only for you!
San Diego, Tres Reyes, Y Santo Tomas
Santa Barbara learned her name
Grumetes learned the stocks
The autumn course, our bearings north
The winter not forgotten
Luzon wood built cannon proof
But like us quick to rotten

Thomas turned back with the ill
Diego kept the cross
The New Year’s Day beyond Drake’s Bay
The frigata was lost
North we climbed, morale declined
Not even six could stand
But through the storm, from legend torn
The strait of Anián

Only for you
I feel brand new!

Oh I believe, oh, I believe!
The father and the son!
Claim this coast, oh holy ghost
Who spoke through prophets’ tongues
Only for you

I feel brand new!
Only for you!
CREDITS

Produced, recorded, and annotated by
Julian Saporiti

Co-produced by
Emilia Halvorsen Saporiti
and Seth Boggess

String and orchestral arrangements by
Seth Boggess

Recorded at Saporiti home studio,
Portland, Oregon

Mixed by
Seth Boggess at Seth Boggess’s
home studio, Normal, Illinois

Mastered by
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Nashville, Tennessee

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Phan Chan The/Saporiti Family

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Mary Monseur

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Editorial assistance by
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Art direction and package design by
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There are seemingly infinite layers of meaning to be found in No-No Boy's third album, Empire Electric. You can listen closely to singer-songwriter Julian Saporiti's lyrics, which juxtapose true stories of struggle from throughout Asia and its diaspora with Saporiti's own redemptive intergenerational trauma. You could also let the majesty of Saporiti's songcraft wash over you, his captivating melodies cracking those themes in a veneer of hope and ecstasy. But the deepest storytelling happens at the sonic level, as sounds drawn from across the Eastern Hemisphere mingle freely with distinctly American instrumentation—bongo and keys, hip-hop and guitars—while electronically manipulated field recordings of raging water, chirping birds, and other natural sounds ground us in the now. Adventurous and affecting, Empire Electric offers a vision for a new kind of folk music, one that tells untold stories through unorthodox means and finds new pathways through our tangled roots.

Produced by Julian Saporiti