

# No-No Boy & Mariachi Los Broncos

“La Banda Más Chingón en Wyoming”

(The Best God Damn Band in Wyoming)



b/w “Nitro ‘66 Cannonball Blues” featuring The New Celestial String Band

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# **“La Banda Más Chingón en Wyoming”**

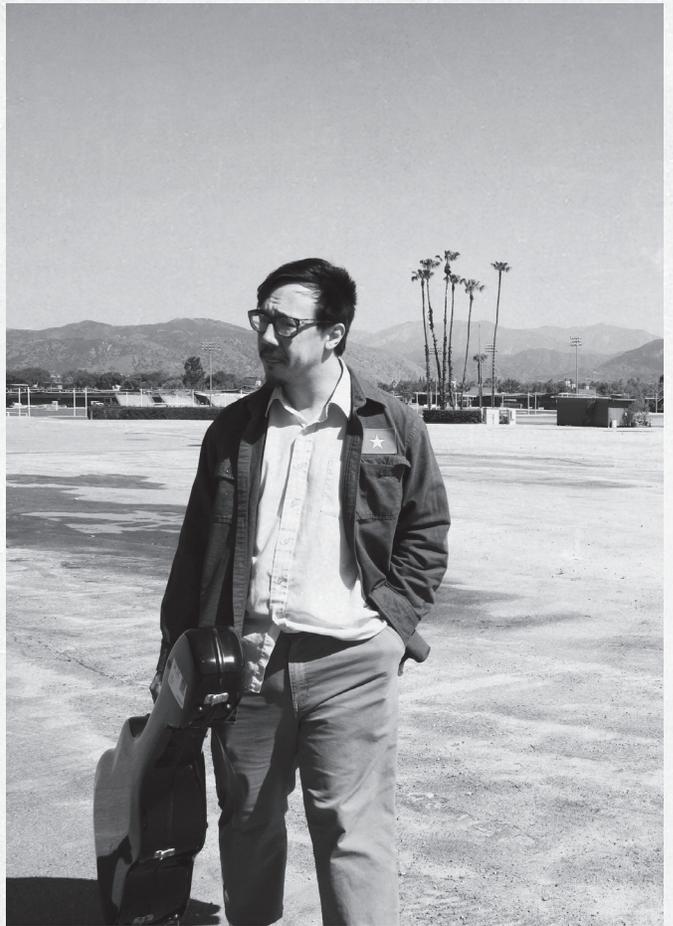
**— No-No Boy feat. Mariachi Los Broncos**

A mariachi rendition... of a folk-country song... about a 1940s Asian American swing band... composed in Wyoming... by the son of a Vietnamese refugee... from Nashville... performed in Southern California: this is the layered and deeply American excavation of No-No Boy's newest single, "La Banda Más Chingón en Wyoming." A bilingual update to No-No Boy's "The Best God Damn Band in Wyoming," this collaboration with Mariachi Los Broncos came into existence when ethnomusicologist Jessie Vallejo wrote to Julian Saporiti (aka No-No Boy) in 2021, asking if she could teach his song to her mariachi ensemble at Cal Poly Pomona. Dr. Vallejo felt that the form and lyrics would fit well into the mariachi style, and she wanted to use the song to teach her students about cultures beyond Mexico and Mexican America. The story of a big band that performed behind barbed wire in a WWII Japanese American concentration camp in Wyoming touched her deeply, but it was a place name mentioned in the lyrics, "Pomona," that truly connected her with the song.

During the pandemic, Dr. Vallejo had volunteered to perform mariachi music at the Fairplex in Pomona, CA. During that time, it was being used to house detained migrant children separated from their parents and awaiting reunification with family in the US. In an interesting historical parallel, saxophonist George Igawa had also been detained at the Fairplex in the spring of 1942 along with thousands of other Los Angeles-area Japanese Americans. At this makeshift assembly center, Igawa quickly organized a jazz ensemble, plucking up some of the camp's best young musicians (clarinetist Tetsu Bessho, trumpeter Yone Fukui), and he began putting on concerts to bring joy and distraction to his fellow detainees. When Igawa and his bandmates were moved from California to Wyoming in the summer of '42, the orchestra continued to perform and were even invited to play dances around the state. As Vallejo repeatedly listened to the No-No Boy song on her walks around Pomona, she couldn't help but see parallels in her own performances at the Fairplex and the band about whom this song was written.

Eighty years after the formation of the George Igawa Orchestra (first known as The Pomonans and Californians) — almost to the day—Dr. Vallejo and her colleagues brought No-No Boy to Pomona to teach and perform. On this trip, Saporiti, along with a small contingent of local politicians, educators, and Fairplex staff, toured the site. On the very spot where the "Best God Damn Band" first formed, Saporiti played the song as well as selections from the band's repertoire. Although the bleachers were empty, the performance activated a deep musical history for the small group of local dignitaries in attendance. This visit fittingly ended with Saporiti and his No-No Boy partner Emilia Halvorsen joining Mariachi Los Broncos onstage at Cal Poly Pomona to perform "La Banda Más Chingón en Wyoming" in tribute to those who had lived through detention, hardship, and uncertainty at the Fairplex just down the road.





# “Nitro ’66 Cannonball Blues”

— No-No Boy feat. The New Celestial String Band

## *A short personal essay:*

Growing up in Nashville, I never felt too at home attending the old-time folk music jams. They always seemed a little too academic, encyclopedic, and rigid—ironic, maybe, since I’m now an academic myself. I like the song-collecting aspect and I’ve always enjoyed the sound and traditional instrumentation of “old-time” music, but I never really got the community (which I realize are probably a lot of Folkways listeners). In truth, my discomfort comes from the same self-consciousness that plagued my entire youth, that of an Asian kid growing up in predominantly white spaces and always feeling like a peripheral misfit. My own Folkways recordings intentionally veer away from traditional-sounding acoustic “folk” music. I’m more interested in transforming and mutating (perhaps corrupting) America’s “roots” music than paying allegiance to it. I like to twist form and use the modern “folk” processes of sampling and electronic music production to create sounds that feel more authentic to my American folk experience, which is something deeply impure and scattered, like a mixtape of cultures. For me, pastiche and genre-hopping feel like a more authentic carrying-on of our folk lineage, much more so than putting on suspenders and playing a hundred-year-old guitar—no offense, y’all.

There’s also the fact that very few old American songs talk about what people who look like me, that is to say, people of Asian descent, dealt with in the 1800s and early 20th century. I want to know that shit. I’m not sure I’ll ever rid myself of the kind of racial discomfort I feel in all white spaces, but one thing I can do is write some songs that recover ignored histories of folk who looked like me and share them with people—or, in this case, rewrite songs.

This record, “Nitro ’66 Cannonball Blues,” is a variation on one of my favorite classic folk tunes, “Cannonball Blues” made popular by the Carter Family. It bends the Carter Family classic, a beautiful folk song centered around longing, distance, and the American railroad, in the direction of the criminally underrepresented Chinese immigrants who actually built the fucking railroad in the 1860s, foundational Americans only insofar as they laid the goddamn foundations of America. I like recording for Folkways because I know there’s a possibility that the next time the label does a compilation of train songs, this one might now be included, and that’s super cool for a folk music nerd like myself.

When doing research for this song (thanks Stanford Chinese Railworkers Project), there were many important facts and stories that I wanted to put in the lyric. First off, the Chinese comprised four-fifths of the workforce on the Central Pacific line! Yet there’s not a one in the famous Promontory Point photo celebrating the linking of the transcontinental railroad in May of 1869. Much like their fate in our folk music canon, these foundational American laborers were erased. Beyond their impressive numbers and strategic historical erasure, I was amazed by accounts of the toil and sheer daring of these jobs. I read about how men would be lowered down in baskets hanging off the Sierra Nevada’s granite cliffs, and how they would stick newly invented nitroglycerin into the rock, hopefully being pulled up just before they got blown to kingdom come. Hundreds of these men died in these unimaginable workplace conditions. Certainly, they are worthy of remembering, worthy of a song.

Although about half of my new verses are edited out of this recording for brevity, we had to end the song with one of my all-time favorite lyrics, "She's gone, she's solid gone." This line has always struck me as one of the most profoundly devastating lyrics in all of English songcraft. Solid gone... Damn, what a thing to say. So heavy. So final. That's how I end my version, but it's in a much different context. Several of the excluded verses detail the sad story of a former railroad worker who moved to Eureka, CA, in the 1870s. He gets caught up in the city's expulsion of all the Chinese in February of 1885, and it's along his deportation journey that he's singing this song to us, about how he helped build America and now they're kicking him out. And in the last verse, on a steamship to China, docked in San Francisco Bay, he hears a train whistle in the distance and he says, "Now, I'm gone. I'm solid gone." Study US immigration history, get to know some deportees, and that lyric "solid gone" cuts real deep, deep, deep.

Musically, the tune is sung in three-part harmony by myself, my partner Emilia, and Portland singer-songwriter Jacob Miller. The instrumental accompaniment is provided by my ragged banjo playing and less ragged bass playing. Not being able to leave that suitable orchestration well enough alone, I layered in samples of traditional Chinese instruments to create what I imagine an Asian Americana old-time band would sound like. This sonic melange is also a gesture to several AAPI instruments that played fundamental roles in American popular and folk music, most notably the slide/steel guitar (Hawaiian) and the "Chinese" tom-tom, among others. Also, I gotta be honest with you, it's never felt "authentic" to me to just play straight-ahead old-time-sounding music. Whenever I play with a "traditional" string band, it's really fun, but also it feels like doing whiteface. But this record feels good to me. The music itself is meant to play with ideas of sonic authenticity and larger concepts of cultural belonging. In any case, I hope it's an enjoyable new take on a favorite old song. I also hope it shines a bit of light on a deeply important American history we've done a good job of ignoring. Most importantly, now I have something to sing at the old-time jam, so lend me some suspenders.

— Dr. Julian Saporiti aka No-No Boy

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***P.S. For any real song collector/musicology heads out there, this is an abridged version of the historical route by which "Cannonball Blues" came to me:***

Round about the end of high school, I learned the tune "Cannonball Blues" from my friend Wes Langlois, a fantastic young folk musician who was obsessed with Nick Drake and Neil Young, renowned by his classmates for his virtuosic whistling and ukulele performances, and was the starting center on the state championship football team. Nowadays Wes plays with Chris Scruggs and Fats Kaplan and makes strange and wonderful lofi folk tapes, but at one point when we were younger, he had a brief but obsessive dalliance with the middle Tennessee old-time scene. He picked "Cannonball Blues" up from the Carter Family's version and does it pretty straight to some of their recordings. They of course didn't come up with it out of thin air. The song's origins, like most great folk songs, seem to come from several disparate tributaries including a mess of tunes about the assassination of President McKinley (in the Temple of Music, no less) and the long ride his assassinated corpse took "from Buffalo to Washington." There are also some lyrics pulled from blues and Black traditions that riddle the Carter Family version. I've heard the Carters themselves came by it from their frequent collaborator Lesley Riddle, the overlooked East Tennessee musician and musicologist whose foundational role in the birth of country music has been painfully overlooked on account of him being a Black man. In any case, it's a damn good song.

# “Nitro '66 Cannonball Eureka Expulsion Blues ” (full lyrics)

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Listen to the train coming down the track  
Built on blood, took the best years from my back  
Oh California, I'm'a leaving you

Came out to Eureka, settled down on 4th  
Good work as a ranch hand,  
now they're shouting me off the earth  
Chinee must go boys, Chinee must go

I'll tell you a little story since we got the time  
The railroad men they were scrambling back in '65  
From Omaha to Sacramento

Rich man Crocker, Central Pacific side  
Took all of them Chinese pulled em out  
of the placer mines  
They'll do just fine boys, they'll do just fine

Cutting out hard granite, hanging off Cape Horn  
Lowered down in baskets, set the fuse to burn  
Hang em high boys, hang em high

Oh, listen to that train coming down the line  
Built on blood and all of my lost time  
Oh California, I'm'a leaving you

I heard the big explosion over by camp 9  
Six men gone, foreman blown into the sky  
He sailed sky high, nothing left to find

The new god's power, I've seen it with my eyes  
That nitroglycerin ripped up the mountainside  
It shook me right, it shook me right

Never knew a winter as back in '66  
Tunneled through the snow with  
our shovels and our picks  
Just let em die boys, just let em die

The old god's finger touched the mountain cold  
An avalanche on Christmas buried all of us below  
Plenty more for hire boys, plenty more for hire

Four in every five and a thousand of us died  
But not one in the picture come Utah '69  
Oh what a lie boys, but what a line

Listen to the train coming down the track  
Built on blood, took the best years from my back  
And now I'm gone, I'm solid gone



**No-No Boy & Special Guest**

JULIAN SAPORITI – vocals, guitar, banjo production  
 EMILIA HALVORSEN – harmony vocals  
 JACOB MILLER – harmony vocals on “Nitro ‘66  
 Cannonball Blues”

**Mariachi Los Broncos & Special Guests**

JESSIE VALLEJO – director, violin  
 EVELYN CRUZ – violin  
 JOSUE RAMIREZ – violin  
 HEAVYN RIVERA – flute  
 CRYSTAL LEE – flute  
 CHRISTIAN SOLIS – clarinet  
 BRYAN CRUZ – clarinet  
 JOSEPH AVILA – trumpet  
 MIKAYLA MENDEZ – trumpet  
 JOEZEH RAMIREZ – guitarrón  
 SALLY HAWKRIDGE – guitarrón  
 ALONDRA REYES – vihuela  
 MELISSA DIAZ – vihuela  
 ANTHONY REYNOLDS – guitar  
 JOHNNY MUNOZ – guitar  
 DAVID GONZALEZ – guitar  
 LIRIO HERNANDEZ – guitar  
 ADRIAN VEGA – tambourine

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 Mixed by Seth Boggess  
 Mastered by Mike Monseur  
 Annotated by Julian Saporiti  
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