No-No Boy's *1975*: Julian Saporiti's ambitious effort

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No-No Boy is a project of musician and researcher Julian Saporiti. His newest album *1975* was released on the Smithsonian Folkways Recording label. The album is also part of his doctoral dissertation in the American Studies program at Brown University.

The band's name is taken from John Okada's 1957 novel *No-No Boy*, set during and after the forced internment of over 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II. Those in the internment camps who answered "No" on a 1943 "loyalty" questionnaire—to question 27 (Willingness to serve in the US military wherever ordered?) and question 28 (Unqualified allegiance to the United States?)—were known as "no-no boys." The "no-no boys" often received the harshest treatment at the camps, and at least 300 were sent to federal prison from the camps for refusing to serve in the military.

As a work of folk music, *1975* is a collection of stories and recollections connected to actual people and events, though sometimes fictionally rendered. Saporiti's academic research includes conducting interviews and making recordings of sounds from historical sites that he uses at times in the songs. While the conditions of the interned Japanese Americans form a through line, the music also takes up the experiences of East Asian and Latin American immigrants and children of immigrants to the US.

1975 is a reference to the year the Vietnam War ended. Saporiti's family on his mother's side fled Vietnam for Paris after the People's Army of Vietnam and National Liberation Front forces captured Saigon in April 1975. Later his mother moved to Nashville, where his American father worked in the country music industry. The opening song, "St. Denis or Bangkok, from a Hotel Balcony," loosely sketches this family route around a dirge for his late grandmother, musically constructed through a sparse electronic keyboard and Saporiti's restrained singing.

The album's musicality is one of its strengths. The variety of styles and the confidence of the production quickly make themselves apparent. Saporiti, a talented musician, studied at the Berklee School of Music and performed in rock and folk bands in Nashville's music scene before going into academia. In the more up-tempo songs, the convergence of influences—jazz, country, rock, electronic—gives added life to the stories and are often layered in thoughtful harmonies.

The album's most intriguing song, "The Best God Damn Band in Wyoming," recounts the experiences of the George Igawa Orchestra at the Heart Mountain internment camp near Powell, Wyoming. The song adopts the point of view of the band's last surviving member, Joy Teraoka. Driven by sharp mandolin and guitar playing and a buoyant horn section, the song gives a moving sense of what life was like for a teenager singing with the group:

"Under machine guns they danced behind barbed wire
At below zero, it meant something to sing
Angelenos mixing up with farm kids in the choir
The best god damn band in Wyoming."

Another intriguing song, "Close Your Eyes and Dream of Flowers," takes up the plight of refugees in detainment camps at the US-Mexico border. The song's title refers to what a mother encourages her daughter to do while waiting in a processing line for 40 hours at a cold south Texas border center. Over cloud-like electronic chords, a haunting refrain keeps repeating "Imagine no end to the road…" In Spanish, "At the border you realize history tends to repeat itself: A child is a child, a cage is a cage, the feelings, the anguish, they are all the same."

Another evocative song, "Imperial Twist," tells the story of a teenage rock band in Saigon. The narrator makes references to US bombs going off mid-concert—cutting short a rendition of Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze"—and his desire to "change the world"

through music.

Saporiti's songs are not particularly specific in their details. While this approach can be intriguing at times, it also has its weak sides. A blurring of time and space occurs on many of the songs, in which narratives move in and out of historical events and mix with a singer's inner dialogue, without explanation.

For example, on the musically plaintive "Gimme Chills," Saporiti sings from the perspective of someone considering the history of the Philippines. Events bound up with Spanish colonialism and American imperialism are identified throughout the song but never really explained. It ends in a somewhat underwhelming reference to the five-month-long Marawi assault in 2017 ("Give me Coca-Cola, Chuck Taylors, and an Apple watch / Give me your Asian manhood / Give me Duterte's sober will / Black flags in Marawi, gimme chills").

"Honouliuli," which takes its title from a Japanese American internment camp in Hawaii, opens like an island love song ("And I'd love to waste your day / If you'd love to waste mine, too"), but shifts to making references to colonial oppression on the island, to resistance figures like Fred Makino, who led a 1909 labor strike on the island, and to US "military might."

"Tell Hanoi I Love Her" grapples with Saporiti's conflicting emotions about his family's history in Vietnam. Family members collaborated with the French and American occupations. His great-grandfather was a South Vietnamese politician, who was killed during the 1968 Tet Offensive. He sings of his bitter aunt in the US who now votes for Donald Trump, but how Saporiti, on the other hand, "named my Chrysler after Ho Chi Minh" and sometimes thinks "the most communist things."

Without Saporiti's liner notes, which provide the motivations for many of his songs, it is more difficult to be emotionally grabbed by the various historical and cultural experiences. In interviews Saporiti, unfortunately, views this as a strength, citing the various references as "Trojan horses" that will make the listener go back and learn more about the historical facts.

"History is a kind of a mess that doesn't make sense, and that's kind of where I leave it. And that's kind of why songs are such a wonderful way to deal with it because you can just sit with the mess. And you can sing through the mess. And maybe by doing that you can shine light on what's happening today, when it does repeat itself. When these echoes become resonant."

This outlook is expressed explicitly on the song "Miss Burma," sung from the perspective of a woman named Chibby who made it out of the Japanese American internment camps. "There are no bridges to the past / Don't fool yourself when you look back / The time is up, the years are gone / You have for now but not for long / Pass it on and pass it by."

To "just sit with the mess" of history is not the best advice. Such a course of action might not lead to anything. In any case, history is clearly not simply a senseless "mess," because Saporiti consistently returns to questions of colonialism, imperialism and popular resistance. *He* obviously sees some "sense," some lawfulness, in the historical process. The problem is that he has only done part of the work, the more obvious part. He has not worked through the more complex questions—what happened to the Russian Revolution (and, for that matter, the Chinese and Vietnamese Revolutions)? Was there an alternative to Stalinism and Maoism? What accounts for US militaristic aggression and the poison of patriotism? Is there a social force that can combat and put an end to the misery, inequality and injustice experienced by so many, including immigrants and refugees?

Some of this "working through" takes place in songs such as "The Best God Damn Band in Wyoming." Wherever the concrete social details and era are more sharply, specifically presented, and the music is full of life, the songs have more of an emotional impact. One certainly derives a sense of the injustice that took place against Japanese Americans during World War II, with an eye toward the injustice taking place at the US border today.

That Saporiti has made an album addressing difficult historical events and experiences indicates his antennae are pointed in the right direction. For this to bear the richest fruit will mean following the social and historical processes to the end, to the essential currents and trends that shaped the 20th century and beyond.