

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

SIMON TAM

A SLANTED AND ENCHANTED LIFE IN PUBLIC

By Andrew Hamlin
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Photo credit: Robbie Glen

He's owned a record label, owned a music promotion company, and owned and ran a clothing store. He's played in several rock bands, coordinating concerts, albums, and videos. He's masterminded charity drives. He's no lawyer, but he spearheaded a legal action that went all the way to the Supreme Court and set legal precedent. He's even working on a new series of Asian American music videos.

For all of that, though, Simon Tam seems low-key, modest, and even humorous about his accomplishments. Tam, whose band The Slants have a video retrospective airing now on AsianAmericanMovies.com (AAM.tv), and who's also introduced the Asian American Music Video Fest that launched on Feb. 12 at the same site, notes wryly that his early accomplishments, at least, seem more impressive on paper than in reality.

"It was pretty easy to start a music promotion company to book shows because so few people were doing it," he recalled. "Same with a local record label and the vintage clothing shop (it was in a town of 40,000, there wasn't a lot going on). At some point, I just developed an attitude of 'let's just try it and see what happens.' Until you ask, the answer is always no so you might as well see if something is possible.

"I think that's probably what makes me an inherent optimist. I don't think optimists look for the positive in everything. I think that they just see the possibilities, instead of obstacles. When I think about the hardships that my parents had to endure, everything else seems pretty menial. So I might as well make the time and energy that I have count!"

Tam's a wanderer by nature, but he grew up in San Diego. He remarks that he had no cause to think about race, until he entered kindergarten. He'd been working through study books for several years before arriving at the school, and he tested well ahead of kindergarten levels.

Then, he says, his parents took a meeting with the guidance counselor, a meeting he himself wouldn't learn about for decades. Their son was obviously very bright, said the counselor. But he would require ESL classes to emphasize mastering English. They were not to speak to him in any



The Slants Collection | Credit: Jady Bates

language except English, to help him assimilate into mainstream culture. To this day, he cannot read or write in any of the three languages his parents mostly spoke at home, including Mandarin, Taiwanese, and Cantonese.

"Aside from occasionally attending the Taiwanese Lutheran church that my grandparents were a part of, I wasn't really involved with the Asian American community," he said. "After numerous experiences with bullying, I didn't want anything to do with my heritage, so I shied away from things like the Asian Pacific Islander club and wasn't aware of anything that promoted Asian American culture until after I moved away.

"In general, Asian American culture is fairly young as a movement, especially in arts and community organizing. Many of the more notable events and organizations, like the San Diego Asian American Film Festival (now Pacific Arts), didn't come into existence until the 2010s. And any existing cultural organizations mostly focused on the Asian-ness (i.e., cultural heritage such as Lunar New Year) rather than the distinct American-ness of distinct Asian American culture. Now, it seems to be more prolific, inclusive, and intentional of other identities.

Music came early. At 2, he was clowning and dancing with a guitar on top of the living room coffee table. The children's records set out for him wouldn't do. He moved over to his father's collections of The Rolling Stones, The Beatles, and Elvis Presley. His brother gave him a Depeche Mode cassette for Christmas, and he took the tape, dark menacing lyrics and all, to show-and-tell at school.

Seattle's own Duff McKagan, who played in the band Guns N' Roses, inspired Tam to settle on the bass guitar for his main instrument. He left college just short of graduation to work with a Portland, Oregon band called Stivs, whom he'd befriended in California.

He left the Stivs to work on his idea for an all-Asian band. This band eventually became The Slants. He knew the name would sound provocative, but, he says, the band was determined to repurpose the longstanding racial slur.

"When I was first starting the band, I'd ask my non-Asian friends, what's something that you think all Asians have in common?" he explained. "'Slanted eyes,' they'd often say, which I thought was interesting because it isn't true.

"I always associated my slanted eyes with shame. And since Asians are the

most-bullied demographic in U.S. schools, I knew I wasn't alone. I wanted to change the association and make it about self-empowerment and identity, to address the false stereotype, and to honor the work of Asian American pioneers who were reappropriating terms to create solidarity. Plus, it just sounded like a cool band name.

Tam didn't think much of the band name beyond what he'd meant for it, until he tried, on the advice of an attorney, to register the band's name as a trademark. The United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) turned him down, on the grounds that "slants" were disparaging to people of Asian descent.

Tam took the case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, arguing that the USPTO's decision violated his right to free speech. He didn't speak before the judges—only the attorney of record can do that, and he has no law degree. But he worked intensively with the attorneys all the way down the line. The case took roughly eight years to settle, but the Supreme Court ruled unanimously in Tam's favor.

He's especially proud of the charity work The Slants have done over the years. Causes include rescuing refugees from North Korea, raising money and educational awareness for the disparity rates that Asian women face when it comes to cancer, anti-bullying programs, working with Make-a-Wish or other youth projects, doing anti-racism work, and working with Japanese American museums to teach the history of incarceration camps.

"I'm most proud of the work being done by The Slants Foundation because it allows us to initiate scalable social change by elevating the work of other artists in ways that we couldn't do alone by just being a band," he concluded. "Each week, I see how our efforts are helping others find expression and how I can help other artists in ways that I wish I had when I was getting started. It's helping ease the road for others." ■

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HAPPY LUNAR NEW YEAR!

May you have joy, health and prosperity in the Year of the OX!

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