

ALIVE

An Asian American troublemaker takes on the Supreme Court

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New memoir 'Slanted' details Simon Tam's journey to keep his band's moniker and fight against racist hijacking

Simon Tam never thought of "slant" as an ethnic slur. He knew it mostly as a self-referential term of empowerment in the Asian American community. But when he'd ask his white friends what all Asians had in common, they'd usually say, "Slanted eyes."

"I thought that was interesting, because Asians are not the only people on the planet with slanted eyes," said Tam, who eventually decided to further reclaim the term and use it as a moniker for his Asian American dance-rock band, the Slants.

"'Slant' is also a musical term, so I thought it could be this fun play on words," Tam said. "It was shortly after starting the band that I realized how much it meant to other people. It really means something significant to them to be able to reclaim this as a point of pride [instead of] a term of shame and embarrassment."

Tam also came up playing punk-rock and was a fan of bands with controversial names like the Slits. He thought of boundary-pushing hip-hop groups, too, like N.W.A. "The term itself isn't racist. There are slant angles. ... It's only harmful when it becomes hijacked by racists," Tam said. "We should be the ones who get to decide and seize this conversation."

Still, Tam had no idea when he and his bandmates decided on a moniker that it would eventually land him in front of the Supreme Court in a landmark free speech case. He chronicles that journey in a new book *Slanted: How an Asian American Troublemaker Took on the Supreme Court*, and on Saturday, Sept. 14, at the Book Loft in German Village, he'll read from the memoir and will also perform songs alongside Slants guitarist Joe x. Jiang.

Tam had all sorts of emotions when going in front of the Supreme Court. For one, it was intimidating. The government had more than 30 attorneys while he had his one pro-bono lawyer. "Also, it's just a weird thing to have Supreme Court justices say my name and talk about my band," Tam said.

And if he did win, would his victory empower racists? Representatives of the U.S. government were essentially branding him as racist, even while Tam was involved in anti-racist initiatives. "It was negatively impacting my social justice work," he said.

Along the way, the court case made for strange bedfellows. When he eventually won, all the news headlines touted the implications for Dan Snyder's NFL team, the Washington Redskins. And everyone from Libertarian think tank the Cato Institute to the progressive ACLU backed Tam's cause. "A diverse set of people were all agreeing to defend the First Amendment," Tam said. "It was encouraging and inspiring to see groups on the far left and the far right agreeing on this case."

All along the way, Tam had to keep the Slants going for the case to continue, but in November the band will play its final live show. "It's bittersweet," he said, "but we've been doing it for 13 years. I'm pretty tired. ... I don't know if I would have kept it going if not for the court case."

While the live performance aspect of the band is ending, Tam still plans to record music with the Slants, and last year he also created the nonprofit Slants Foundation, which provides scholarships to artists incorporating activism into their work. "I still want to empower Asian Americans and artists," he said.

A forthcoming project is also stretching Tam in other ways: He and his bandmates are composing music and working with a Broadway writer/director on a theater project in hopes of making a show out of Tam's life.