



Simon Tam

HIDDEN HERO OF HISTORY

Listen to the story: <https://jonincharacter.com/simon-tam/>

Simon Tam is an American author, musician, activist, and entrepreneur. He is best known as the bassist and founder of the Asian American dance-rock band, the Slants®.

Simon Tam was born in San Diego, California, and discovered his love for music as a child. He would stage concerts for his family using his dad's guitar before he knew how to play. Simon developed a deep appreciation for pop music through exploring his father's record collection. Eventually, the bass became his instrument of choice.

Growing up, Simon experienced bullying, often because of his Asian American heritage. He also witnessed that his family members were treated similarly. Music became a safe space for Simon, helping him cope with these difficult experiences.

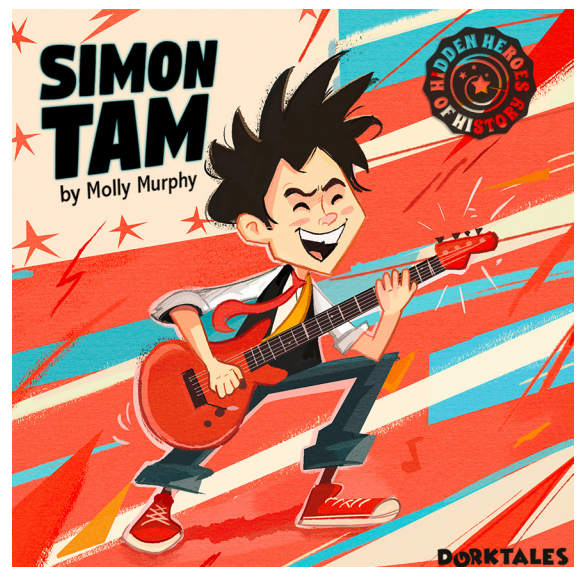
Simon went to college on a scholarship to study philosophy and religion, but he soon realized his true calling was music. He left college and moved to Portland, Oregon, where he joined a band called The Stivs. However, it was with his next band, The Slants, that Simon's music career truly took off.

Simon noticed a significant lack of Asian American representation in entertainment— including the music, television, and film industries. He decided to change this by forming an Asian American band called The Slants. The band's name was a bold choice, intended to reclaim the term "slants," often used to mock and hurt Asian people. Simon aimed to turn the negative stereotype into something positive and empowering.

However, when Simon tried to trademark the band's name, the United States Patent and Trademark Office rejected his request, claiming the name was racist. This means that they determined that the word was being used to humiliate a race, even though Simon and his band wanted to take away its power to hurt.

Despite this setback, Simon was determined to challenge the decision, knowing that other non-Asian people had been allowed to trademark offensive terms in the past. He saw the rejection as unfair and fought back by taking the case to court. Simon's battle was an act of activism, as he sought to stand up for free speech and fair representation.

Simon shared evidence to fight back against the decision, like testimonies from dictionary experts, community surveys, and even letters from Asian American leaders. But his appeal to get the decision overturned was rejected multiple times.



However, he persisted, and after an eight-year fight, the case reached the Supreme Court of the United States, the highest court in America. Over a thousand people showed up on the steps of the courthouse to show their support for Simon. People even spent the night outside to make sure they were there for the result.

In the end, every Justice—or judge—on the Supreme Court ruled in Simon’s favor, allowing him to trademark the name “The Slants”. Ruth Bader Ginsberg was one of the Justices who helped with the decision. She said:

“Dance rock band frontman Simon Tam sought to trademark The Slants. His aim was to reappropriate a term long used to disparage a minority group and to render the term a badge of pride. All of us agreed.”

Simon’s victory was a milestone for his band and representation and free expression in the arts. But Simon Tam didn’t stop with that victory. He continued touring with The Slants until 2019. Then, he co-founded The Slants Foundation, an organization that uses the arts and activism to change the world.

Simon’s work has been highlighted in 129 countries in media features from The New York Times, the Washington Post, Rolling Stone, National Public Radio (NPR), and more. He works with world leaders and big companies to encourage inclusivity, and he joined other celebrities as part of an anti-bullying campaign with the President of the United States, Barack Obama. He’s helped other musicians legally protect free artistic expression.

Today, Simon continues to work in numerous art forms, like storytelling, composing, theater, and more. And he’s only just beginning. May his life encourage us all to “Sing from the Heart!”



The Dorktales Storytime podcast episode on Simon Tam, Hidden Hero of History, was inspired by the Red Comet Press children’s book:

[We Sing From the Heart](#)

How The Slants® Took Their Fight for Free Speech to the Supreme Court

By Mia Wenjen

Illustrations: Victor Bizarre Gómez

Glossary

Activist – A person who works to bring about political or social change, often by standing up for the rights of others or for a cause they believe in.

Bass (Instrument) – A musical instrument with strings that makes deep, low sounds. It's usually played in bands to keep the rhythm. Simon plays the bass guitar.

Bullying – When someone is mean to another person on purpose, over and over, hurting their feelings or making them feel bad about themselves. Simon experienced bullying because of his heritage.

Entrepreneur – A person who starts their own business or creates something new. Simon is an entrepreneur because he founded his band and The Slants Foundation.

Heritage – The culture, traditions, and history that are passed down from previous generations. Simon is proud of his Asian American heritage.

Trademark – A legal way to protect the name of a brand or product so that no one else can use it. Simon tried to trademark the name of his band, The Slants.

Reclaim – To take back something that was used in a harmful way and turn it into something positive. Simon and his band wanted to reclaim the term “slants” so that it no longer hurt Asian Americans.

Representation – Showing people from different backgrounds, cultures, or communities in movies, music, and media so that everyone feels included. Simon wanted more representation for Asian Americans in the music industry.

Supreme Court – The highest court in the United States, which makes important decisions about laws. Simon's case went all the way to the Supreme Court.

Free Speech – The right to say or express what you believe without being punished. Simon fought for free speech when he wanted to trademark The Slants.

Foundation – An organization set up to support important causes or help others. Simon started The Slants Foundation to use music and art for activism.

Give it Some Thought

- Why was it important to Simon to reclaim the word “Slants” and turn it into something positive?
- How did music help Simon cope with bullying, and how can creative outlets help us during tough times?
- Why do you think it’s important to have different cultures and backgrounds represented in music, TV, and movies?
- What kept Simon going during his eight-year fight for justice, and why is perseverance important when facing challenges?
- How can you use your passions or hobbies to make a difference in your community or the world?

Use Your Imagination

Here are some fun and educational activities that will help you understand and relate to Simon Tam’s story:

Create a Band Name

Activity: Come up with a name for your own pretend band. Try to choose a name that reflects something special or important about who you are, just like Simon Tam did with “The Slants.” As an extra challenge, design a poster or album cover to go with your band name.

Goal: To help you understand the power of words and self-expression.

Music as a Safe Space

Activity: Listen to your favorite songs and draw or color how the music makes you feel. How can this music help you feel better, just like music helped Simon feel better when he faced bullying?

Goal: To explore how music can be a tool to express your emotions.

Using Talents to Make a Positive Impact

Activity: Think about your talents and come up with a community project or a way that you can use your skills to help others. Write or draw what this would look like.

Goal: Explore how using your talents could make a positive impact like Simon did by starting The Slants Foundation.