

# Pairing 010: Ataraxia Dian Hong x “No Moon” by Spoon Jackson & Nicolas Snyder

In which we get rattled and repaired by arresting soundscapes and reminded that we are not our worst doubts.



ALEX DWYER  
APR 23, 2024

But first, a story.

Nearly two years ago, I walked into [Tea at Shiloh](#) for the first time. I was alone. Filled with far more doubt than hope about what awaited me for the evening. I committed the cardinal tea lad sin of bringing tea to a tea house, an offering meant to short-circuit my spirals of misguided expectation. But also an offering that represented my inability to resist sharing all that boils over in the kettles of my heart.

You see, I had just returned from my first trip to [Yame](#). The region had whisked around my heart strings for years. And, after visiting two other regions in Kyushu (Sonogi & Ureshino), I had acquired a full 2 Kilos of new tea. I returned to Los Angeles lit up head to toe like a Christmas tea tree—my arms might as well have been confetti cannons ready to spray deep-steamed, umami-leaning sencha and tamaryokucha leaves skyward for anyone willing to dance with me in the green rain. In short, I could not help myself. These teas were too fresh. Too delicious. They howled to be shared and so I shared them.

After some lively conversation deserving of its own post, I shoved several tins of that good-good into the hands of my hosts—Shiloh and Ahdom—poured up some of their titular Moonlight White and retreated into a corner pocket of their singularly crafted space. I had brought with me a journal and a book. Being there alone, I figured I would just melt into the comforts and become one with the cushions in a liquidy way one can only fully melt into away from home.

And that was when Nic and I struck up a conversation.

I remember much of what we discussed. Life. Los Angeles. The view from porches and backyards. The mountains. Japan. Tea. Woodworking. Somehow, music escaped the conversation. I would only discover on later visits to Shiloh—first through a gong meditation that rang in me sharp, cathartic contact with the pains of my slain mother and later through a more meandering evening of his equally ethereal and cosmic soundscapes—that Nic composed music for a living.

By fall he had released Spell of Remembrance, an instrumental album whose opening track “Veil of Forgetting, Mother” echoed against the hollowed out caverns of the same coronary wounds Nic helped re-expose to oxygen with the gong meditation months earlier.

Keener listeners than I may more exactly survey what it is that his compositions contain. Fibrous, natural woods and long chimes cascading through percussions. The flashy glitches and pattering footsteps of what he programs his machines to contribute. Those captivating waters, winds and bug buzzy lurchings he captures from the fields with the glee of a kid turning a glass jar into a firefly lightshow. To listen to his wild, under-the-mossy-log arrangements is to go on those rare kinds of hiking courses that forever change the way you look the ecosystem, your place in it, and how those two holes on the side of your head aren't ears after all. They are hang gliders for gutsy musical gust rides.

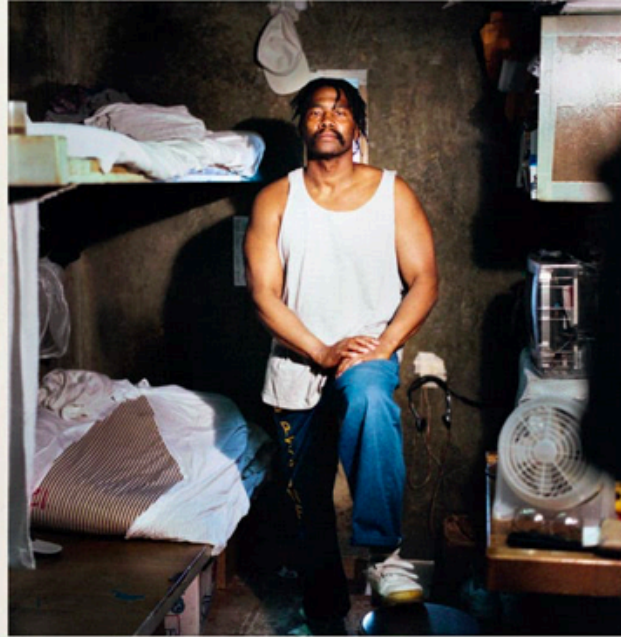
Earlier this year, from what I gather from Nic's posts, a groundswell of attention for his [soundtrack to the animated series Scavengers Reign](#) led to a streaming release. Whether or not you've ever seen the show (I haven't) strung across the track list are the same breath-taking tiny-moment dewy Snyder web-weavings— at once so spaciously simple to slurp in and yet so staggeringly complex in their construction—only they've been enlarged and charged with narrative punch. They race. They pant. They twist and crescendo and leave you on your knees at those kinds of losses that are greater than your greatest gains. They harvest you, carve you up, and devour you only to replant you again at an angle better suited to the sun-starved strains in your genes.

And, if you're like me, you sort of find yourself wondering how Nic accomplishes these feats of sonic emotive surgery with the same precision a pomegranate sews its seeds into its flesh. I have no answers. Better to investigate what has been coded in the seemingly repurposed blindfolds of woven fabric in the lamp dangling in the raised room of the Tea at Shiloh Annex. Secrets might be stitched on the undersides.

Because Nic made that too—which explains why I assumed he made home furnishings for a living after we first met. And now I'm sure it's clear. He's the sort of renaissance man you came for. The surfers and skaters would say it better than I but we'd probably all undersell it. The guy rips:

And although I confess to feeling urges to pair his past releases with teas before today it was the release of his Nic's latest project that has forced my pen.

Spencer Jackson



NO MOO

Better to let Nic's most recent collaborator incarcerated poet [Spoon Jackson](#) — crack open the last-week-released [No Moon](#). Here are the opening lines of the first track “Look Away:”

It took a life sentence to show me how to love today

It took a life sentence to show me how to look away

Joining the constellation of great phone-recording-from-prison lyrical gymnastics of years past—from [Shyne's verse on the Confessions II Remix](#) two decades ago to the late Drakeo The Ruler's mid-pandemic feat from Men's Central in DTLA [Thanks For Using GTL](#)—[No Moon](#) is a message-in-a-bottle plea of artistic audacity from inside the walls of the American prison industrial complex. The product of decades behind bars laboring over a pen, Spoon Jackson's words and delivery contain the blunt truths and nothing-to-prove posture of an artist in chains walking the balance beam of forgiveness without a rope over a canyon. Nic's instrumentals work like carefully measured flames, sparking alive the poetic stanzas into lines of incense smoke, rising and then dispersing in the starry skies spanning what was, what is, and what might still be. The brocade of straightforward confessionals and primal vibrations allow Nic and Spoon Jackson to give those who stayed up for the sunrise after-the-after-party of Jaime XX and Gil Scott-Heron's *We're New Here* with an equally dissimilar but perfect collaborative sky. Without the grainy, grizzly words riding the at vivid audio color palate, I'm not sure the shades of major sufferings and sparkling of tiny joys could be illuminated or textured as wholly.

For all the confinements—pun unintended—a project like this would face, it also manages to squeeze out range. There is the levity of “Dance.” The Black-mirror-grade techno-critique of “Computer Lady.” The torturous despair of “Love Poem” and the wrenching brutality of the titular track. Listen to “Touch and Go” three times in a row and tell me you don't choke up or grind your molars into each other like they are mortars or both at once. But it was listening to Gypsy Woman that lined up the sounds and the tastes in my teacup the clearest.

Am I crazy to hear the tea on Spoon Jackson lips?

This song made my mind travel back to my first-ever time being served tea in the Global Tea Hut style aglow in mid-morning beams of light at The Ojai Tea Hut in November 2022. I likely listened to Nic's music on the drive up, seeing how "Veil of Forgetting, Mother" would eventually make it onto the year-end-best-of-mix. I was served tea that day by another musician, Mia Maestro. In the aftermath, Mia told us how she sometimes served tea at prisons, which was an important initial crack in the wall I had put up between what I perceived the GTH community to be and all the it actually offers.

In the end, I was as wrong about Global Tea Hut as I was about Tea at Shiloh. I thought one was a cult and the other was a tik-tok hypebeast fad. That both are so wholly alive in their own universes proves to me not just how wrong I consistently am (especially about the things I care about mind you) but also the wide range of tea itself. The best tea I've had needs to be as steeped in the stuff of sages as it does in the world of dust from whence most of us came and will return to.

Because I sit here wondering what we're all wondering: did Mia serve tea to Spoony Jackson in a prison on some fateful day only for him to turn around and write a poem about tea? Who else could talking about breaking and healing hearts in that spirit if not someone hip to kintsugi?

This is all pure speculation. Blame my extrapolations on the dian hong. I recommend drinking in this album with Ataraxia—a tea included with the GTH freshly released Spring 2024 issue—because it packs power and wisdom but also frailty. There is a collapsibility to black teas from Yunnan that doesn't always come through in Chinese hongcha from elsewhere. It's like a trap door, where so much sensation can creep in. Like the poetic confessions of a man who regifted himself the dignity of his own art, the showing of weakness, that permeability and permission, becomes its greatest strength. Call it another episode of what the black and gold bring out of each other in the leaves and let Nic's music crash over you like a clothes-free visit to a mountain waterfall at dawn on an early spring day.

Better to let Spoon Jackson close this out. Once more, from later on in "Look Away:"

It took a life sentence to show me how to forgive

It took a life sentence to show me how to live

Lest we forget—as I fumble through my assigned gongfu tea experiments comparing pitcher pours and those straight out of the pot—that the bombs continue to fall requiring that heroic, unfathomable, miraculous rescues take place. These rigid, auto-pilot mechanisms of orphan making and dream deleting and dignity erasing churn along without so much as an acknowledgement that a possibility could exist that they could be malfunctioning. Despite so many screaming the obvious truths otherwise.

There are new moons and full moons and half-moons—but take a sip, take a listen, and spare a thought for those for whom there are no moons left. If you simply cannot, then turn up at the next intersection and follow Mr. Seago in creating your own Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude.

I'll save what remains in my pen for another day and let a Spoon Jackson offer this week's poetic counsel.