FROM CASCADE HORIZON BAND, BEND, OR — TO COSTA RICA

Hot Jazz
By Helen L. Keefe

The Papagayo is on the prowl. This Costa Rican wind reminds me of growing up in Southern California with the “East Wind,” or the Santa Anas, exquisitely, accurately nailed by detective writer Raymond Chandler:

“There was a desert wind blowing that night. It was one of those hot dry Santa Anas that come down through the mountain passes and curl your hair and make your nerves jump and your skin itch.”

There is Papagayo this day, and all last night, carrying the village’s flotsam and jetsam down the dirt road. A bedraggled palm frond, a coffee-colored coconut husk, a few banana leaves, some sugar cane ash, a harried chicken or two.

My itchy skin tells me it’s time to practice.

I drag out the old trumpet. A decade ago I brought it here during our yearly trip so I can keep up with my Cascade Horizon band mates in Central Oregon. It was my younger brother George’s trumpet, and shows the scars of traveling around with a middle schooler. The bell is crimped and dented, the lacquer peckmarked, the mouthpiece surprisingly usable despite its scraggily appearance.

The case, to match the trumpet, is that standard student case — a burlap-looking surface that has been worn through at every edge. Hardware is rusted to a drab dusty gold. The latches still latch, though their springs are shot.

Inside the case, the red velveteen is ratty, the trumpet shape imprinted, the form somewhat crumpled, but it still smells the way the band room did when an older brother took his 10-year-old sister to high school band practice with him — and I was hooked.

I thought George acquired the horn new, until I went down the rabbit hole of online research. It took a while to make out the legend on the bell:

Ambassador – Made by – F.E. OLDS & SON. – Los Angeles – Calif

George started band in 1960, yet Olds moved its factory to Fullerton in the mid 1950s. If it were new, should it have been labeled “Fullerton”? Any input from trumpet gurus out there is appreciated. I can only agree with these comments on trumpetherald.com, a forum for us horn aficionados, describing the Olds Ambassador:

“This is one of the easiest playing, most responsive horns I have ever played.”

“The Ambassador was the Sherman tank of trumpets.”

The fancy print on the bell looks like it was pinpricked onto the metal and reading is made more difficult by the age and condition. So it is a perfect candidate for New Horizon music — a well worn 50-plus, showing its age but quite eager to play.

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And oh, does it play.

Every year when I open the case and blow that first note, I am surprised by the mellow tone it produces for me. Perhaps it is the horn. Perhaps it is the hot and humid weather.

Perhaps I am my truest trumpet self here. I've always been a timid player but Costa Rica does not let me be. My wife calls it a very acoustically live place.

Building materials for this tropical climate are as light as the clothing, so sound travels and music seeps and dances from every open door and window. There is a “national beat” that is impossible to put into words, but which every one of you percussionists would be itching to play within minutes.

Small businesses come and go like the tide in this gritty little tourist town. One year a tiny building next to the grocery store mysteriously became the “Costa Rican School of Music.” I took the old horn down and stood on the gravel driveway for a photo.

From grade school through high school I played trombone. But I was intrigued by George’s trumpet, which sat around tempting me. As George transitioned from band to sports, I snagged the horn and learned the basic old B-flat scale from his lesson books.

I put my trombone away after high school, dragging it out a few times for pep bands at schools where I taught. When I turned 50, I knew I wanted to play more. But I wanted something lighter to lug around than that trombone.

About that time, my aunt gave me her student trumpet — a Conn Symphony 26B from around 1927. I learned enough more to play a few hymns at church and decided to get serious, take a few lessons, and join the community band. That led to a New Horizons group, and that led to a jazz band. When we moved to a different state, I looked up the local New Horizons Band, and found some trumpet mentors along the way. I go to jazz camp every year, and dream that my sound will be as hot as that Costa Rican horn.

Just as there is muscle memory in our fingers when we play, there is music memory in our heart as well. When I play I hear everyone who played my horn before me. I recall my band mates from grade school and high school.

I remember my band teacher, and my parents who must have paid for our horns through many installments while raising seven kids. I see and listen to my aunt as a 12-year-old marching and joking with her friends.

I recall the few times I played a piece, or a run, or even one note, as perfectly as I am able, and I feel again how that felt. I sit with my mentors, present and past and am grateful. Our instruments are so much more than the materials from which they are made. We hold them and play them. They hold us and carry us along on roads we couldn’t imagine in sixth grade.

It’s a mighty wind that blows through town, and a beautiful one that flows through us.