



## BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith  
tony@tonybeckwith.com

## High School Sweethearts

1958 was a watershed year for me. My alma mater, the British Schools, opened its new high school campus in Carrasco, and I was among the happy seniors who were moved to the spacious new edifice on the outskirts of Montevideo. The modern two-story building had been completed just in time and still smelled of fresh cement and paint as we settled into our new classrooms. After spending years cooped up at the school's original premises in a densely populated residential neighbourhood, we now looked out at lush green playing fields stretching almost as far as the eye could see under an unobstructed sky. The sense of space and opportunity was intoxicating.

Equally intoxicating was the sudden influx of new students, most of them Americans, whose parents had come to Uruguay for a variety of reasons. These girls and boys brought with them the contemporary attitudes and accoutrements of teenage life in the United States, many of which we Anglo kids found extraordinary and fascinating, in equal measure. I should explain that, by comparison, we locals were a very conservative bunch. We were also a very close-knit group who'd known each other since kindergarten and had grown up together. Our parents—who were all affiliated in one way or another with the British Community—socialized with each other, and my friends and I were more like an extended family than school-mates. In time I came to understand that those young Americans arrived in Uruguay not knowing what to expect, and that we seemed just as strange and appealing to them as they did to us.

What they did not find so appealing was the school's dress code. We Anglos had grown up wearing the British-style uniform and thought nothing of it. But some of the new arrivals, who were used to choosing what they wore to school, considered it an outrageous imposition. The girls, especially, protested bitterly about the pleated green tunic, demure white shirt, and tie they were now expected to wear. Not to mention the odious bloomers that were de rigueur under the tunic! But everyone eventually settled down and got on with their new lives.

It didn't take long for locals and newcomers to become friends in the way that kids naturally do, especially when there's so much to share. Anglo girls were soon wearing bobby socks and putting coins in their loafers; boys from California and Utah and Texas were learning how to bowl

a cricket ball and play rugby. I took to rubbing handfuls of Brylcreem into my hair and wearing it slicked back in a duck tail. I thought it made me look like Elvis, but my mother said it just made a mess of my collars. One of the most important things the Americans brought was music. Specifically, the latest pop songs—on 45 RPM records that were carried in little metal cases—and portable record players that let us listen to favourite tunes anytime, anywhere. We were, naturally, intrigued by our new partners' styles on the dance floor. Like my childhood friends, I had taken ballroom dancing lessons and could acquit myself reasonably well doing a waltz, or a foxtrot, or a samba. But rock & roll was an uninhibited freestyle that encouraged a dancer to move to the rhythm of the music rather than to an established set of steps. Or so it seemed to me.



And then there were the personal interactions and relationships. My peers and I lived and behaved according to the British customs and standards that our parents and grandparents brought with them from the old country. Over the years those ways had been tempered and seasoned by contact with the Uruguayan society in which our community was embedded. American teenagers, by contrast, seemed less bound by convention and tradition; they appeared to be more open, more expressive, more able to talk about things like feelings and the nuances of personal relationships that I, for one, had never thought much about. Our rather formal style relied on understatement and reticence. The Americans

seemed freer and more exuberant in ways that some of us found most attractive.

We were teenagers, so of course we were beginning to explore the delicate terrain of fluttering hearts and furtive kisses. In my case, I thought of the girls I'd grown up with as sisters and loved them as such. But a new kind of love was stirring, and I found that the Otherness of the American girls allowed me to think of them in exciting, unfamiliar terms. Some of the Anglo girls no doubt had similar feelings for their new classmates. But it was not all about romance. The various kinds of bonds we shared with some of those girls and boys laid the groundwork for solid friendships that have survived to this day, sixty years later. In hindsight it is obvious that, in areas that really mattered, we weren't that different after all.

