



BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

SOUNDS OF URUGUAY

On Sunday afternoons in summer all was quiet in Montevideo and the streets were deserted. Lunch was over and most people were ready for a nap. Most adults that is, because the children were wide awake and listening—straining to hear a particular, very familiar sound—*listening*. Then suddenly, there it was! Off in the distance but getting louder by the minute: “*Cooooo-na-pro-lee!*” It was the cry of the ice cream vendor who walked the streets pushing his yellow cart, bringing joy to the children of Pocitos, the neighborhood where I lived in the 1950s.

The vendor’s brand of ice cream was *Conaprole*, a well-established dairy co-op, but he’d stretch out the first syllable for maximum effect. In the second, more seductive part of his cry, he serenaded the street with a litany of his wares, a mouth-watering selection of treats: “*vasito, barrita, bombón helado!*” Every Sunday I had to make an agonizing choice: ice cream in a cup? Dipped in chocolate? On a stick? Oh, delectable dilemma!



On weekdays another sound drifted through the streets of Pocitos: the knife sharpener’s whistle. It was actually a little panpipe—just like the one Pan played—made of tin. In my family, any reference to this instrument usually prompted one of us to ask: “If a tin whistle is made of tin, what is a fog horn made of?” As a child I thought this riddle was both clever and funny, two highly desirable qualities I strove to embody in our

little universe. When I or my brother went too far with something, when we pushed the limits in some unacceptable way or, heaven forbid, ignored them completely, my mother or father would stand over us and say, “That’s not clever or funny. Now, go to your room.”

The *afilador* rode a bicycle, and slid his tin whistle back and forth along his lips as he blew into the little holes, playing up and down the scales from low notes to high notes and back again.



He carried his grinding stone mounted on a rack over the back wheel. When people heard his whistle they came out of their houses and waved. He would stop and pull his bike up onto a stand, then sit on the seat facing backwards, pushing the pedals with his feet. The backward pedaling made the grinding stone spin, and he’d lean over it to sharpen dull blades of all kinds, adding a dash of mineral oil now and then, exchanging news and gossip with housewives and flirting with maids as he worked.

Montevideo is a coastal city blessed with a string of beaches that stretch for miles, hugging the northern shore of the Río de la Plata as it flows into the deep, salty blue waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Pocitos beach, barely a stone’s throw from my home, was a summer playground



BACK IN TIME ...Continued

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

for us all, young and old. Throngs of people lounged on the sand on weekends, in bathing attire of varying degrees of modesty and taste, working hard at acquiring the savage tan we all craved. Some brought brightly colored beach umbrellas and volley balls and radios with the volume turned all the way up; some brought just a towel to lie on. Some had no time for food; others brought a picnic with all the trimmings. The rest of us waited for the hot dog man. We could hear him coming from a long way off, singing out his signature call: “*Frrran-frrruteee!*” They were still called frankfurters in those days (my parents called them ‘franks’), though the beach vendors tended to butcher the word almost beyond recognition. The hot dog men wore a white shirt and slacks, with a pair of *alpargatas* (locally-made rope-soled espadrilles) to protect their feet from the hot sand, and carried a large metal box on a strap over their shoulder. When hailed by a customer they put the box on a folding stand (which they carried over the other shoulder) and slipped into their routine. The shiny metal box had a compartment where the franks floated in hot water, which was kept hot by built-in burners. There were separate compartments for the buns, already sliced, in grease paper wrappers, and mustard in a plastic bottle. The vendors used metal tongs to take a frank out of the water and settle it into a bun. “*Mostaza?*” they asked, and if you said yes your hot dog was decorated with a squiggle of bright yellow mustard. Then the man would shoulder his box—which was both hot and heavy—and be on his way again, calling out his wares. No hot dog tasted better than the ones sold on the beach. And nobody had a better tan than those vendors.

With any luck, the Coca Cola man was close behind the hot dog vendor, lugging a huge metal cooler, painted bright red, full of cokes, Orange Crush, and sometimes Pepsi Cola, all in bottles (imagine the weight!), packed into a few scoops of rapidly melting ice. “*Cocaaas, Pessi bien helada, Oranch-Cruuush!*” An ice cold coke and a hot dog with lots of mustard? That was beach living at its very best!

The beaches were never quite as crowded when there was a soccer game, especially if it was between *Peñarol* and *Nacional*, the two top local teams. Then the fans would fill the *Estadio Centenario* and their roars, erupting from the stadium, could be heard for miles around. When they weren’t yelling and screaming—at their teams or at each other—you could hear the sing-song sound of the coffee vendors: “*Soorocabana café!*” These strong, agile men carried a large metal canister full of Brazilian coffee strapped to their backs, and had all the necessary accoutrements hooked onto their belts. They’d pull a paper cup out of a tube dangling at their waist and fill it from a hose attached to the canister, then sprinkle a little sugar into it. Aaah! Hot coffee, sweet and strong; just the ticket for getting through a long, rowdy afternoon of *fútbol*.



This stadium, crowned by its dramatic winged tower, was built in 1930 to commemorate the centennial of Uruguay’s Constitution. The very first World Cup tournament—anywhere in the world—was played there that year and, when Uruguay won, the whole country reverberated with ecstatic cheers of victory—one of the sweetest sounds of all.