



# Back In Time

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## The YPF

In the late 1950s, when I was in my early teens, Wednesday nights were very special. That was when the Young People's Fellowship met at the Lafone Hall and much fun was had by all. We were teenagers, with more energy than we knew what to do with, so a group of parents decided to provide a weekly chaperoned social event where we could blow off steam.

The YPF was organized on behalf of the British Community in Montevideo under the auspices of the Holy Trinity Church and held at the Lafone Hall, which was attached to the church proper. The Church and Hall were built in 1936 on the southern rim of the Ciudad Vieja at the corner of Reconquista and Treinta y Tres, most appropriately overlooking the Rambla Gran Bretaña. The Hall was named for the British entrepreneur Samuel Fisher Lafone (1805–1871), who was instrumental in the construction of an earlier incarnation of the church. Other than its rather daunting location—it was in an iffy part of downtown and faced across the Rambla right into the unforgiving winds blowing off the Río de la Plata—the Hall was the ideal place to hold YPF meetings. It was sponsored by the community church, so it had an impeccable air of propriety. It also had no bar, unlike the other social clubs in town. But it did have a battered, black, upright piano standing in one corner of the huge wooden floor just beside the stage that rose up a few feet at one end of the room. Under an amazingly high ceiling the uncluttered cream-coloured walls made the space seem even bigger than it was.

On Wednesday nights a long table was set up along one wall, where the ladies provided tea and sandwiches and cakes. But first there were games and activities, like musical chairs, Scottish dancing, charades, badminton, and sing-alongs. There was always a musical soundtrack thanks to Cecil Shaw, OBE (1907-1991), who played the piano. Those Wednesday evenings could not have taken place without the unselfish support of parents and volunteers: kind people, every one of them, too numerous to mention here. But there was no one like Cecil; he was the life and soul of the YPF and a legend to my generation. Originally from Belfast, Northern Ireland his parents brought him to Montevideo when he was about twelve years old. They were among the many families that came out from the British Isles in the early twentieth century and found a home in Uruguay. He was extraordinarily charismatic and his smile lit up the room. He was also a natural piano player, and could play anything if you would just hum or whistle it for him. He loved to sing and had a

marvellous way of getting even the shy ones to sing along. Cecil had great faith in the younger generation, and made us feel that we were part of something real, something important, and it was all about us.

At some point during the evening it was time to dance, and records—usually 78s, but 45s and LPs too—were placed on a gramophone. The needle crackled into the groove and the speakers belted out *Valencia*, a lively *paso doble* played in quick time (“*Valencia*, in my dreams it always seems I hear you softly call to me...”). Of all our favourites, which were all we ever played, it was probably the most popular tune because those who could would scoop up a partner and whirl around the floor, hurtling up one side and careening down the other, girls screaming with delight and boys grinning from ear to ear, while the rest stood and watched. Judging from the expression on everyone’s face, it was clear that *Valencia*, like the YPF itself, was a license to smile.

Perhaps the most memorable experience from the YPF period was when a British warship was in port, something that happened once in a while in those days. On this occasion the YPF invited a group of officers and sailors off the visiting ship to an evening at the Lafone Hall. The historic photographs taken that night do a good job of reminding us who was there, but reveal nothing of the emotional turmoil simmering in every breast. The boys were stricken with quite unfamiliar feelings of jealousy as they watched the girls—who just a week ago had sat on their laps when the music stopped—chatting with chaps in uniform. The girls, meanwhile, were enjoying the attention of the naval contingent and, with hearts lightly fluttering, vaguely contemplating unfamiliar horizons. This was precisely the sort of exercise the YPF was created for; to provide a safe place for the community’s youngsters to take their first steps into adulthood.

Wednesday evenings inevitably came to an end but we never wanted to leave. So we gathered around Cecil at the piano for one last sing-along before scurrying out into the night, the lyrics of another favourite song, *Jamaica Farewell*, still echoing in our heads (“But I’m sad to say, I’m on my way, won’t be back for many a day...”). Sometimes a parent gave us a ride home; sometimes we walked a few blocks to catch a bus, insulated from the rather forbidding streets by a cocoon of giddy adolescent euphoria. We felt perfectly safe; we were the YPF.