

## The Week of the Beer

Patrick Madden

It's a rainy afternoon, and Solomon and I are riding down Paysandú's main street, Dieciocho de Julio, named after one of Uruguay's several independence days, and we stop to ogle the CDs in a small shop that specializes in American music. There's a new Guns N Roses CD with a mess of spaghetti on its cover. It's disappointing to see that they've made it as far as Uruguay when the new Rush album is nowhere to be found. We spend a few minutes there, seeking, but not finding, a strange fix from afar by looking at the music while our ears are bombarded by We Are the Champions. This shop's got all the Queen CDs. Sometimes we overhear them when we're walking out in the streets. Sometimes their songs are on the landlady's television, droning on while we're trying to read in the other room. Queen is pretty big in Paysandú. If the people could understand the lyrics I'm sure I could analyze the deeper meanings of the popular songs in the context of the struggling factory worker and the dead-end economy and the impressionable kids. But idiomatic expressions like Another One Bites the Dust don't translate very well.

Across the street on the steps of the Banco Hipotecario sits a midget atop a skateboard selling newspapers. He's an invariable fixture, always there when we're in town. He watches the people pass, hopes they will buy his papers, chats with a few scattered friends. He says hello back when we pass without buying anything. Even in quick glances once a week I can gather details, see his crook hand curled into his side, his bent nose, one eyebrow quizzically higher than the other, handmade suede leather shoes for two different-sized, tiny feet, one sole thicker than the other. I wonder why bother with the soles; I've never seen him walk. I wonder where he lives, who he lives with, where his family is. If we're walking by we nod, mumble an *hola*. *Chau* he says back, as only Sanduceros, Paysandú natives, do. Hello, goodbye all in one.

He knows who *we* are; he's known us for years. Everybody knows us. We're the missionaries, the Mormones, the *huevos*. Maybe we're the CIA; maybe we're spies. The rumors must be fun, and I admit it's comforting sometimes to get lost in the persona I'm representing. I don't have to be myself, just what they think I am. I don't really think that. We fit their stereotype easily: wearing white shirts, ties, dark pants, and shoes, just like the G-men in the movies. We're always talking to them about our religion. We ride fancy mountain bikes and wear Oakley helmets. *Huevos!* they shout. The young punks laugh out loud, feeling like they've accomplished something.

If you want the innocent reason, the harmless one, it's because our white bike helmets look like eggs. *Huevos!* It makes sense and nobody's offended. But really, not all the helmets are white; many of them are fluorescent. And really they're talking about another kind of *huevos*—what we'd call nuts or balls. It also fits in well with what they call the Jehovah's Witnesses: *Testiculos de Jehová*.

Down the street three long-haired men are sitting on the sidewalk on colorful blankets. They're weaving psychedelic jewelry with yarns and beads and precious rocks from Artigas where you can find the gems lying in the street. The people say it's because of an ancient volcano. Rock collectors from all over the world come to Artigas to find some of the finest stones, they say. What calls my attention is the Jimi Hendrix patch on the back of the denim jacket facing me, its owner hunched forward, intent on some manual project hidden from my view. Hendrix! I haven't yet met anyone in Uruguay who likes the same music I do.

One guy is meticulously bending copper wire from a heavy coil into spiral designs and fine holders for the colorful rocks. Turquoise, ruby red, sea green, milky white with black veins. He's wearing a woven vest, Peruvian looking, and tight black jeans cut off at the knee. He has wild black curly hair down to his shoulders and a thick mustache and beard stubble with gray hairs. Before we even meet him we call him Cheech.

The one with the Jimi Hendrix jacket, we find out later, is Numen—the artist's inspiration, he tells us. It's a name he picked out for himself. He looks less Latino than the others, with strong European features and long black hair. He looks like Jimmy Page, but more cognizant. We want to call him Page, but Numen is too cool a name.

The other guy doesn't look enough like anyone to warrant a nickname so we call him Eduardo.

I start the conversation by talking about Hendrix and the other bands we all like, but deftly move on to religion, which is why we're here after

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all. We find out they're visiting from Montevideo for a couple of weeks to sell their work at the Week of the Beer festival, the local supplement for Holy Week. It's a sort of Oktoberfest, but without the innocent-sounding name. The people of Paysandú aren't hiding anything. If they're going to have a week whose purpose is beer drinking, they're going to call it what it is, and they'll do it right before the Resurrection. In Sao Paulo and New Orleans they confine their debauchery to Mardi Gras, before Lent, but in Paysandú they wait until God is most certainly looking.

Cheech and Eduardo sell handmade jewelry, colorful bands of strings and silk decorated with copper springs and swirls holding polished turquoise, jade, amethyst. Numen is an artist; he draws tattoos. Not the raised black welts the kids do to themselves. He has the needles, the colors, the artistic ability. He draws snakes, dragons, and women. Fluttering banners of eternal promise and dedication. Would we like to see his work? We can already see it on his companions' arms, but there's more in a book of photographs.

On our turn we talk about our country, our religion, our message. We do this hundreds of times each week, hoping for glimmer of interest and a chance to share what's important to us. Typically we're told, politely, Thanks, but no thanks. But with these guys the Book of Mormon seems to interest them. They'll read it and we'll get back with them in a couple of days. Right here in the center?

Yeah, we'll still be up here for another week, they say. Then we're going down to the park by the river for the festival.

We exchange a couple of multi-faceted gripping, changing handshakes, Yeah, we'll see you in a few, and we're gone back to our anonymity in the faceless crowd. Solomon smiles and raises his eyebrows as if to say, It feels good to talk with someone who looks you in the eye.

In a couple of days we're back and wondering have they read anything at all. O ye of little faith.

Numen says, So this is about the first people in the Americas?

Yeah, well, at least one group of them.

And these people, the ones with the brother of Jared, they came before the others?

Uh, yeah. Solomon jabs an elbow in my side. He can't believe it and neither can I. The brother of Jared's near the end of the book. Did Numen read that much?

Numen opens to a picture of the prophet Lehi's family crossing the ocean in a boat and says, So this *loco*, he takes his family out of

Jerusalem, wanders around in the desert like Moses, his kids get pissed off, then they repent; they come here and set up camp, but continue with their problems?

It's the first time I've heard the generic *loco*: crazy guy or lunatic. It takes me by surprise because I always took the meaning literally and I'm thinking it's disrespectful until he calls Jesus a *loco*. For Numen, everyone's a *loco*. At least everyone he likes.

Yeah, says Solomon, the Jaredites were the first to come to the New World from Jerusalem, but the book is mainly about Lehi's family, and did he read about Jesus' visit to the people in the Americas.

He knows the Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, and about the Incas and the Mayas and the Aztecas, and asks, So this is what that was all about?

We tell him, It is.

Amazing, he says, and his friends, Cheech and Eduardo, say, Amazing. You get the idea that Numen's the one reading and telling the others about it, but that's okay. Just then the midget newspaperman glides by on his skateboard giving high fives to all three. All right, man, they say, and he shouts back, Keep on the shady side of the street, boys.

The next week we go wandering down to the river, which we see every day when we leave the house, but which we've never visited. The Week of the Beer is on and the people have off from their jobs on account of Holy Week and it seems like everybody is at the river. Carnival rides and games of chance and hawkers; guess your weight, throw a ring, shoot a basketball; cotton candy and hot dogs; umbrella tables and circus tent booths. Everywhere you hear the bells and buzzers and the low murmur of conversations which you'll never pick up when you're still learning the language like I am. There are smiles on all the faces and people drinking beer, which, although it's not free, is cheap because the Week of the Beer is sponsored by the Nortefia brewery, which you can just see through the trees up near the bridge that goes to Argentina.

Solomon grabs some artisanal souvenirs because he's always thinking about going home, and he might as well stock up when he can, and I buy a knit sweater because it's not going to stay warm forever. We pick up a fake newspaper with our own computer-generated headline: *Toda la ciudad de Paysandú se convierte al mormonismo*, and we laugh. Wouldn't that be the day.

South of the fair is the campground, a sea of army green tarps, brightly colored pup tents, and clothes hanging on lines, all circling a

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central brick building of showers and toilets. We wander in cautiously, and from the description they gave us of the location where they camp every year, we easily catch up with Numen and the gang. They've been joined by more friends and all told there are about ten people now, all with long hair and dressed in cut-off jeans and tattoos on their arms, and two of them are wearing colorful sports bras, and they're the women.

Numen shouts out a welcome and says, Fellows, these are our friends the Mormons, Madden and Solomon. Hello, hello, and a few of them get up to shake our hands, but Numen pays them no mind and starts talking to us. How've you been? he says, I've been reading the Book of Mormon every day.

They're getting ready to eat pretty soon, cutting up carrots and peeling potatoes and throwing lentils into a great black pot on a cinder block park grill. When they ask us to join them for a *guiso* we're not sure whether to accept or not because we haven't got much time, but we may as well choose the better part, as Jesus said.

We call everyone together for a photo in which Numen is holding up his copy of the Book of Mormon proudly, then we sit around chatting in the shade of the trees while some other guys prepare the dinner, mixing in religion with music and politics and the free way of life, envying each other. One of the new guys plays an Andean melody on a *queña* flute, a rendition of *El Condor Pasa* (the song Paul Simon used), and some others. I tell Solomon later that if I ever came back to Uruguay I'd look these guys up and live the way they do for a while.

They're drinking from a five-liter green wine bottle with a wicker handle and basket on the bottom, but guess what, it's water. Only water. The Week of the Beer, to them, is just a chance to sell some jewelry, at least enough to pay for food and bus fare to the next gathering place.

The stew is tasty, no meat because some are vegetarians among us, and they serve us first in clean bowls but with no spoons. Everyone is sipping from the edge of their bowls, so we do too. It's exciting, to be sitting on their woven colored blankets like the white man meets the Indian on the first Thanksgiving, them sitting cross legged without shirts and decorated and in moccasins, while we're careful not to spill on our stark white shirts. What must the other campers around us think? What's the connection between these gringo CIA *huevos* and those gypsy tattooing hippies?

The funny thing is, I'm not sure myself.

You know you can't invite them to church, and they're not going to be

around to hear any more of the religious message, so maybe that takes some of the pressure off. They give us a few pieces of jewelry for our sisters or *novias* back home, and they know we're not going to get any tattoos, so they're not worried about selling to us either. Numen's already more than halfway through the book—he's been skipping around following the footnotes and asking questions about everything, and he teaches the others what he's learning—so maybe that's all we need to do. Our conversation dances around commitment, and in the end keeps moving.

It's a staggered, uncomfortable goodbye after dinner with hesitant handshakes, but then Numen knows what to do. He grabs my hand and pulls me in, puts his left hand behind my back, and with a kiss on my cheek says, May God be with you, my brother.

I'm glad to hear from Solomon months later, after we'd split up and moved on to other parts of the country, that he met up with Cheech in a hospital in Rivera, on the border with Brazil. Cheech was wandering the halls somewhat dazed, and found Solomon there in the hallway. Elder, he says, and Solomon says, Hey, what's up? because he can't remember the guy's real name. They get to talking and Cheech says he's in there because he had a nervous breakdown and he's far from home and could Solomon give him a copy of that book. Of course, says Solomon, and pulls it out and Cheech thanks him, asks about me, tells Solomon that he told his mom about the Mormons and now they're visiting her in Montevideo, and walks away down the hallway, almost hugging the book.

Numen wrote a letter to my sister because I told him one time that she was studying Spanish and he said could he write to her and she could practice and that way he and I could keep in touch, so I gave him the address and he gave me his. Sometime after I get home, after my two-years' service is up, my sister mentions the letter she got that I never knew about. She gives it to me to read and to help her out on some phrases she didn't understand even with a dictionary.

Your brother has a good vibe, he writes in his artistic handwriting, and that makes me feel good. But he must have moved or the mail doesn't get to the twenty-fourth-point-eight kilometer on the Interbalneary Route in Solymar Norte, because even though I write, I never hear from Numen again.

