



The First Trip to Japan

I

Fifty years ago, when The Brothers Four performed for the first time in Japan a young Japanese girl approached the guys and, with the help of an interpreter, asked if she along with some of her schoolmates could form a Brothers Four Friends Club in Japan. As sometimes happens things got somewhat lost in translation. One of the guys said of course and maybe your club could affiliate with a fan club that's just been formed in the United States.

The young girl got quiet and then made her position very clear.

We are not fanatics, she said, we do not want to be your fans we want to be your friends. And so The Brothers Four Friends Club was formed and 50 years later when The Brothers Four return to Japan for the 50th time Akia Nakagima and other members of The Friends Club that she started so long ago will be there to greet us.

It remains a privilege and bit of a puzzle to explain the group's long and deep connection to the people and the country of Japan. An encounter with a man from Fukuoka a dozen years ago might offer the best explanation. The Brothers Four were sitting at an autograph table after a show when a man came up and asked us to sign a photograph taken a year earlier of him with the four of us. He'd waited until there was no longer a line before making his request because he had something to say. While most Japanese are comfortable reading English and understand it when it's spoken slowly and clearly they are often shy and apologetic about speaking it. He stared straight ahead and began expressing something he had practiced hard to get just right.

"Because of The Brothers Four I learned English," he began.

In the 60's listening over and over to Brothers Four records was a common way for Japanese students to become familiar with English.

"Because I learned English," he continued, "I did well in school. Because I did well in school I went to the University. Because I went to the University I got my friends."

By this time the four of us have put our pens down and are looking intently and listening carefully to his beautifully chosen words.

"Because I got my friends I met my wife. Because I met my wife I have my kids. Because I have my kids I have my life. Because of The Brothers Four."

It makes me emotional even now to talk about that special moment and back then it took a few moments to regain our composure and then for all of us to stand up and do something very un-Japanese. We gave that very eloquent man we hardly knew a true group hug.

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II

Many memories of my first couple visits to Japan remain in little patches. Those trips were in the summer so I remember being overwhelmed by the humidity and the heat. Trying to fall asleep listening to Anne Murray singing *Snowbird* on Armed Forces radio. Reading about Woodstock in an International Edition of Newsweek Magazine, impossible to get a sense of the significance of that event-that life changing moment-half a world away.

The exchange rate was 360 to the dollar so there were gifts of pearls and silk and cameras and stereo equipment for family and friends. I remember trying to ship electronics gear back to Washington State and having it end up in Washington, DC. Luckily my friend, Bruce, was living in DC at the time, and he had it reshipped to the correct Washington.

The few overseas calls I made in the middle of the night. The Overseas Operator calling back when the connection was made so I could talk with some friends in Seattle where for them it was the morning of the previous day.

There were the black cabs with white-gloved drivers who turned off their headlights at red lights. There was visiting Akio Morito, the founder of Sony, at his home because his son played guitar and loved folk music and The Brothers Four.

There was a wonderful night in a private dining room in Kyoto with the koto player and a lobster who was still alive, and he began crawling off the plate as I awkwardly picked up and then dropped a part of his tail with my chopsticks.

There was the tailor who came to our hotel rooms-the suit-two sports jackets-half a dozen dress shirts that I ordered. I never wore them much, for one thing I started gaining some weight and also I never got completely comfortable with cuff links and monogrammed shirts.

There was the hostess from the Copa in Akasaka who ended up in my hotel room-I hadn't had sex before and I didn't want the first time to be with a stranger in a strange land. What was I thinking? That we'd just talk? She didn't speak English and I certainly didn't speak Japanese. I'm not sure who was more embarrassed when after an hour or so we said an awkward goodbye-

For some reason I did become infatuated by Michi the untouchable Go-Go dancer at another Akasaka club called Mougín, her dark hair streaked with light highlights dancing in a cage-with those boots made for more than walking-

A time near Sapporo when I saw a batting cage-and thought I would take my anonymous swings. The place stopped to watch this big foreign guy, swinging and missing at every pitch, I couldn't get out of there fast enough-

A lot of things about growing old aren't easy but one of the benefits is that it becomes possible to take such scattered threads of memory and weave them into something meaningful and beautiful. Thank goodness.



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III

Among the many things I've learned by being able to regularly visit Japan in the course of a lifetime is that despite our differences there is a lot more that unites us than divides us, how we see things is often tied to we look at them, and where we stand often depends on where we're sitting.

For instance The Brothers Four did a number of shows at Expo 70, a Worlds' Fair in Osaka, during a very hot summer when I was 23 years old. We needed ID badges to get on the Fair Grounds and every morning when we went through the gates some officially dressed person would come onto our bus and carefully look first at our badges and then at our faces. While I was not concerned there might be trouble when I was with everyone else I thought I might be stopped when I was by myself because my badge had my age listed as 48 years old, and I knew it was clear to everyone I was just a kid and not some ancient relic approaching 50. I was concerned enough that I went up and asked our road manager if he could get me a new badge that listed my correct age. He scratched at his chin for a moment. I knew he was taking my request seriously. He finally said.

"There won't be a problem. You all look the same to us."

Now, fast-forward to 1996 when I am 49 years old and The Brothers Four were touring Mainland China. At that time the main source of Western music in China came from stations broadcasting from Taiwan or Hong Kong. The way it was explained to us was that the songs were played one after another without introductions. A station might play a Bee Gees songs, a Beatles, and then a Brothers Four song. There was no context. It was simply Western music. I am happy to report that for one brief spring moment in Beijing four old guys were seen as young again and even a little sexy to all those young faces that thought on some level we all looked and sounded the same.

IV

In the late 80's each member of The Brothers Four was asked to write a short personal greeting for Japan that was printed in a program available at various concerts that year. In my note I said that going to Japan felt like being on a grand adventure and at the same time it felt like coming home. That ironic sentiment feels as true now as it did all those years ago. If home is where we feel safe and valued and alive in the moment Japan remains such a place for me. If a grand adventure is where every day offers a chance to explore and discover and connects us to a bigger world Japan is such a place for me.

It is something to have first gone Japan in my early 20's and to still be going in my mid-60's, to be able in some way to measure a life and a lifetime returning regularly to such a magnificent people and place and get a sense of how some things change and what remains the same.

For years the group stayed at a hotel within walking distance of the Akasaka District. One time when I was in my early 50's walking over the hill from Akasaka to the hotel I remember thinking if only I'd known when I was walking this path in my

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20's what I know now...and then suddenly stopping and laughing and thinking, if I spend too much time thinking this way in a few years I will be in my 60's walking over that same hill wishing I knew in my 50's what I know now!

After our next tour as the airplane lifts off and takes us home from Japan I will take a moment and do what I've done so many times before. I will look out that small airplane window filled with a sense of wonder and gratitude for the memories and thankful for the dreams.

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