

The Saddest Song in the World

-- 2001 December 29 Saturday, 8:49 AM -- The winter light flashed silver from the black and gray roofs as the F train rattled out of the tunnel and into the daylight above 9th Street in Brooklyn. The thick-bodied man seated across from me began rummaging through the duffel bags stacked on his luggage cart. His tweed cap had the cut and jaunty angle of working men of another era, the 1920s or '30s maybe, and an Ace bandage was wrapped around his right hand and wrist. Thick, stiff brown fingers jabbed, slowly and stubbornly, into the top bag. His tense frown relaxed and he rocked back on the subway car bench, and he held up and examined a copper tube. It was about as long as his forearm - one cubit - and about an inch across from rim to rim. Then back into the bag until he pulled out a black mouthpiece with reed, and then a second metal tube, as long as the first but maybe as much as four inches in diameter. It was covered with thick coats of paint, the latest being green. Six finger holes, one above the other, were neatly drilled in the part he held closest to the floor. Slowly and deliberately, he fitted the three pieces together and began to play The Saddest Song in the World.

You know the song. If you've lived long enough and traveled far enough from home so you can no longer say for sure where home is, you've probably sung it yourself. It doesn't always have the same notes in the same sequence, and the distances between them may also vary, but whatever the scale, it is always in a minor key. I've heard it in a dust-choked slum in Lima, played on quena and charango, and coming from the shadows of a ruined temple in Angkor, that time in low murmurs from a human throat. When I was a teenager, I loved to listen to snatches of it on blues and Elektra round-the-world folk music records, and I even tried to play imitations on guitar, inspired by adolescent Angst. The first time I heard it authentic and live, or maybe only the first time I knew enough to recognize it when I heard it, was in a steamy warren of cardboard and mud-and-wattle huts in the hills south of Caracas, more than thirty years ago. When the woman singing it saw me come around the corner of her shanty, she stopped.

The Saddest Song doesn't seek an audience. It is most often heard in some corner of a public space, never - in its authentic form - on center stage. It is not a performance, but an expression. The sad memory of a yearning long abandoned.

The sounds the man seated across from me on the F train was drawing from his instrument were smooth and sweet, like a saxophone. He didn't look up, he didn't pass a hat, he didn't place a cup on the floor in front of him for coins and bills. He just renewed his acquaintance with his song, and after they had saluted each other, man and song, he leaned back again and gently, carefully disassembled his instrument and placed its pieces back in his bag. At the next stop, just before the train was to leave the daylight and plunge back into the tunnel, he unhooked his wooden cane from the upright bar of the luggage cart, lifted himself and, with the cart-handle guided by his bandaged hand, walked off the train with solemn dignity.