

Saxophone Street

Sarah Hartzell (Yeongju Girl's Middle School)

It was a crisp, empty Sunday afternoon. My husband and I were wandering our way home to our apartment, still new to our town and only about 3 weeks fresh off the plane from the States. As we strolled down the street, I paused to take a second look at an assortment of music stands and instruments visible through a large window into a building. Was it a store? Could we buy an instrument stand there for our guitar?

As we scrutinized the room through the glass, trying to determine just what the place was, a man inside spotted us. Our moment's pause was all he needed to open his door and usher us in.

Next thing we knew, we were inside and perched upon stools, getting an up-close look at the room. We quickly realized that it was a music studio. Specifically, this older gentleman had the entire space set up for playing saxophones. There were several of them poised about the place, as well as music stands, a large sound system, electronics, shelves of books, and all other manner of musical clutter. The walls were decked out with framed photos of groups of saxophonists, which the man was now proudly showing us.

We spoke only a smidgen of Korean (after, "Hello!" "Thank you," and "kimchi," there wasn't much else we could say...) and the only English he mustered up was just as inhibited. However, this did not prevent him from eagerly communicating to us. He rattled on in his mother tongue as though we were friends who hadn't seen each other in years--as though we could understand him. His hospitality was charming. We felt oddly at home and out of our comfort zone, both at the same time.

As things often do in Korea, one thing led to another without any sort of request or permission from us. It was decided: we were staying for coffee. Suddenly, a few other Korean gentlemen were arriving, some with instrument cases in hand. As they entered, we exchanged friendly, bewildered smiles in greeting. They didn't know what we were doing there; and neither did we!

I don't know how the proprietor explained our presence to his friends. Perhaps, "I thought these foreigners looked lost, so I thought they should sing some karaoke with us!" Because that was exactly what was about to happen.

At first we were just expected to sit and enjoy the music while the musicians played. Then things began to escalate. All of the sudden, there was a large, theatrical curtain drawn against the wall, to provide an elegant background for the soloist. As he played the sheet music off of a computer screen in front of him, he was simultaneously on another screen, being recorded.

Then a new song came up. The lyrics appeared. And then we were thrust into the limelight.

I felt uncomfortably aware of the aforementioned large, glass storefront, but we didn't know how to decline our gregarious, new-found friend. He shepherded us off of our stools. He placed us in front of the curtain, behind the camera, and between very large speakers. I

held the microphone like it might bite me in the face. Our host was thrilled and either unwilling or unable to recognize our hesitation. He eagerly put on some American Oldies for us to sing, which we blundered through with great self-consciousness.

Two of his friends were merely spectators of our performance, while another was our accompaniment. Meanwhile, our host hovered beside us, pointing as the lyrics scrolled across the screen, egging us on like a groupie. I squirmed with discomfort, but at the same time, I was delighted at this unexpected cultural experience. Koreans are so affectionate of music and of generosity--we had blindly stumbled into the perfect picture of their passion for both. And none of them seemed to think this whole ordeal was at all abnormal, so I tried to loosen my inhibitions and belt it out as best I could.

"If you're going to San Franciscooooo! Be sure to weeeaaar some flowers in your haaaaaaair!"

Our biggest fan picked up his saxophone for the next song, satisfied that we were locked into our role as singers. We became a regular American Oldies cover-band: two hesitant singers, two blaring saxophones, and one big cultural exchange.

Eventually, we found a way to politely extract ourselves from the impromptu stage and non-verbally communicate our need to return home. All smiles, and making known our obligation to come back so we could get a copy of the video of our performance, our host bowed us out the door. As my husband and I strolled away down the street (which is now and forever known to us as "Saxophone Street") we shared stunned smiles and shook our heads happily at our experience.

You just never know what may happen to you in Dynamic Korea. One moment you will be minding your own business, considering some practical shopping needs, and then you will end up spending the next hour "in song." It will be tempting to despise Korea's insistence on doing one thing or the next, as you find that your time no longer belongs to you.

But it's all right. Go with it. Let the saxophones play. Applaud them. Stand up and have a go at songs you don't even know. Koreans will love you for it, and if you can find the willingness in your heart to try it with a smile, you may just find yourself more in love with Korea--unexpected dynamics and all.

