



traveling soon?
medical advice for global travelers

THE TRAVEL CLINIC

John D. Wilson, M.D.
1200 Hilyard St., Suite S-560
541/343-6028

www.TravelClinicOregon.com

Questions? Email us at travelclinicoregon.343-6028@gmail.com

Cargobike Rally & Picnic Sun., 2:00 P.M.

Xtracycle Rally!

A cruise with our favorite foods, coolers and grills followed by a picnic. Ross Evans, Founder of Xtracycle, will join us in a celebration of cargo hauling.

Ride starts 2:00 P.M., Sun., 25th
at Arriving By Bike

2705 Willamette St • 541.484.5410
Mon-Fri 11-7, Sat 10-6, Sun 12-5

arriving by bike

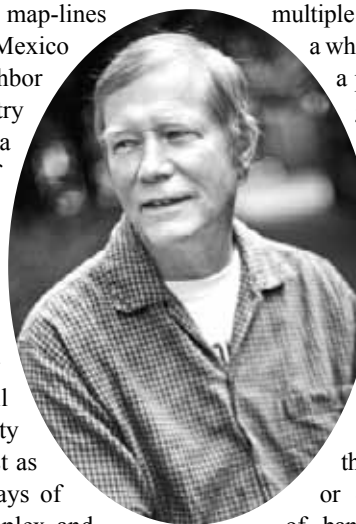
Urban Cycling Outfitters

BOOKS BY RICK LEVIN

Border Song

Eugene musician publishes his Mexican memories

The imaginary map-lines drawn around Mexico suggest our neighbor to the south is one big country — and indeed, Mexico is a singular place, a land of magical realism full of beauty and brutality, art and artifice, poetry and struggle, history and its erasure, *todo y nada*. But as any open-eyed traveler over the Rio Grande will tell you, there are in reality many, many Mexicos, just as there are many, many ways of seeing this uniquely complex and confounding country.



Composer Mike Curtis, a member of the Eugene Symphony, has traveled extensively in Mexico over the years, first visiting Tijuana during a family expedition in 1956, and then returning again and again over 50 years and through the many stages of his life — broke college student, long-haired bohemian, lone pilgrim, resident musician, family man. Something about Mexico, the mystery and promise of the place, lit a fire in the young man's soul, sparking a lifelong desire to unearth its infinite cultural treasures.

In *Memories of a Musician in Mexico*, his recently self-published book, Curtis describes one of his early sojourns to the country that continues, even now, to call his name: "It was almost Christmas, 1975. I was 23, I had little money, I had never traveled in a foreign country alone, my language skills were rusty and shy, and I had this idea of devouring the length and breadth of the place like one glorious meal." This is a passage worthy of Henry Miller, full of wanderlust and the infectious grandiosity of youth.

Such moments of longing — inspired by the romantic archetype of the American expatriate and buttressed by the mystical musings of Carlos Castaneda and the road-running nostalgia of writers like Ken Kesey and Jack Kerouac — give Curtis' writing a pleasant familiarity. He is adept at tapping into a vast literary tradition, that of the spiritual sojourner searching for personal growth across a border that is both a reality and a metaphor. It is this aspect of Mexico as land of discovery that provides the narrative backbone of *Memories of a Musician in Mexico*.

It would be wrong, however, to categorize this book strictly as a memoir, though it does have its memoir-ish moments. The fact is, this short, rollicking, rapturous compendium of memories fails, in the end, to positively declare itself; literally, it is neither here nor there, which is not entirely a shortcoming.

Containing elements of travelogue, travel guide, ethnography, history, memoir and personal journal, Curtis' book is a sort of literary sampler, dipping its toe into forking streams of thought but never lingering long enough to develop into a full-fledged movement. *Memories* branches out into

multiple realms of fascination, but as a whole it remains embryonic, like a précis or pitch for a series of genre-jumping books about Mexico.

Fortunately, the sheer exuberance of Curtis' enthusiasm for his subject matter is enough to carry the reader along. His writing can be graceful and economical. Whether waxing poetic about the colorful, quixotic tumult that is the city of Guanajuato or describing the joyous clash of bands in a public procession, Curtis is able to convey the palpable thrill of a traveler's first encounters. He describes a public gathering in Jerez as "charged with intensity: sexual, alcoholic, and even violent," noticing that "young and old clutch beer cans or pour mescal from casks stored on the backs of burros." Such finely observed details bring Mexico to riotous life.

Despite a pervading indecisiveness about what exactly it wants to be, *Memories* is always great fun to read — it has that desultory yet seductive quality of an overexcited friend talking you through a slideshow of his awesome vacation. Granted, the book would have benefited from a stronger editorial hand (the decade was the '70s, not the 70's), and the layout leaves much to be desired; for example, page 21 is mysteriously blank, and the cover looks notoriously cheap and New Agey (there's no reason these days why self-publishing can't compete, in terms of design and editing, with the big houses).

These are minor criticisms, though, containing more of hope than disappointment. Curtis is a lifelong musician, a multi-instrumentalist and composer (one storyline of the book is how Mexico inspired Curtis to write music that has been performed both here and abroad), and it can almost be said that, when it comes to art, English is his second language. As he told me: "I wanted to yell or sing my impressions or play them on a horn, but I only had letters on the page and I didn't have much experience distilling the images that way. Words are powerful but they can be too weak, too."

These sentiments — expressing the paradoxical frustration and fruitfulness of the written word — exhibit the earnest ambitions of a born author. In *Memories of a Musician in Mexico*, Curtis succeeds in capturing that country's multivalent, many splended culture, and every now and then he lays down a line of prose that sings harmoniously from the page.

Curtis says he has another book in mind — a novel this time, set in Mexico, about an expat struggling to simplify his life and the impact this has on his family. If *Memories* — a kind of warm-up, perhaps — proves anything, it's that fiction could be just the right key for Curtis' talent. He's already in tune.

EW

Memories of a Musician in Mexico is available at Tsunami Books; for more information, visit drumstick.com