

# MARCHING WITH THE SAINTS

## THE GREEN STREET MORTUARY BAND

by Ernest Beyl

**S**an Francisco, long famed for unusual public displays, has a properly theatrical way of sending Asian-American residents off to meet their maker.

In a tradition going back more than 100 years, a uniformed, brass marching band, playing Christian hymns and dirges, leads the deceased and a corps of mourners on a musical march through the streets of North Beach and Chinatown. Each year the Green Street Mortuary Band, with its ten musicians, plays for more than 300 Chinese and other Asian funeral processions.

It all begins at the Green Street Mortuary in North Beach with three shimmering “bangs” on a brass Chinese gong as the casket slides into a shiny black hearse. At that moment mourners bow three times in unison, and the band, led by a contingent of special motorcycle police to clear intersections, steps off slowly at the head of the cortege and begins the procession with a slow and dramatic rendition of *Amazing Grace*. The harmony of the trumpets, trombones, a tuba and a lone alto saxophone registers sweet, sad and insistent. The slow-step march is punctuated by muffled thumps of the bass drum, the snap and roll of the snare and the intermittent, almost random, banging of the gong.

An open convertible follows the marching band. Rising from the center of its back seat, is a flower-wreathed, near life-sized, color photograph of the deceased. The hearse follows closely behind the top down convertible. Next in

line is a closed limo with family members, followed by the assorted mourners in their automobiles or sometimes on foot. Frequently the Christian hymn-playing, marching band—its program includes *Abide With Me*, *Onward Christian Soldiers*, *Fallen Heroes* and *St. Jude's Funeral March*—is joined by a Buddhist ensemble costumed in saffron robes. Attendants in sackcloth mourning garb burn incense. Spirit money is scattered along the street to confuse meddling, maladroit spirits who may wish to unsettle the departed on that final long journey.

Sometimes the entire cortege—marching band, convertible, hearse, limo, Buddhist contingent and assorted mourners, pause at the departed's family residence or business, or even a favorite restaurant, for a final, brief spiritual visit. The march finally plays itself out back on the edges of North Beach. The gong sounds three times in a final salute. It is a dramatic pageant of public mourning. Finally the portrait of the deceased is removed from the back seat of the convertible. The band disperses and the special motorcycle police contingent leads the way to the cemetery.

The proud Chinese, whose practice of public mourning with musical accompaniment goes back thousands of years in a Confucian worship and respect of ancestors, began borrowing from western tradition. In Hong Kong when it was a British Crown Colony for example, well-known colonial officers and business leaders were ushered off this mortal coil by a marching brass band in full regalia, whose instrumentation sometimes



John Coppala and Lisa Pollalrd make music on Green Street.

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included bagpipes. For prominent Chinese immigrants, it was only a short cultural jump from a funeral procession with a British marching band in Hong Kong to its approximation in turn-of-the-century San Francisco. Historian Linda Sun Crowder, herself a Chinese American with roots in Hawaii, has made a scholastic mission of exploring her race's funeral practices. She has traced early, western-style musical groups at Chinese funerals in San Francisco back to 1892 when "Little Pete," someone she described as "a rogue Chinese entrepreneur-cum-gangster," was shot to death in a Washington Street barber shop and sent on his way in high style to the other side. For Little Pete's funeral an ensemble was organized from the city's Opera House orchestra and played the funeral march from the opera *Saul*.

In 1911 a Chinese boys marching band was organized. It was called the Cathay Club Boys Band and a retired U.S. Navy concertmaster, Thomas Kennedy, helped with the marching and the music, which tended to be John Philip Sousa marches and Christian hymns, for important funerals. Sometime in the sixties the Cathay Club Boys Band faded away and for a long period Chinese funerals had to be content with ragtag groups with few musical, and fewer marching, skills.

The tradition of the Green Street Mortuary inviting bereaved Chinese and other Asian families to mourn their dead with a hymn-blasting marching band, appeared to be in a spiritual drift. That is, until the early nineties when Lisa Pollard, a jazz playing dynamo known widely by her e-mail address Saxlady, came on the scene.

Lisa Pollard is a talented and gregarious professional musician—the daughter of the late Dick Pollard, a renowned *San Francisco Examiner* reporter—with a business-like, take-no-prisoners manner. When Lisa

got the invitation from the Green Street Mortuary to organize a brass band and revive the funeral march tradition she jumped at it. She turned to some of San Francisco's best musicians, all members of Local 6 of the musician's union, who played in jazz, swing and pit bands around town. Several had their own groups or performed with major artists. Lisa herself had toured with Duke Ellington and his Orchestra.

One musician Saxlady sought out when she was forming the funeral marching band was well-known San Francisco trumpeter and big band leader John Coppela, one of the most respected performers in the area who had played with Woody Herman and Stan Kenton at various times. Coppela became the Green Street Mortuary Band's lead trumpet and arranger. He remains so to this day.

"I have the job of turning Christian hymns into march time," he says over a beer at O'Reilly's, the Irish pub across the street from the Mortuary and the ready-room of choice for band members awaiting their cue to form up.

Coppela says the Green Street Mortuary Band has played for many highly prominent San Franciscans and sometimes takes musical requests. "We played for Jessica Mitford and Herb Caen when they died, and when San Francisco author Amy Tan's mother Daisy died, we played *Daisy* during her funeral procession."

The Green Street Mortuary Band is indeed a San Francisco tradition. It's not only an imposing way to send the deceased off to their maker but a fascinating piece of street theater.

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