

About Felicidades

In 1975 Larry Haggin, Scott Wardinsky and Chris Kern were students at the Willamette Learning Center, a high school for "unschoolable" teens located in the Centenary Wilbur Methodist Church at SE 9th and Ash, when they were inspired by the band Upepo to start their own musical experiment. Scott and Larry both spent time at the home of Dave and Beth Grafe and as Dave was then a working musician Scott asked him how to start a band, the reply being something along the lines of "learn some songs together and go find somebody to play them for." This they promptly did, learning a few songs by Harry Belafonte and Jimmy Cliff on borrowed instruments and taking their act to the streets.



It didn't take long to discover that the real money in pre-Transit Mall Portland was near the entrance to Meier & Frank's downtown department store, where shoppers wound their way through the busiest bus stop in the city. This was lunch money on a dependable basis and the take was regularly shared with other wandering minstrels and fellow student Sam Rogers, who played maracas on the street while quietly learning to play the electric bass. Dave G. brought an old saxophone and Danny Schaufler, silver flute in hand and in search of his destiny, stepped off a bus and into the band of buskers.

As the group began to discover new performance opportunities Hassan Heiserman was invited to fill out the percussion section and this was the lineup that first appeared at the Mountain Moving Café, with David Nelson of Upepo playing soprano sax.

From its inception the group had simply called itself the Willamette Learning Center Marching Band but one night at the Mountain Moving Café the group was spontaneously introduced as "Felicidades" by Bob Scorby, who had opened the evening's show. The appropriateness of the moniker for this youthful, energetic group could not be denied and a dedicated cadre of dancers and fans began to grow.



In early 1976 Sam left and the band was joined by jazz veterans Ted Trimble on bass, David Leslie on electric piano and Don Mumford on drums, forming the foundation for an expanded musical vision. Alan Nohlgren of Upepo had also joined the group and they were soon packing clubs and dance floors from Ashland to Seattle, delivering a powerful and diverse mix of Caribbean, Brazilian, African and



American Jazz sounds. By the end of the year Bobby Johnson had become a fixture on electric guitar, Ted and Donny, Al Nohlgren and David Leslie had all moved on to other pursuits, Dave Grafe moved over to play bass and Danny was loving his new tenor saxophone. New faces filled out the band, including percussionists Caton Lyles and Nick Weitzer and John Smith at the piano. And then there was John Pappas, who joined the band mid-song one night at the Mountain Moving Café, his inspired valve trombone, soprano saxophone and various flutes at the ready.



From Seattle's Bombay Bicycle Shop to the Oregon Country Fair, folks were coming out of the woods to dance in the city and vice versa, packing every conceivable sort of venue with exuberant dancers and celebratory vibes. The band's monthly trips to Eugene were paying the fledgling W.O.W. Hall's mortgage as well as their own rents while generating legendary big fun for all and "La Familia" was producing their own events in Portland, complete with floor shows a la Carmen Miranda and featuring refreshments of all kinds, all organized, prepared and served by members of "La Familia." Percussionist Brian Davis had joined the band and many other local musicians were regular participants on a bandstand that might hold from seven to fifteen players or more at any given time; jazz luminaries the likes of Jim Pepper and Jeff Lorber performed guest sets with the group,

drawn to the global awareness and youthful effervescence of the scene, once described by writer Rick Mitchell as a "Latin Hippy Cult Phenomenon." Throughout 1977 and 1978 Felicidad was at the center of a world-sourced and world-conscious culture, a true "world beat" band many years before the term was ever printed in the press.

The youthful optimism and fervent activism of the band was nourished by the powerful community bonds of 1970's Vietnam War-era Portland; from the stage we watched City Councilor Mike Lindberg shake it up and we could see Bill Walton's head bobbing high above the crowd, dancing long past mandatory curfew for Trailblazer players, we knew. If there was a benefit for a worthy cause or a civic festival to perform at Felicidad would be there, always ready to play in active support of community growth and positive social change.



By early 1979 various members began to consider other musical interests, but the group returned to the stage for reunion events in 1984 and 1986. After a twenty-year hiatus they came together again to play memorial sets for Beth Grafe at the W.O.W. Hall and the Oregon Country Fair in 2006 and 2007. New faces have appeared in the lineup during this time, most notably those of master percussionists Bobby Torres and Nick Gefroh, woodwind virtuosos Marc Grafe and Francisco Marmelejo, trumpeter Lewis Livermore, trombonist Tim Tubb, drummer Jackson Coffey and vocalist Freila Merencio.



Over the decades various participants have also founded and/or performed with many outstanding ensembles, including Sky River, Nu Shooz, Crazy Eights, Los Munequitos de Matanzas, Brydge, Manteca, Pepe and the Bottle Blondes, Soul Vaccination, Lisa Mann, Foothill Diesel, Island Breeze, Herbie Hancock, Pink Martini, The Bobby Torres Ensemble, Ron Rogers and the Wailing Wind, Joni Harms, Marylhurst Symphony Orchestra, Oregon Symphony Orchestra, Tom Grant and many more.

Video from the 2007 Oregon Country Fair: www.youtube.com/watch?v=BAkz9KcQ3_M

Audio tracks from the 2007 Oregon Country Fair: www.pdxaudio.com/felicidades

