

AL MARTINEZ:

Jazz, taps invoke lonely memories

They were playing the blues down at Henri's and taps by the pier at Santa Monica, and both in their way were lonely tunes.

I can isolate each sound as I sit in the freshness of morning, their memories trailing through my head like ribbons of silver. I can visualize them too.

Henri's is actually a kind of breakfast place in Canoga Park. Everyone calls it Henry's. If you said you were swinging by "On-rees," the correct pronunciation, no one would know what you were talking about.

There's a back room called the Back Room that offers jazz every Friday and Saturday night played by masters. It's reminiscent of the clubs that used to be tucked away in alleys around San Francisco's North Beach, where the music lasted until dawn came, all cool and misty.

The legendary John Hammond is almost always at the Back Room, with Jim Hughart on bass and Ralph Penland on drums, but on this particular night, Lanny Morgan was there too, adding to the riff of what John Coltrane called "a communion with the natural laws."

Morgan plays the tenor sax like no one you've ever heard, evoking visions of places you've never been and starry nights you've never seen. There's a haunting quality to music like that, reaching back into the core of your memories, and your loneliness.

But nothing is lonelier than taps, played over graveyards and military compounds, either for the night or for the dead, like someone sobbing in the distance.

It can stir memories too as you're walking among the crosses and the stars of David that memorialize the men and women who have died during the war in Iraq. People like Jonathan Falaniko, Aaron Reese, Roger Ling and Melissa Hobart. Names on a board like a scroll in heaven.

Markers by the Santa Monica Pier are put there every Sunday morning by L.A.'s Veterans for Peace, reaching from a concrete boardwalk toward the ocean. They call it Arlington West, and if you go there, be prepared to be absorbed by the terrible loneliness, because you come to realize, walking among it, that death is the loneliest place of all.

Hundreds, maybe thousands, visited the orderly rows of crosses placed there by volunteers in a sunrise mist that laid over the white sand like a bridal veil and then was brushed away by the dawning warmth of the sun. They came on the Sunday of the Memorial Day weekend, silently, thoughtfully, tearfully. They came to honor Linda Jimenez, Frank Rivers, Erica McKinley, Michael Tarlavsky....

A recorded version of taps drifted into the crowds and through the white, wooden markers. Flags rustled and flowers swayed in a breeze that came from the sea, as though all of nature were joining in commemoration.

It was a perfect place to honor the young whose lives ended too soon. Once they were sons and brothers and fathers and dreamers, and now they are one with their dreams.

They were 20 years old, 25, 23, 25, 22, 24, 21, 22....

Up until that Sunday, 1,657 American servicemen and women had been killed in Iraq. And 26,551 more had been wounded and injured. And beyond any physical scars, all who survive will suffer wounds to their souls that will never heal.

The numbers increase in the desert sands far away, even as taps plays over the ocean sands at Santa Monica. What missile will fly next? What suicide bomb will shatter the flesh of a living human? Enemies and friends perish

as one in the overheated atmosphere of war. There are no separations in the mutuality of their dying.

I guess it was the repetition of taps playing throughout the day that reached into me as I walked among the markers. The mournful tune of goodbye played against a trill of laughter from the pier, like tears at a circus. I could look up at a helicopter trailing a banner for the next Batman movie. I could look toward the surf where colorful beach umbrellas were appearing by the dozens. I could look to the distance where seagulls ruled the sky. Affirmations of life were everywhere.

But it was taps that filled my mind, blowing over the terminated futures of Nicholas Perez, Michael Halal, Lonny Wells, Isaiah Hunt....

At Henri's, I heard an alto sax in the hands of Lanny Morgan play sweet loneliness into an audience composed of people beyond their fighting years. Some were veterans of other wars, with pasts of their own, locked in the compelling blues of a master's instrument. There was a oneness of spirit there too, but it was in the camaraderie of those who had survived.

Other moods floated that night on the jazz licks of Hammond and Morgan. They could play for the rest of their lives and never play the same tune twice, so vast is their repertoire and so unique their approach to music. I listened knowing what I'd be doing the next day, because I'd been putting off a visit to the beach of the dead, and I was determined to make the trip. I owe them that much.

So I stood there on the sands of America, head bowed, listening to the sound of taps over the grave markers of our collective conscience, and I mourned with the melody of our failure.

Al Martinez's column appears Mondays and Fridays. He is at al.martinez@latimes.com.