

PAUL HIGAKI: THE WHISTLER NISEI TROMBONE MASTER 1924 - 1970

by George Yoshida



*Paul Higaki with Lionel Hampton.
Circa July 1949.*

They called him “Murphy.” He did things other young Niseis definitely did not. On a Boy Scout camping trip, the guys took the usual hamburgers and hot dogs—Murphy took a rabbit to cook!

Prewar San Francisco Nisei went to Commerce, Lowell or Poly High; Murphy chose Balboa. His friend, Kiyoshi Kawahata, sacrificed his love of music to pursue a stable profession; Murphy chose to become a trombone player in a swing band!

Paul Fumio Higaki, the son of a prominent dentist was born on July 28, 1924, in San Francisco. His teen years were particularly momentous—it was then that he was turned-on to music and instruments. Starting with the soprano bugle in the Troop 12 Boy Scout drum and bugle corps, he changed to the larger baritone bugle as the corps developed into a crack 99-piece ensemble. About this time at John Swett Junior High School, the trombone entered his life and his love affair with this instrument persisted for the rest of his relatively short life.

Tad Ishida, a teenage chum and fellow bugler in the same drum corps as Paul, played the trumpet and also enjoyed listening to swing bands. One Saturday morning in 1940, Tad and Paul, in great anticipation, hurried down to the Golden Gate Theater on Market Street in San Francisco. The theater marquee shouted in bold block letters: “ON STAGE—TOMMY DORSEY, THE SENTIMENTAL GENTLEMAN OF SWING AND HIS ORCHESTRA!”

Clutching their “four-bit” tickets [50 cents], they rushed in to get the best seats in the house—front row, center—right in front of the theater stage. Being Saturday, five live performances of the band were interspersed with an insipid cowboy movie, some news and a cartoon were promised.

It was a memorable, exciting happening

for the young swingsters. They dug the marvelous band with its powerful trumpet section, the beautiful blend of the trombone section with Tommy Dorsey playing the sweet lead, the superb sounds of five saxophones in syncopated harmony—supported by a rhythm section



with Buddy Rich on drums kicking the band into a righteous swingin' groove. On top of all this good stuff, young Frank Sinatra was lamenting, "I'll never smile again..." with Jo Stafford and the Pied Pipers; and Connie Haines was singing her cute stuff.

Imagine the two adolescent Niseis, oblivious to the hundreds surrounding them, sitting in awe and pure joy. It's too much! Paul with super-intensity concentrates and listens, all ears, to Dorsey's trombone—the purity of the open horn, the different sounds created by the mutes, the phrasing of melodies, the smoothness of the rapid jazz phrases. Says Paul to himself, "Damn, it sounds so fine...I gotta play like that!" Tad likes Ziggy Elman's hot trumpet, but he really prefers Harry James.

After sitting through the complete second show, Tad cuts out, leaving Paul sitting by himself. He's staying put—"I'll catch you later, Tad. The band's gonna play some other tunes and I'm gonna sit here 'til the last show...gonna dig the band and close up this place."

After the third performance of the band, a member of Dorsey's staff approached Paul, who was still sitting in the same center seat. The man handed him an innocuous brown bag, "It's from Tommy." Tommy Dorsey had observed the same light Asian lad with glasses sitting in the same spot in the front row—show after show. Touched and amused by the lad's loyalty and enthusiasm for his music, Dorsey had sent Paul a hamburger

Merced Assembly Center, The Stardusters. Circa June 1942

Higaki scribbled in his scrap book below the photograph of his Stardusters, "[This is] my first band. Organized at the Merced Assembly Center in June, 1942...The band stunk, but we got our kicks anyhow."

sandwich and a coke! (One wonders if Paul slept that night.)

In 1942, Higaki was interned with his family in the Merced Assembly Center where, as a seventeen-year-old, he organized his first dance band, the Stardusters. Higaki scribbled in his scrap book below the photograph of his Stardusters, "[This is] my first band. Organized at the Merced Assembly Center in June, 1942. Leo Kikuchi (second sax man from the right) was killed in action with the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. The band stunk, but we got our kicks anyhow."

Subsequently, in the Amache Detention Center Higaki was a member of the teaching staff of the Granada School Music Department and also directed a ten-piece dance band. In May, 1943, Higaki volunteered for service in the U.S. Army and trained with the 442nd Regimental Combat Team at Camp Shelby, Mississippi; he was medically discharged five months later.

Soon after his discharge, Higaki, at age

nineteen and professionally known as Paul "Murphy" Lee, received a telegram requesting his services from Lee Williams who led a ten-piece dance band in the Midwest ballroom circuit. "It was a great band with some of the finest guys!" said Higaki, who was featured as a soloist on the trombone and as a vocalist on novelty numbers.

Higaki's next job was with the Bill Cross band which opened an engagement in the Empire Room of the Schroeder Hotel Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on January 23, 1945. In the February 15, 1945 issue of the Milwaukee Sentinel, Buck Herzog wrote the following: "There are four lads in the Bill Cross band at the Schroeder Hotel who have seen long service with Uncle Sam's warriors. One of them is a Chinese-Hawaiian, Paul Lee, who is affectionately referred to by his cohorts as Murphy." (Higaki, as did many other Niseis in the entertainment world, used a Chinese pseudonym during World War II because bookers would not hire Japanese names. It was easier for Paul to let on that he was Chinese-Hawaiian, than try to

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