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History of Dance Argentine Tango

History of Argentine Tango

by Mike Higgins

When talking about the history of the Tango, the reader should consider that although there were many 'influences' in the creation and life of the Tango, it is very important not to assume that it was some form of linear development. So the idea that you start with this dance or piece of music and along comes this piece or step, and overnight the whole thing changes, is very wrong.

Whilst dances and music from around the world have had some influence, this rather detracts from the people who really created and evolved the Tango into its current form. These are the people of Buenos Aires, who in the bars, cafes and dance halls made the Tango, danced the Tango, lived, loved and occasionally died for the Tango.

It is the voice of the streets of Buenos Aires. Any suggestion that they may be dancing some sort of second hand steps or regurgitating music taken from Europe or Africa must be rejected as somewhat insulting to all the great milongueros who have danced and innovated down through the years. It is equally insulting to the great Tango maestros who have drawn on their own life experiences when composing music.

The history of the development of the Tango in Buenos Aires requires the reader to take a journey back to when Buenos Aires was a large settlement, under the control of the declining Spanish Empire. The settlers were primarily Spanish immigrants and the slaves which were transported from Africa. (Buenos Aires - *Good Winds* in Spanish, but perhaps better translated as "Fair Winds", as in navigation)

However these settlers were for many years attacked and repulsed by the native peoples of the area. In 1541, the settlement was abandoned but re-established in 1580 on a permanent basis. Following this, there began a much larger battle for the area, which brought into play the Gaucho, the South American plains riders. Though initially thought of as the South American equivalent of the "cowboy", in fact they were seen more as freedom fighters and fought fearlessly as a type of light cavalry. They carried out hit and run raids, usually as part of a private army for a local land owner or caudillos, local warlords in all but name.



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On May 25, 1810, the citizens of Buenos Aires ousted the Spanish Viceroy and a provincial government was established. On July 9, 1816 independence from the Spanish Empire was declared but which was not recognized until 1862.

Shortly after, the interests of big business dictated that the pampas should be cleared of the native Indian population and the vast number of gauchos. 5 divisions of well armed troops were sent in under the control of General Julio Argentino Roca to effectively clear the plains of the Araucanian Indians and most of the gauchos. However, as with the industrial revolution in England, these now displaced people began to drift towards the rapidly growing city of Buenos Aires. In this drift came the Payadores, traveling musicians from the Gaucho stock. They would arrive at a bar, and begin to strum a simple tune with its base on the 4th string, and sing ad-libbed lyrics, usually obscene. It's possible that this had some native Indian rhythms or tunes. This does offer a fairly good explanation of the main input into the creation of the milonga, but by no means the only explanation.

The Africans, who had been brought across as slaves, had their own brand of rhythmic music. Most notably the Candombe, which was an athletic dance. No doubt, somewhere along the way, the Candombe met the payadore and his guitar. So may have been born the Milonga in a form more recognizable to the current generation. It is also possible that the Polka, Waltz, Mazurka and Schottische, also had an influence on the Milonga.

Almost certainly, the most important factor in the evolution of the Tango was the influence brought in by the Habanera, created in Havana, Cuba, and also known as the Andalusian Tango.

Unfortunately there is now insufficient information to assess exactly how this was originally danced. The Habanera was based on the concept of a 'walk', the same as the Tango.

At some point the Milonga and The Habanera were fused to form the embryonic version of the Tango. At this point you have a dance which has influences from around the world.

From about 1880, large scale immigration, most of whom were men, increased the population Buenos Aires. One figure suggests that at one point the ratio may have been about 50 men for every woman.

Men tempted by the idea of a better life and streets paved with gold, instead found a lonely squalid place with muddy streets and poor accommodation. Often they were stranded on the outskirts of the city and everyday became a struggle to survive.

The one trade that flourished above all others was prostitution. A reflection of the hardships endured by the

people, a way of survival for some, and a desperate means of earning income for others. It is unlikely the working girls saw much of the money. For many men, owning a woman who earned good money working in a brothel, became a status symbol.

It is here in the brothels and bordellos on the back streets of Buenos Aires, that the Tango really came to life. These illegal brothels, most became known as Academies de Dance, were the massage parlors of their day. The dance had to be simple, so if the police raided the joint (police which hadn't been bribed), there would appear to be "dancing instruction" going on.

It was the rise of the Compadritos and the Compadres who really launched the Tango. Compadritos - the street man, sometimes but not always, small time villains, petty criminals and pimps. Compadres - the local men of some means, sometimes shady dealings, slightly better off than the compadritos who tried to emulate them.

The dance probably started out as some form of acting out of the relationship between the prostitute and pimp. This was often reflected in the titles of the first tangos which referred to characters in the world of prostitution. It must also be noted that when written lyrics began to appear, women were often portrayed as evil temptresses, there to lead men into sin and degradation.

At this time, the dance was totally rejected by the upper class elite of Buenos Aires society, as a dirty street dance. Although, many of the young well-to-do gentlemen, would allegedly visit the 'Dance Academies' for instruction.

Around 1880, an new instrument arrived from Germany, the Bandoneon. A difficult instrument to master but its wailing sound caught the very feeling of the Tango. It became inextricably linked to the music of the Tango, from then to now.

From the early 1900, however, a new type of lyric began to appear. One recalling bygone times, often with a sad, melancholia, recalling wasted lives, lost loves, unrequited love, the missing of a mother, the missing of your barrios [district] or street but most all, the love of the Tango itself. The lyrics were written in the language of the streets of Buenos Aires, Lunfardo, a mixture of Spanish, Italian, Native Creole and words strangely twisted.

The change in the Tango lyrics may also have occurred at this time because it is thought that Tango was first demonstrated by the Argentinean playboy Ricardo Güiraldes in 1910/1911 in Paris. It was so different from the dances of the time and considered somewhat obscene. It challenged the conventions of acceptable public behavior of the time. The Comtesse Melainie de Pourtalis stated, upon seeing a demonstration of the dance in 1912, "Is one supposed to dance it standing up".

However, the rapid acceptance by the people of Europe of the dance, invariably meant that it was re-exported

back to Buenos Aires. Now it was embraced by the upper classes, who had so vigorously opposed it only a few years early.

The dance was banned by the Pope after a private viewing, and Kaiser Wilhelm 1 forbade his officers to dance it whilst wearing their uniforms, effectively banning it from all state balls.

Yet the Tango survived, and evolved, thanks to the people of Buenos Aires. But its not the end of the story. In a way, the Tango is even more threatened today than in its early years. Why? Because of the creeping Europeanization of dance.

More than anything else, the Tango is about a connection, an empathy between two people, the need to embrace, and be in the arms of another, to escape, albeit for just a brief moment of time, and in that moment, to live a life time ...

The Europeans and the North Americans have no connection to this concept. It is totally alien to them. They see the dance in terms of "how flashy can I be with the steps" and I want more steps, and more steps. All I want to do is impress the people standing around the edges of the dance floor. This is, in a way, the very antithesis of the concept of the Tango.

Tango must be simply danced, with immense feeling, with a sense of energy flowing between the dancers. This energy grows or decreases as the music ebbs and flows. It is a seduction, or a private conversation, something to be quietly shared, not publicly displayed.

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With grateful thanks to the following and many others whom I can't remember:
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