

The Tango and its Origins

Like many another child of doubtful parentage, there is no doubt about *where* the tango was born—in the poor districts of late 19th Century Buenos Aires—but the details of its ancestry are much harder to unravel. The stratum of society from which it sprang wisely preferred to leave its dubious activities unrecorded. Nonetheless, even without much first-hand evidence, the broad picture is clear enough, although scholars still wrangle hotly over the details.

Beginning in the mid-19th century, Argentina was transformed in a mere 70 years from a poor sparsely inhabited country into one of immense wealth. This extraordinary growth centred on its main port, Buenos Aires, which became the nation's capital in 1880, and thousands moved into the city from the countryside, attracted by the usual legend of gold-paved streets.

Prominent among them were two groups of particular significance in the tango story: the *gauchos*—the nomadic cowhands of the *pampas*—and the Afro-Argentines, descended from slaves imported in the 17th Century. The other chief contributors to the genesis of the tango, immigrants from Spain and Italy, were meanwhile arriving in millions and bringing with them their own countries' rich musical heritage.

There was, of course, no place for them in the rich and elegantly rebuilt centre of a city that by now claimed to be the Paris of the Southern Hemisphere. They settled instead in sprawling, poorly serviced and overcrowded suburbs where the warm climate, one-room living and the needs of a thriving port soon spawned a profusion of seedy cafes, dance halls and brothels. This was the rich seed-bed in which, through a complicated process of cross-pollination between different traditions of music and dance, the tango eventually blossomed.

One important ingredient of the emerging genre was the traditional dance and music brought into the city by the displaced *gauchos*. Like the romanticised cowboys of the USA, they had, and still have, a special place in the Argentinian psyche. Their vigorous and aggressive dancing, performed to improvised guitar music, embodied the qualities for which they were so admired: independence, toughness, loyalty, and a fierce code of honour. They became a kind of symbol for many poor and disappointed young immigrants, who signalled their disaffection with society by adopting a stylised form of *gaucho* dress. They naturally attempted to mimic *gaucho*

dance and music too, and in the process created an amalgam between it and their own Spanish and Italian styles.

For their entertainment, the Afro-Argentines favoured large gatherings at which couples indulged in near-violent and sexually provocative dance improvisations. Two particular actions were an essential of every such performance: a kind of jerky, athletic contortion of the body and a sudden pause in which both partners held a pose of menacing suspense.

In the close-packed slums it was only to be expected that these different strands should merge, especially as the dancers and the musicians who accompanied them were amateurs, with no ingrained adherence to any particular tradition. If they liked what they saw or heard they reproduced it without any qualms concerning purity of style.

So, the embryonic tango which flourished in the city's brothels acquired the characteristic jerks and pauses of the Afro-Argentines, the *macho* posturing of the *gaucho* style and distinctive rhythmic and melodic contributions from the Spanish and Italian immigrants. Some of the dance elements clearly derive from *flamenco*, but the mulatto origin of the first famous tango musicians to emerge from the shadows of history emphasises the crucial African contribution to the gradually emerging style.

By the 1890s, tango music and dance—still virtually inseparable at this stage—had acquired most of the mannerisms we associate with them today, albeit in a cruder and less polite form. The mode of dancing, with the couple plastered together from knee to chest, legs closely entwined, was frankly erotic and revealed its bordello origins as surely as the women's provocatively slit skirts and tight, low-cut bodices. The music, usually performed by an ensemble of flute, violin, piano, guitar and clarinet, had by now crystallised around the modern tango's most easily recognised feature: the heavily accented bass rhythm, (lo-ong, short, long, long), derived from the immigrants' *habaneras* and polkas. One vital ingredient of the tango's musical personality, the *bandoneón*, had not yet reached Buenos Aires.

The blatant sexuality of the dance attracted avid spectators and keen participants and, in the last years of the century, it spread like fire through the undergrowth of the city's music-halls and low-class theatres. It soon reached the more select bordellos that catered to the wealthy men about town and became just as popular there. (One of the most famous tangos was written for the city's police chief by the pianist of his favourite brothel.) Many 'gentlemen' became accomplished proponents of the dance, but as no respectable lady could possibly participate, it remained excluded from polite society.

The *bandoneón* was the German contribution to the tango. This odd form of concertina works rather like a mouth organ in that each of its 71 keys produces two different notes, depending on whether the bellows are "sucking" or "blowing". This makes it much harder to play than the accordion or the conventional concertina, but when sailors brought it to BA around 1900, it was taken up with huge enthusiasm. It very soon came to be regarded as indispensable to any tango band, its nasal tone imparting a special 'bite' to the sound that perfectly matched the genre's function as the under-classes' music of protest and lament. At about the same time, the tango's fundamentally sad and bitter nature was made explicit when it acquired lyrics that almost invariably mourned lost loves or complained of injustice.

It was through the rich gentlemen of Buenos Aires that the tango reached France around 1912 and from there swept around the world. First demonstrated in a fashionable Paris salon as a scandalous but dazzling party trick, it was tamed just enough to be acceptable in adventurous social circles eager for novelty. So the tango that arrived in Paris a lady of questionable virtue set out on her world tour a polished *débutante*.

The French dancing masters took good care to retain sufficient of the tango's erotic essence to shock the old and guarantee the wild enthusiasm of the young. A noble French lady is said to have enquired, "Is one really supposed to dance it standing up?" and an English clergyman complained in *The Times* about the popular Tango Tea Dances, "It is not what happens there that so much matters as what happens after it!"

The patina of respectability acquired in Europe and the USA finally allowed the tango to emerge into polite Argentinian society. Couturiers devised clothing and even corsetry that allowed women the physical freedom the dance required without totally abandoning contemporary standards of modesty. Respectable young Argentinian women flocked to join in and the tango became and, has ever since remained, not merely the national dance but a national obsession that somehow expresses the Argentinian soul. Its essence is felt to be enshrined in the *bandoneón*, and as a consequence, Argentina celebrates Bandoneón Day every July 11.

In the social context of its birth, the tango was inevitably an expression of male dominance and female compliance and some commentators continue to see it this way. However, another interpretation is possible. In this view, women find its characteristically confrontational moves, in which there is no distinction between the steps assigned to each sex, the perfect symbolic vehicle with which to assert their own sexual power and their equality with men. The implied dissatisfaction with an unequal society brings us nicely, if

somewhat paradoxically, back to the tango's very roots and perhaps explains, in part, the worldwide revival of interest in the tango. However, that revival is also largely due to the development of *Tango nuevo* in the hands of the late, great Astor Piazzolla, extraordinary composer and virtuoso of the *bandoneón* who opened a whole new chapter in the tango's fascinating story.

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