

A brief history of Tango

The popular myth that Tango evolved in the bordellos of Buenos Aires is far from the whole truth.

Argentina was undergoing a massive immigration during the later part of the 1800s and early 1900s. In 1869 Buenos Aires had a population of 180,000. By 1914 its population was 1.5 million. The intermixing of African, Spanish, Italian, British, Polish, Russian and native-born Argentines resulted in a melting-pot of cultures, and each borrowed dance and music from one another. The European dances undoubtedly travelled with the immigrants and became mixed with the popular Habanera from Cuba and the Candombe rhythms from Africa.

Most immigrants were single men hoping to earn their fortunes in this newly expanding country (at one point men outnumbered women by at least ten to one). They were typically poor and desperate, hoping to make enough money to return to Europe or bring their families to Argentina. The evolution of Tango reflects their profound sense of loss and longing for the people and places they left behind.

Most likely the Tango was born in African-Argentine dance venues attended by “compaditros”, young men, mostly native born and poor, who liked to dress in slouch hats, loosely tied neckerchiefs, and high-heeled boots with knives casually tucked into their belts. The compaditros took the Tango back to the Corrales Viejos – the slaughterhouse district of Buenos Aires – and introduced it in various low-life establishments where dancing took place; bards, dance halls, and brothels as well as the shabby courtyards of tenement blocks. It was here that African rhythms met the Argentine milonga music (a fast paced polka) and soon new steps were invented and took hold.

The polka, Viennese waltz and mazurka were the only “partner” dances of the mid nineteenth century, and in these the man and woman faced each other at a respectful distance. Even so, for the couple to be holding one hand with the man’s other arm round his partner’s waist must have been as risqué as one could get in polite circles.

Although high society looked down upon such activities – not least the shocking close embrace of the Tangueros - the well heeled sons of the oligarchy were understandably attracted rather than repulsed. Eventually, everyone found out about the Tango and, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the Tango as both a dance and as an embryonic form of popular music had established a firm foothold in the fast-expanding city of its birth.

Given the “shortage” of women, being able to dance well became a key attribute for young men to woo their sweethearts. This gave rise to the all male “practicás” where men danced together to perfect their Tango technique. This was pure practical necessity – there was nothing sexually ambiguous about men dancing together. Young men would first learn the follower’s steps – for several months – before graduating to learning how to lead.

The worldwide spread of Tango came in the early 1900s when wealthy sons of Argentine society families made their way to Paris and introduced the Tango to a society eager for innovation and not entirely averse to the risqué nature of the dance or dancing with young, wealthy Latin men. By 1913 the dance had become an international phenomenon in Paris, London, and New York. There were

Tango teas, Tango train excursions, and even Tango colours – most notably Orange. The Argentine elite who had shunned the Tango were now forced into accepting it with national pride.

The Tango spread worldwide throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The dance appeared in movies and Tango singers travelled the world. By the 1930s the golden age of Tango was beginning. The country became one of the ten richest countries in the world and music, poetry and culture flourished. Tango came to be a fundamental expression of Argentine culture, and was strongly encouraged under the Peron government.

The golden age lasted through the 1940s and into the 50s, but came abruptly to an end with the military coup in 1955. Anything associated with the previous Peron regime was strongly discouraged. As political repression developed, Tango song lyrics increasingly reflected political feelings until they came to be banned as subversive. Large dance venues were closed and large gatherings in general were prohibited. The necessity of going underground combined with the eventual invasion of Rock and Roll (which was subtly promoted by the Government to weaken Tango further) sent Tango into decline until the mid-1980s when the stage show Tango Argentine opened in Paris. Once again it was Paris that was to launch the rekindling of the Tango phenomenon worldwide. The show toured the world and stimulated a revival that is still growing across the world today. Stage shows such as “Tango Por Dos” and “Tango Fire” appear in the UK regularly.

However, this form of Tango (sometimes called “fantasia”) is a distant relation of the Salon Tango. It attracts large appreciative audiences, but some say that it is an artificial representation of Tango, and lacks the subtlety, connection and passion that are the key elements of Tango.

New styles of Tango dance and music are now evolving. Gotan Project recorded “la revancha del tango” in 1997 and since then artists such as Carlos Liberinski, Bajofondo, and Otros Aires have followed and their music is frequently heard on TV and radio. This “Nuevo” Tango music is inspiring the modern development of the dance, using more off-balance and extravagant movements that can be used on less crowded dance floors.

In the UK, Tango has seen accelerating growth since the 1990s. Most large towns now have growing tango dance communities, and Argentine Tango also features on the BBC’s “Strictly Come dancing”.