

# Tango!

*By Oscar Escalada,*

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Tango music is representative of Argentina in the same way that Son represents Cuba, the Samba represents Brazil and Jazz represents the U.S. This does not mean that these musical mediums are the only ones which have developed in these countries of the Americas; however, these musical idioms best represent their respective country throughout the world.

## **The Origin of the Word**

In my opinion, the word *tango* is a native to America. It began with the Quechua language, which together with Aymara and other lesser languages, was used by the Incas and some Andean nations.

The word *tango* comes from *tanpu* in Quechua, and for phonetic reasons the Spanish tongue transformed it into *tambo*.

The original meaning of *tambo* meant a site, meeting, or inn. Later it began to be used for the places and meeting sites where black people met up until 1780. It then started to be changed into the word *tango*. These phonetic changes appear by association, in a pan-Hispanic phenomenon that consists of changing letters in words. I invite the reader to discover more about this in detail at [www.oescalada.com](http://www.oescalada.com) > Articles and research > Etymology of the word tango.

The native word *tambo* is the same word that later is used for a brothel. Indians, black slaves and prostitutes were among

the lowest strata of society and, therefore, the same word was used to refer to all of them. Something similar happens with the Portuguese word *quilombo*. In Brazil, this name was given to places inhabited by black slaves who escaped from their master's plantation. We can imagine that if a slave was already considered among the lowest social strata, being an escaped slave was even worse. By extension then, calling *prostibulos* (a brothel) a *quilombo*, shows that both words already had similar social connotations. Today, this word means a *noisy racket, mess, and disorder*, perhaps because of the association with the noise of a brothel and the disorder of the rooms. However, even in the 60's, brothels used to be called quilombos.

The period 1780 to 1860 was a time of transition when both words coexisted synonymously.

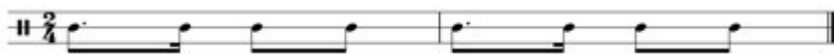
Around 1860, the word *tango* is identified as being used to refer to the dance. The name was also used for the place where tango was danced; whereas *tambo* remained as the word for brothel.

In 1917, a Tango was sung for the first time. It was *Mi noche triste* by Pascual Contursi and Samuel Castriota, sung by Carlos Gardel. From that moment the word tango widens its meaning, defining not only the dance but also the song, thus bringing a reflective attitude that it never had before. Simultaneously the word *milonga* came to mean both the dance that is akin to the tango, and the place to dance. Both names continue to this day, and it is correct to say "*I'm going to a milonga to dance a milonga*".

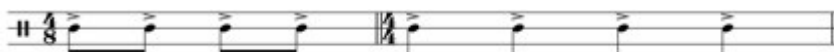
With the appearance of Astor Piazzolla in the 50's, the word tango broadened its meaning to designate that music that is not for dancing can be heard in concert. The revolution caused by this extraordinary composer goes hand in hand with the mass demonstrations that rock and roll produced, filling stadiums with people going not to dance but to listen to the music.

## The Evolution of Rhythm

It is recognized that in America from the late nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, there is a common rhythm from the Gulf of Mexico to Rio de la Plata. The rhythm is called many names according to the diverse region in which it is found. In the U.S it is called *rag time*, *habanera* in Cuba, *maxixe* in Brazil, *tango and milonga* in Argentina, *candombe* in Uruguay, etc. This rhythmic structure comes from the French quadrille that settled in Spain, and which in turn originates from English country dance. But in each place it was given different characteristics, regarding its accent, its speed, or in other parameters, making it locally differently over time. This scheme is as follows:

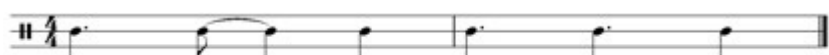


By 1940, the rhythm of tango is more marked, accompanied in some way by the logical imperative of the moment. Since 1930, Argentina was rocked by successive coups and military governments. The pace was closer to the military marches and had the following form:



The dominance of Astor Piazzolla in the Buenos Aires scene and the advent of new tango have resulted in a rhythm that can be considered a derivation of the late nineteenth century original, as it differs only in the added ligation extension

between the two central values and is expressed in 4/4 instead of 2/4. However, it must be added that Piazzolla himself made mention of that rhythm and accent that he heard many times in his childhood in New York. The Piazzolla family lived in Greenwich next to a synagogue, and Astor soaked up the accents of popular Jewish folk music that he heard at weddings. It is possible that both things are united in his spirit to produce a synthesis. This rhythmic pattern is:



Today we can recognize the juxtaposition and simultaneous use of these rhythmic patterns.

### **Afincamiento**

During the gestation period of the tango, there was an area surrounding Buenos Aires where there was an exchange of goods and services between the countryside and the city. This area is denominated in different ways according to names that come from different cultures. So the Mozarabe produced *arrabal*, suburb, from the Latin *suburb* (*sub* and *urbis*) or the medieval *extramuros* – outside the walls.

The tango was born in the brothels, in the *piringundines* (working class dance halls), and in the slum tenements of the suburbs of Buenos Aires. It has deep popular roots in its origins, is socially graded and was intended to be practiced on the outskirts of the city because the prudish society of the time rejected its practice in salons and thought of it as immoral. But it was precisely this prudery that took tango to the salons. Good sons and children of wealthy families used to go on a spree and visit those places where they could have a

good time. They learned the tango and took it back to the salons. Pope Pius IX gave his permission, after witnessing a couple dancing the tango in his presence, and he decided that a dance with embracing couples had nothing obscene in it.

However, the tango had to be first accepted in France, a country frequented and adored by the Argentine bourgeoisie, before being inserted definitively in its place of origin: Buenos Aires.

As a result, the tango in Buenos Aires grew in its early days from composers and poets who developed their themes according to the fundamentally *machista* social structure. Carlos Gardel, Alfredo Lepe, Pascual Contursi, were using retrospective themes in their lyrics – political, historical, descriptive and nostalgic, and especially unrequited love, where the man was always “betrayed” by a woman and never the reverse.

During the decade of the 40's, the golden age of tango, there were no cafes or restaurants that did not have large or small tango orchestras. You could count, only in Buenos Aires, more than three hundred tango orchestras, which were called “*Orquestas típicas*”. The musicians began work at six in the evening and finished at six in the morning. Such was tango boom of the time. You could not even think of organizing a carnival dance without having an *orquesta típica*. Many big football clubs had two, three or more alternating bands on the stage. It was customary to “double” or “triple”, meaning that they played in two or three different places, at each venue.

Big names like Francisco Canaro, Anibal Troilo, Osvaldo Pugliese, Horacio Salgán, Juan D'Arienzo, Mariano Mores, to name only a handful, are now written into the history of tango in gold letters. By 1950 a young bandoneon player who played in the orchestra of Anibal Troilo began his turn with tango. He studied with Alberto Ginastera in Buenos Aires and later with Nadia Boulanger in France. This person was Astor Piazzolla, whose music differed from the great tango composers

in that that they composed music “of” Buenos Aires, whereas Piazzolla’s music is “Buenos Aires”.

Little by little, great poets who came to tango from within the tango perspective wrote master texts. Those poets included Homero Manzi, Enrique Cadícamo Cátulo Castillo, and Enrique Santos Discépolo.

The artistic height which tango achieved led the government on June 28, 1990, to create the sixteenth of the National Academies: the National Academy of Tango. It is currently chaired by the poet Horacio Ferrer.

Today, the younger generation has taken the baton and produced the rebirth of the tango age with a richer outlook and with more elaborate harmonic arrangements. But you can also see the creation and search for new forms of expression and fusion on the horizon. Many critics say the tango is dead. But very much to the contrary, I think tango is more alive than ever. Of course, this is no longer the tango of 1917, but neither is music composed in the same way Mozart did.

*Translated from the Spanish by Martin Clarke, Argentina*

*Edited by Diana J. Leland, USA*