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The Hidden History of Tango

The history of Tango is fascinating and complex. The evolution of the dance has profound implications for the way we dance today, and Tango music has become one of the great World Music genres.

For the first century of its history, while Tango music struggled for and then achieved respectability, the dance was neglected by historians and academics. The articles on these pages are based on many years of research in areas sometimes not covered by the official histories of Tango. The aim is to get to the heart of the Tango from a dancer's perspective, but not forgetting the rich history of the music.

We will examine the story of the dance, from its earliest stages, through its worldwide success before and after the First World War, the Golden Age from the mid 1930s until the coup in Argentina in 1955, the dark ages of Tango when the dance was pushed underground and persecuted, and the fabulous Tango renaissance which has spread the dance once again all over the world. An overview of the history of the music will examine its evolution and the influences that formed it, putting the great Tango artists in context.

If you have any questions about the history of Tango not covered in these pages, please e-mail us and we will do our best to answer them.

The History of Tango Dance by Christine Denniston

Christine Denniston is author of [The Meaning of Tango](#), [Dancing Tango - Unlocking the Mysteries](#) and [Secrets of the Tango - 1914](#)

This history of Tango Dance is based on many years of study and research in Buenos Aires. The subject is a huge one, and the great dancers, those who were genuinely part of the living culture of Tango, have tended not to have academic backgrounds, while the academics in Argentina have tended to neglect the dance, concentrating instead on the music. There are many gaps in our understanding of Tango's history, particularly the history of the Dance, that might never be fully filled.

If I talk about the history of Tango Dance, I need to divide it into four periods. First there are the things that I have seen myself. I first went to Buenos Aires in 1993, ten years after the Tango Renaissance began. I will tell you as accurately as I can about the things that I have seen.

In my research I have spoken to many people who were living witnesses to the story of Tango. I have spent a great deal of time listening to great dancers, getting to know them, and trying to get to the full picture behind the individual stories. I can take this second period back to about 1940, practically to the beginning of the Golden Age of Tango Dance.

Before that is the period for which we have some kind of evidence - sound recordings, photographs, film clips and contemporary accounts. I shall try to pick my way through the evidence I have found to give the important facts about Tango History.

And before that is the pre-history of Tango Dance. This is the period when the contemporary evidence is practically non-existent. Our understanding is based on later commentators. I will present the few facts that we have, and do my best to interpret what little evidence there is. No one will ever know the full story of how Tango began. All anyone can do is give you his or her best guess.

Couple Dancing and the Beginning of Tango

Although it seems now to be the only possible hold for couple dancing, Tango is only the third dance in history done with the man and woman facing each other, with the man holding the woman's right hand in his left, and with his right arm around her.

The first dance done in this hold was the Viennese Waltz, which was a craze across Europe in the 1830s. Couple dancing before the Viennese Waltz was formal, with couples performing choreographed steps, and generally with no more physical contact than holding hands - if that (although some Renaissance dances like la volta could involve surprising levels of intimacy).

The second couple dance to use this hold was the Polka, which became the fashion in the 1840s.

The third dance, Tango, was radically different from anything that came before it because it introduced the concept of improvisation for the first time, and was a huge influence on all couple dancing in the Twentieth Century.

Immigrants into Argentina would have brought the fashionable new dances, with their shocking new hold. Exactly how and when the Tango began to evolve from these dances we can never know. The reason for this is that Tango was created by the kinds of people who generally leave no mark on history except by dying in wars - the poor, the underprivileged. Often we have to pick our way through comments made by people who were not part of their culture, who knew little or nothing about Tango. However, there are a few facts that we can rely on.

The first piece of music written and published in Argentina describing itself as a tango appeared in 1857. It was called "Toma maté, ché". The word Tango at that time probably referred to what is now known as *Tango Andaluz*, Andalucian Tango, a style of music from the area of Spain which is also the home of Flamenco, which was one of the most popular kinds of music in Buenos Aires in the middle of the Nineteenth Century.

There are a number of theories about the origin of the word "Tango" in Argentina. One of the more popular in recent years has been that it came from the community of people of African descent, who mixed the name of their god of the drum with the Spanish word for drum (*tambor*), and came up with the word "Tango". There is some evidence that the African community did use

the word. It seems to me, though, that if the word "Tango" was already in common use in Spanish to describe a style of music at the time when Tango was first being born, then that surely is the most likely root of the word, even though Tango in Argentina became something completely different from the Spanish music from which it borrowed its name. In any case, there is no traditional African dance done in couple hold, so important to the development of Tango. Couple dancing as we think of it certainly seems to have begun in Europe. Members of the African community in Buenos Aires certainly joined in and influenced the development of the dance and music, just as members all the other communities in Buenos Aires did. However, there does not seem to be any real evidence that the dance originated in the African community. Nor does there seem to be any remaining influence of African dance on it - so obvious even today in Salsa and Swing dance, for example.

It is my belief that the most important group in the development of Tango was one of the most neglected and ignored: poor, undereducated, underprivileged, straight white men – the people whose only mark on history was usually when they died in huge numbers in wars. That, of course, is only my opinion. So little evidence remains from this period that no one can be sure of anything.

We have evidence of the Tango being sung in theatres throughout the second half of the Nineteenth Century, and of a couple dancing Tango on stage in Buenos Aires in the 1890s, so certainly the dance was established before the end of the Nineteenth Century. [In the next article we will look at Tango's origins](#) - how and where Tango evolved.

Clichés about Tango Origins of the Dance

There is a cliché that Tango was born in the brothels of Buenos Aires. However, a more likely explanation is that the brothels were where people of the upper and middle classes first encountered it. Members of Argentina's literary classes - the people who are most likely to leave written evidence - did not mix socially with members of the lower, immigrant classes except in brothels.

Brothels were major places of entertainment for the working classes. The terrible shortage of women in Buenos Aires made prostitution a thriving industry. A shortage of women in the population also meant a shortage of women to work in the brothels. With many potential clients and few working women, the consequence was that there would be queues in the brothels as men waited for the women to become available.

In exactly the same way that a few years later Madams in New Orleans would employ artists like Jelly Roll Morton, at the cutting edge of the new music transforming Rag Time into Jazz, to entertain the men while they waited, brothel owners in Buenos Aires would employ Tango musicians. In both cities, these musicians were playing the music of the poor, and brothels were amongst the very few places in that section of society that could afford to employ professional musicians. So it is not surprising to see that the most important early musicians often spent some time working in brothels before becoming successful to a wider audience. The difference is that the chattering classes and opinion formers in the United States were likely to have heard Jazz for

the first time in a nightclub in New York or Chicago rather than in New Orleans, while in Buenos Aires it was in the brothels that opinion formers first heard and saw it.

The idea that it was the prostitutes in the brothels that danced with the men while they waited is an appealing one, but doesn't make logical sense. The point was that the men were waiting because the women were otherwise occupied. Obviously the brothel's income would be maximised by keeping the girls busy at their primary occupation, so certainly at peak periods where the brothel was busiest there would not be women available for dancing. However, if there was music then it seems to me to be a pretty safe bet that the men would have used the opportunity to practice their dancing together.

At the beginning of the Nineteenth Century Buenos Aires had been little more than a village at the furthest corner of the Spanish Empire. In the middle of the Nineteenth Century the British arrived to develop the railway network across Argentina. This opened up this practically deserted country, and made accessible its potentially huge wealth. It made possible the transportation of agricultural produce for export, and also the exploitation of mineral resources. The only thing missing was the workers necessary to make the landowners rich.

The Argentine government decided to advertise in Europe for workers. They offered accommodation for a man's first week in Argentina with very generous rations, and sometimes subsidised passage. Immediately an avalanche of immigration began. Unlike the immigration to much of the New World, which might include families or whole communities hoping to start a new life in a new land, much of the immigration into Argentina was economic - people hoping to work for a few years, make some decent money, and then go back home to their families. So the overwhelming majority of the immigrants were men. And by the beginning of the Twentieth Century the overwhelming majority of people in Buenos Aires were immigrants. This meant that there was an enormous lack of women.

Not only did the majority of the immigrants not get rich, and so never go home, but they also had very little chance of creating a family for themselves in Argentina. There were simply not enough women for all the men who might have wanted to settle down and have children to be able to do so.

There were really only two practical ways for a man to get close to a woman under these circumstances. One was to visit a prostitute and the other was to dance. With so much competition from other men on the dance floor, if a man wanted a woman to dance with him, it was necessary for him to be a good dancer, and being a good dancer only meant one thing. It didn't matter if he knew lots of fancy steps, or if the other men thought he was a good dancer. The only thing that mattered was that the woman in his arms had a good time when she danced with him - because with so many other men to choose from, if she didn't enjoy dancing with him she wouldn't do it again, and neither would her friends.

This meant that it was necessary for the men to practice together in order to be good enough to dance with the women. It is important to remember that this was a time before recorded music was available. The only kind of music was live music, and there would have been very little of it. So if a group of men heard music playing they would jump at the chance to dance to it. In the

brothels there would be live music and other men waiting. So it seems to me quite obvious that the clients of the brothels would have danced together while they waited, making the most of the opportunity to practice, not because they wanted to dance with a prostitute, but because they wanted to be able to dance well when they got the opportunity to dance with a woman who was not a prostitute.

It was the potential wives and sweethearts that lived in the tenement blocks - conventillos - that they were hoping for a chance to dance with. A prostitute took money from a man in return for her favours - a clear and simple transaction. To win a sweetheart in the real world took something more, and being a good dancer helped a lot.

It was not in the brothels that Tango was born, but in the courtyards of the tenement blocks where the poor lived. With so many people living together in one building, it was very likely that someone might play the guitar, perhaps someone else might play the violin or the flute, and that from time to time they would get together to play the popular tunes of the time. And other people in the building would take the opportunity to dance, to have a moment of joy in what might be a terribly hard and lonely life.

The music and dance became a common language that united people from many different cultures. It was here that the different music and dance styles brought by immigrants from different countries, and by the people already in Argentina, blended together, and what emerged slowly became Tango.

Another cliché of the origins of Tango is the men dancing on a street corner. This certainly must have happened. People relied on live music to dance, and there were buskers in Buenos Aires, as in any city, making a living from playing for passers by. One of the most popular instruments for buskers was the barrel organ, or organito. Without a doubt, men hearing a busker playing a tango would have been keen to take the opportunity to practice, and buskers would have found it profitable to have a few tangos in their repertoires.

The men practicing together, looking for the best ways to please a woman when they danced with her, preparing for that rare moment when they actually did have a woman in their arms, were the people who created the Tango as a dance. It evolved and became Tango, unique and glorious, under these very special and unusual circumstances.

Couple Dance Begins in Europe

Tango was the first couple dance ever seen in Europe that involved improvisation. Before the arrival of Tango, couple dance was sequence based, with every couple on the floor dancing the same steps at the same time. (The only notable exception to this was the Boston, a rhythmically difficult form of Waltz fashionable in London in 1911, although it was never widely danced. Some Ballroom dancers today dance a very simplified version of the Boston.)

It was the arrival and popularity of Tango that really defines the beginning of couple dance as we understand it.

The earliest evidence of Tango being danced in Europe comes from the first decade of the Twentieth Century. It probably came into France first through the port of Marseille, where Argentine sailors would dance with the local girls, and Tango was the couple dance they preferred. There is evidence of a couple dancing Tango on stage in Monmartre in Paris by 1909. But it was in 1912 that the Tango took Paris by storm.

By this time Argentina was the seventh richest country in the world, with an average per capita income four times that of Spain or Italy. While the poor stayed poor, the rich got very rich indeed, and it became the fashion for families to send their young sons to Europe, either to go to university, or simply to do the Grand Tour and finish off their education.

Young men of good families have a tendency to spend time in places they are not supposed to visit, and with girls that their mothers would rather they did not marry, and as a consequence several of these young men were quite good Tango dancers, even though Tango was still completely unacceptable in polite society in Buenos Aires. But when these young men began to dance in Paris the upper classes were entranced, and Tango became a massive craze.

1913 was the Year of the Tango all over the world. Tango was the couple dance everyone wanted to learn. In this year the Tango Teas began at the Waldorf Hotel in London, picking up the fashion of *Tes Dansants* from Paris, and a grand Tango ball held in the Selfridges department store was declared the event of the season. All of Europe was dancing the Tango. There were many disapproving voices, but the mania had bitten. Fashions in clothing, already changing away from the restrictions of the Victorian corset and hooped skirts, changed more quickly under the influence of the Tango. It is said that women in Paris abandoned the corset in order to dance it. The feathers in women's hats moved from horizontal, sweeping across in front of the face, to vertical, going up from the forehead, letting a couple dance without the feather getting in the Tango partner's way. Tulip skirts, which opened at the front, made dancing easier. Women were sold not just Tango shoes, but Tango stockings, Tango hats, Tango dresses, and anything else that manufacturers could think of. And the colour of Tango was orange.

In 1913 and 1914 a variety of books were published in Europe claiming to teach Tango, four of them in London. It seems to me that one of these, [Secrets of the Tango](#), has a ring of truth about it. It was published in 1914, under the name of an English author, but the steps in it are credited to a young Argentine living in London. His parents thought that he was studying Engineering. In fact he was appearing on the stage of the Queen's Theatre in Shaftesbury Avenue dancing the Tango.

It is quite clear that the young Argentine, referred to only by his stage name, Juan Barrasa, feels that the other books published in London were written by people trying to jump on the Tango bandwagon, and lack any real Tango content.

It is my guess that the steps he presents give us one of our only indications of how Tango was being danced in Buenos Aires before the First World War. Certainly they seem to fit naturally and beautifully with Tango recordings from that period. There are also movements reminiscent of the ocho cortado, a step popular in the 1950s, and fashionable again in the Tango renaissance.

It is sometimes described as a decadent form of the forwards ocho, but is clearly a variant of a very early kind of step.

The popularity of Tango in Europe, and especially in Paris, made it an interesting couple dance to the upper classes in Buenos Aires, and the Tango was re-imported for their benefit. I have seen a book published in Buenos Aires around the time of the First World War (the publishing date was not given on the copy I saw) which says in its introduction that this is to teach people the elegant Tango as it is danced in Paris, which is nothing like the tasteless, squalid little dance done by the lower classes in the outskirts of Buenos Aires!

In the early years of Tango lyrics were generally comic and often bawdy. They were usually written in the first person, and described some excellent quality that the character possessed. In the original lyric of the tango **Don Juan**, for example, written around 1900, the character describes himself as such a great dancer that when he does a clever step in the south of Buenos Aires everyone talks about it all the way to the north of the city. He also points out how incredibly good-looking he is, and that the bravest man cowers in front of him.

This sort of lyric was not acceptable in the houses of the middle classes. As the popularity of Tango grew in Paris and across the world, there started to be a market for Tango music and Tango recordings amongst the middle and upper classes in Argentina. This put pressure on both the music and the lyrics to change.

From about 1917 onwards a new sort of Tango lyric began to be written. Many of the finest poets that Argentina and Uruguay have ever produced have written Tango lyrics. Quickly the form became one of the richest in Twentieth Century popular culture. And as the lyrics improved in quality, this was also the period when great singers began to emerge, and then to dominate the Tango scene, particularly with the advent of radio, and later sound film.

As the music adapted to accommodate the needs of the star singers, it began to be less attractive to dancers, and between the mid 1920s and the mid 1930s in Buenos Aires the dance became less popular. There were still great orchestras, notably the orchestra of [Julio de Caro](#), who brought classical training and sensibilities to the Tango. But it was not until the explosion onto the Tango scene of the ruthlessly populist orchestra of [Juan D'Arienzo](#) that the dance was swept back up from the doldrums and returned to the height of popularity.

Everyone Learns to Dance Tango

From 1935 people again began to dance Tango in Buenos Aires in huge numbers, inspired by the powerful Tango dance rhythms of [Juan D'Arienzo](#). [D'Arienzo](#) was unapologetic about creating the kind of Tango music that people wanted to dance to, even though his style was criticised as a backward step in the evolution of Tango music. And it was precisely the injection of energy that the Tango needed. The period between [D'Arienzo](#)'s recording contract in 1935 and the military coup that changed everything in Argentina in 1955 is generally considered to be the Golden Age of the Tango. It is the period when all aspects of the Tango were in the greatest harmony. Musicians played for dancers. Singers sang within the orchestra, as another instrument, rather

than dominating the orchestra as the star. The dancers, inspired by the many great orchestras, created a massive evolution in the dance, and also provided the market for the many orchestras, encouraging them to compete and reach new heights in Tango dance music.

In the 1940s and the 1950s practically everyone in Buenos Aires danced the Tango. Generally those who did not dance Tango were the members of the upper classes, for whom the bulk of the population still represented the recent immigrants, whose culture was very different from their own. To the upper classes in Argentina, Tango, particularly the dance, was then, and remains today, at least as exotic and alien as it is to the bulk of people in Europe or the United States.

But for most of the people of Buenos Aires, Tango was very much a part of their everyday lives. I asked a friend of mine who began to dance Tango in 1940 how he managed to go out dancing every night when he also had a job to go to. He told me that he would go out dancing, then go home to shower and change, work from 6 or 7 a.m. until 2 p.m., go home and sleep, and get up in the evening, ready to go out dancing.

Buenos Aires is a huge city, and in any huge city you will find a variety of accents, perhaps even dialects. That is how it was with the Tango in the Golden Age, when everyone danced. I have been told that in the 1940s and 1950s you could work out not just which part of town a leader came from, but which of the many, many dance halls he favoured on a Saturday night, by the time he had taken two steps at the beginning of a dance. This did not mean that people were doing a different dance. Just as a language has certain grammatical rules and basic vocabulary that are constant across all its accents and dialects, so the Tango had fundamental rules much more important than the specific Tango dance steps that were being done.

Tango Dance Styles of the Golden Age

The huge variety of Tango dance styles in Buenos Aires in the 1940s and 1950s represents the amazing depth and richness of Tango. I shall begin by describing three different broad styles, danced by the great Tango dancers who were dancing before the 1955 coup in Argentina, and that I danced with them in the 1990s.

I shall begin with a style popular in the geographical centre of Buenos Aires and the central part of the south of the city in the early 1950s. This was a style developed for crowded dance floors. The shape drawn on the floor as a couple moves in this style is like a kind of Brownian motion. It appears almost random and slightly jagged, with many changes of direction. This is probably the simplest Tango dance style, choreographically speaking, although it is technically demanding. It relies on the connection within the couple and the musicality of the dancers for its flavour and delight. The musicality of this style relies on steps on the beat and frequent double time steps. This form of musicality appears to be the easiest for people with an ear trained in European musical styles to understand.

The archetypal step in this style is the ocho cortado, not seen in any other style, and the archetypal orchestra is early [Troilo](#) .

The most elegant Tango dance style is without question the style danced in the north of Buenos Aires in the 1940s. This is a part of the city that has historically tended to be financially better off than the south. Dance floors here have tended to be larger. The shape drawn by the couple on the floor as they dance tends to be long straight lines, punctuated with a sudden, very complicated movement. The form of musicality in this style is probably the hardest for the person trained in the European tradition to understand.

While I was doing my research on the various styles of the Golden Age I would ask dancers that I met who, apart from themselves of course, was the best dancer of the style. In the north of the city the answer always came back "Portalea". I would ask why, and I was always told that it was the way he interpreted the music that made him the best. One evening someone told me that Portalea was in the room, so, very excited, I scurried off to watch him dance. And I looked at him in amazement, because I simply could not work out how what he was doing had anything to do with the rhythm of the music at all. And that, of course, was my mistake. He wasn't dancing the rhythm of the music. He was dancing the phrase.

In the style of the north it is very common to see people dancing three equal steps in four beats of the music, in a way that is utterly natural, and completely at one with the music.

The archetypal step in this style is a *salida* in which the leader takes just two steps to the four taken by the follower, followed by walking in line with frequent weight changes. The archetypal orchestra is [Di Sarli](#) .

Possibly the oldest of the Tango dance styles of the Golden Age is the style of the south. The shape drawn by the couple on the floor is one without many straight lines, made up of curves and arcs, looking very much like an Art Nouveau design. The stance of the dancers is a tiny bit closer to the floor. The interpretation of the music involves many pauses, and many rapid movements. This is the style where *ganchos* and *boleos* were danced.

The archetypal step is one where the leader takes the follower off her axis, taking responsibility for her weight, and perhaps walking her around the foot she is standing on. The archetypal orchestra is [Pugliese](#) .

The Traditional Way to Learn to Dance Tango

By the 1940s, and very possibly some time before that, the way in which a young man would learn to dance Tango was surprisingly uniform across the whole of the city. I have asked many elderly men, from every part of the city, and dancing every style how they began to dance. Generally they start, "I was 13 years old, and there was this girl..." A 13 year old boy in Buenos Aires in the 1940s or 1950s was not the same as a 13 year old boy in the First World today. Most boys would have left school at 11, at the latest, and would have been full members of the work force for at least two years. So at 13 they were young adults with quite a lot of independence.

The young man who was starting to notice the attractions of young women had little option but to learn to dance the Tango. He would go to a men only practice dance, or *práctica*, and, after he had watched for a little while one of the older men would start to teach him how to follow, that is to say he would learn to dance the woman's part. Once he was considered to be good enough at dancing the woman's part he would be allowed to try leading another young man who had been dancing about as long as he had, and start to learn to dance the man's part. I have asked many elderly men, from many different parts of the city, how long this process took (barring in mind that the men I speak to for my research are generally the outstanding ones, who would not have been the slowest members of their group), and I have never been told that it took less than nine months to learn to dance the woman's part well enough to be allowed to start learning to lead.

They would then continue to learn, dancing both parts, gradually leading more, until one night one of the more experienced men would tell them to put on a suit on Saturday because they were going to a dance, or *milonga*. I have asked many elderly men how long that whole process took, and not one has told me that it took less than three years.

Their first dance with a woman would have to be arranged for them. No woman would dance with a young man she had never seen dancing. There were too many good dancers for her to be interested in risking a dance with someone if she didn't know if he could dance, so unless he was exceptionally good looking, one of his more experienced friends would have to ask a woman, as a personal favour to him, to dance with the boy. If it went well then he could be left to carry on, as the other women would have seen him dance. If it went badly then he would have to go back to the *práctica* until he could do better.

The men did not simply go to the *práctica* to learn to dance - or there would not have been any experienced men for the beginners to dance with. The men continued to go to the *práctica* for a couple of hours each night, four or five nights a week, before they went to the milonga. In fact several men have said to me that you did your real dancing at the *práctica*. You went to the milonga to meet women. Generally the men in the *prácticas* followed better than the women in the milongas did. And in a *práctica* you could experiment more and take risks. Dancing with a woman you had to stick to what you could do perfectly, to increase her enjoyment of the dance.

In the *prácticas* there would be men who specialised in following - although they also led in the milongas to meet women. Often men had regular dancing partners, and there would be demonstration dances done in the milongas to a very high standard.

The process by which a man would learn to dance was similar to the way a child learns a language. First of all the child listens. Then, after perhaps nine months the child starts to make little noises, imitating the sound of words spoken by the adults around it. But mostly it still listens. Gradually it starts to make words, and then phrases and sentences, until by the age of three a child can have a proper conversation. There is still some way to go, of course, but the fundamentals are there, and a child who learns in this way doesn't make grammatical mistakes as an adult. The child may grow up to be a poet or someone inarticulate, but whatever use it makes of the language it learns, the fundamentals are always right.

When I ask elderly women how they learned to dance, the story is also similar whichever part of town they come from. It was done in private and in the home. Many were taught by fathers, brothers or uncles, but some were taught by mothers, sisters or aunts. When I ask a woman who says she was taught by her mother, "So your mother danced the man's part?" she says, "Obviously," as though I was insane to ask the question.

While it is not part of the official history of Tango, I do believe that a considerable number of women in the Golden Age (and probably before that too) did learn to dance the man's part as well as the woman's part, and took their Tango as seriously as the men did. There was much less pressure on women to reach a high standard in the dance, as they were such a rare commodity. A woman did not have to be a particularly good dancer in order to dance all night if she wished. But it is my belief that those women who were captivated by the Tango did practice together in private, and did learn to dance both parts.

When you talk to the men about the standard of the women it is clear that some women were significantly better than the rest, and that they were the ones that any man would choose to dance with. I do believe that these were the women who practiced, and who, in the privacy of their homes, led.

However, that is only my theory, and not the story that has been officially recorded.

The Dark Age of Tango

The coup in 1955 that ousted General Perón had profound consequences for Argentina as a whole, and for the Tango in particular, launching the country into a kind of modern Dark Age. The new military government was made up of members of the upper classes, for whom the culture of the mass of the population was alien and dangerous. They did not understand the Tango. They did not dance it.

Also they had a knee-jerk reaction that anything Perón had said was good must be bad. Perón was a nationalist and a populist, and Tango was both national and popular. Perón had used Tango and Tango artists for his political purposes, and many famous Tango artists were involved with the Peronist movement. As a consequence many artists were either imprisoned or blacklisted by the new regime.

And large numbers of men meeting every night in the social halls of community or political associations in order to dance together? That would have seemed very suspicious, and an obvious cover for political agitation.

It would have been difficult to ban the Tango itself, although specific songs were banned, and some had to have their titles changed. Some of the measures natural to a repressive regime took their toll on the dance. At various times there were curfews, making things difficult for a night-time activity like Tango. At other times there were bans on meetings of more than three people, making a social dance illegal.

But one very subtle and clever attack was made specifically against the Tango. This story was told to me by someone who ran a number of Tango dances in the mid-1950s. There were laws banning the presence of minors in nightclubs. These laws were rigidly enforced for Tango clubs, but were not enforced at all for clubs that only played Rock and Roll music. So where before the coup the best way for a young man to meet a young woman was in a milonga, suddenly it was much easier to meet a girl by dancing Rock and Roll. Overnight, young men stopped learning how to dance the Tango. There was no reason to spend three years learning how to dance Tango, when the girl you liked was in a Rock and Roll club instead. The generation that were 18 years old in 1955 learned to dance the Tango well and with confidence. The generation that were 13 didn't learn it at all.

It seems extraordinary that a repressive right-wing regime would encourage Rock and Roll at a time when conservatives all over the world were trying to stop young people dancing to the wild new music. But it served the purposes of the regime, and it served them well.

Between the coup in 1955 and the fall of the military junta in 1983 after the Falklands War, practically no one learned how to dance the Tango. The Tango did not disappear. It was still possible to go out dancing, and many people did. But the Tango was pushed underground, and naturally people became very suspicious of strangers. Some professional dancers of other kinds of dance found that they could make a living doing choreographies that looked like Tango in shows, particularly shows aimed at the overseas market. In fact it was in the 1950s that the concept of the Tango choreography for stage seems first to have appeared. Before that professional dancers seem to have improvised.

The Tango Renaissance

The fall of the military junta in Argentina in 1983 began a spectacular Tango Renaissance in Buenos Aires. Friends of mine who were in Buenos Aires at that time tell me the atmosphere was extraordinary. Suddenly everyone wanted to move. It was as though a physical weight had been lifted from them. Yoga classes were full. Martial arts classes were full. Dance classes of all kinds were full. And suddenly people wanted to learn to dance Tango, the ultimate symbol of Argentina to the rest of the world, because suddenly it felt all right to be proud to be Argentine again.

The problem with the Tango was that there had never been beginners' Tango classes in the Golden Age, and there was no tradition of teaching Tango. The prácticas had gone. There were no Tango teachers in Buenos Aires. There was a vacuum that needed to be filled.

A dear friend of mine, and a wonderful dancer, told me a story about how he started to teach Tango. He was a student at university, and there was this girl... He wanted to find a way to get closer to her, and he saw a notice for a Tango class aimed at people training to be professional stage dancers, to prepare them to dance in shows. The turnout had been low, so they had opened the class up to other students. He suggested to the girl that they go to the class together, and she agreed. After the second class her schedule changed and she couldn't make it to the Tango class

any more, so he suggested that he carry on going and then show her what they had learned afterwards.

After about three months of classes things were going well, and she suggested that as he was doing so well teaching her, perhaps they should start a class. She had some contacts in a local Arts Centre and got their class put into the programme. It happened that this was exactly at the moment that the junta fell and everyone suddenly wanted to move. They came to teach their first ever Tango class and there were 200 people there.

Everywhere in the world that Tango has begun since 1983 the story has been more or less the same. I taught my first Tango class in London when I had been dancing seriously for four months, not because I thought I knew everything, but because people asked me to teach, because I had taken as many classes with visiting teachers or by travelling myself to Europe as I could, and knew a little. Very few Tango scenes anywhere in the world were begun by experienced dancers.

Even in Buenos Aires, when the Tango Renaissance began, it was mostly young dancers who knew a little who were the first teachers. In 1983 many of the people who had been dancing in the Golden Age were not dancing, and those that were would still have been suspicious of strangers. After all, there had been a brief flirtation with democracy in the 1970s, but in the background the Dirty War was already beginning.

So the first people to start dancing again in Buenos Aires would probably never have danced with someone who had danced in the Golden Age. A friend of mine tells me that she went to milongas and sat and waited and went home and didn't dance for years before people began to believe that she might be able to dance and started to ask her. Another friend of mine went to Tango classes for almost two years, eventually becoming the teacher's assistant, before she decided to go to a milonga for the first time. She took one look at the people dancing and suddenly realised that what she had been doing for such a long time had nothing to do with Tango, and was something that her "teacher" had made up.

Gradually the people who had been dancing in the Golden Age, and who might not have danced for thirty years began to dance again. Some of them developed a passionate desire to pass on to the younger generation the dance that they loved.

One of the most important couples in the early years of the Tango Renaissance were Miguel and Nelly. Miguel tragically died at a relatively early age, before I had the chance to meet him, though I did meet and dance with Nelly. They organised their beginners' classes to be as close as possible to the traditional way of learning. Students were only allowed to dance with the teachers until they were considered to be ready, only doing the most basic steps.

A friend of mine tells me that she went to Miguel and Nelly's classes with her boyfriend of the time. After a few months he said to Miguel, "When are you going to teach us some steps?" Miguel said, "When you're ready. You're not ready." The boyfriend protested and picked up my friend to show some of the steps another teacher had already taught him. Miguel threw him out of the class.

Many of the most important professional dancers of the Tango Renaissance trained with Miguel and Nelly.

The early period of the Tango Renaissance was dominated by complex steps. There can be a tremendous excitement to doing complicated steps, especially if they are done with the technique used by those who learned Tango in the traditional way - native speakers of Tango, if you like. When done in this way, steps are part of the emotional connection that defines the essence of Tango. I began dancing when this fashion was still dominant in the new Tango scene. I always loved dancing with complicated movements, and still do. But even as a relative beginner I started to feel that some people in the new generation of dancers were dancing differently, and using steps to keep an emotional distance from their partners.

One of the most influential teachers of this period was Antonio Todaro, a brilliantly inventive dancer of the older generation. The intellectual challenge of the steps he created, and danced with the technique of the Golden Age, was a great inspiration to new dancers. He taught many of the professional stage dancers, and toured frequently in Europe. Todaro fell ill late in 1993, and passed away soon afterwards. It may be coincidence, but the fashion amongst young dancers in Buenos Aires, and then in the rest of the world, began to swing away from steps in 1994.

The next style to come into fashion was one based on the style of the geographical centre of Buenos Aires and the centre of the south of the city in the early 1950s. This is a style that is choreographically relatively simple, relying on the connection between the dancers, and their connection with the music. While it is possible to dance the other styles of the Golden Age with space between the dancers' bodies (although this was not done during the Golden Age), this style makes no sense if it is not done in a close hold.

The great attraction of this style is in the connection within the couple which is necessary to make it work, and which, when done well, is tremendously seductive.

One of the most prominent champions of this style, Susanna Miller, coined for it the term "Estilo Milonguero", milonguero style. The word milonguero, though it literally means someone who spends a lot of time in milongas, had come to be used to mean someone who had been a regular Tango dancer during the Golden Age, before the 1955 coup. While the choice of the term was obviously inspired by the desire to distinguish this style from the steps dominated style danced on stage, the unfortunate and unforeseeable consequence was that it set up the idea in people's minds that this was the *only* authentic social Tango style.

One of the saddest things I ever saw in Buenos Aires was a dear friend of mine who started dancing in 1945, in the style of the north of Buenos Aires, which is the most elegant and also the most difficult style of the Golden Age, on the point of tears - and elderly Argentine men do not cry in public - because a young dancer had said that he was not a milonguero because he danced with steps. He was being accused of lying about an important part of his whole identity, because this young dancer had misunderstood the term "Estilo Milonguero" and thought that this was the only true style.

The dancing of the people who were dancing in the Golden Age remained unchanged, and one could still go to milongas away from the centre of Buenos Aires and see people doing the most fabulously complicated steps in a truly authentic and completely social way. But by 1995 the style variously known as “close hold”, “short steps”, “Tango club” or “milonguero” had come to dominate the dancing of the people in Buenos Aires who were part of the Tango Renaissance.

The problem with this style, lovely as it is, is that it lacks the fascinating choreographic challenge of all the authentic styles of the Golden Age, apart from the style of the geographic centre and centre south in the early 1950s on which it was loosely based. The thing that makes this style exciting is the connection within the couple and the musicality of the dancers. Quite quickly I started to notice people finding ways of manipulating the close embrace in order to maintain an emotional distance from their partners. Most particularly I noticed people not dancing directly in front of each other, but with the follower away to the leader's right. This was certainly not my experience of dancing with people who had danced this style in the 1950s. They always were directly in front of me, as were almost all the dancers I danced with who had been dancing in the Golden Age, whatever the style.

So quite quickly people began to get bored with this style, as they were not getting the emotional connection that made the style work, but were also not getting the choreographic challenge of the other styles.

Canyengue, Orillero and Tango de Salon, by Christine Denniston

The question: "What are Orillero, Canyengue and Tango de Salon?" was one that people from many different countries began to ask, as they came to Buenos Aires looking for the truth about Tango. I asked that question along with them.

Orillero, Canyengue and Salon were terms often mentioned in books on the history of Tango. I asked many, many people, dancing many different styles from the Golden Age what Tango de Salon was, and all of them answered, "What I do," no matter how different their styles. Indeed, I saw a very fine, and very famous, dancer, who had begun to dance in the 1940s, thrown into a great rage because a young dancer (not me, I'm glad to say!) had told him that he danced Tango Orillero, because he danced with figures, when he had spent his whole life dancing what he considered to be Tango de Salon.

Tango de Salon means literally "Tango for the ballroom" - not, of course, Ballroom Tango, as we think of it, but Tango suitable for respectable social dance halls, and seems to be the only way to describe **all** the various styles danced in the Golden Age, including the style on which the 1990s invention of [Estilo Milonguero](#) was based. Tango Orillero means "Tango from the outskirts of the city". If there ever was a distinction between Tango from the outskirts and Tango suitable for ballrooms, it may well have been the distinction drawn by the author of [the book on how to dance Tango published in Buenos Aires at the height of Tango mania](#), between the elegant Tango being danced in Paris and the dubious dance from the outskirts of the city. So it is possible that in the early part of the Twentieth Century there was a real distinction between Orillero and Salon, as the dances of the poor and of the rich.

By the Golden Age, however, the term Orillero seems not to have been in use to describe any style still being danced in Buenos Aires itself, and the real Tango had reclaimed the ballrooms and the dance halls, to be called Tango de Salon.

The word *Canyengue* is almost impossible to translate into English. It is a word from the slang of Buenos Aires that describes a quality that is indefinable, in the same way that if you have to ask what Swing is you don't understand it. *Canyengue* describes a streetwise quality from the end of the Nineteenth Century, and originally meant lower class.

It may be that there was never any distinction between *Canyengue* and Orillero as Tango styles, but that they were different ways of describing the same thing - the dance done by the immigrants and the poor who were creating Tango in the earliest period, the lower class (*canyengue*) people who lived at the edge of the city (in the *orillas*).

If this is the case then it was this one style of Tango - sometimes called "orillero" and sometimes called "canyengue" - which was the original way that Tango was danced. It was this style, with *cortes* and *quebradas*, which took Paris and the world by storm in the years before the First World War. (Certainly a step known as a "Corte" and its variants are fundamental to the sources we have which detail Tango steps from this period.)

Most most Tango historians in Buenos Aires would agree that *Canyengue* was a style danced to music that was played in 2/4, with a lilting, habanera rhythm, before the squarer 4/8 we now think of as Tango emerged. This "*Canyengue*" period was an important stage in the development of Tango music, but this distinctive musical style, and therefore by extension the dance that went with it, had disappeared by 1920.

In any case, by the early 1990s there was no one dancing in Buenos Aires who was old enough to have been dancing in the "*Canyengue*" period, or whose dance style was one that they themselves would have described as *Canyengue*. But many people, like me, were asking about it, and one dancer, Rodolfo Cieri, remembered some steps that his father had taught him when he was 7 years old. His father was a mature man, and so would have seen people dancing in the *Canyengue* way when he was young. Rodolfo and his wife Maria (who was several years younger than Rodolfo) started to do little demonstrations including those steps, genuinely trying to help satisfy people's thirst for knowledge. The demonstrations were an instant hit, and people wanted to learn the steps they were doing, even though to begin with they were reluctant to teach them as they knew that they could only give a flavour of Rodolfo's childhood memories of his father.

Rodolfo was a fabulous dancer, with a very individual way of dancing. The success of Rodolfo and Maria's demonstrations of these *Canyengue* steps owed a great deal to the charm and personality of this delightful couple. But the memories of one man of some steps that his father showed him when he was 7 are not enough to resurrect a complete style, as they themselves would have agreed.

Another couple, Marta Anton and Luis Grondona, began teaching some steps very similar to the ones Rodolfo and Maria were doing at about the same time. Interviewed on the cable television

station Solo Tango they explained how they had been playing around one evening and had come up with these steps, and had since started teaching them.

It is not surprising that the style inspired by Rodolfo and Maria and championed by Marta and Luis became very fashionable amongst young dancers looking for the authentic Tango in 1996. It was danced in a close hold similar to the one used in [dominant style of the Tango Renaissance](#), but was more playful and choreographically inventive. So people took to it to spice up their dancing.

Oddly, the music most commonly used by people dancing this new style is music from the 1970s, although sometimes music from the early 1930s (the period dominated by singers when there was very little dancing taking place) is used. The style does not seem to sit so comfortably with recordings from the second decade of the Twentieth Century, when Tango had the 2/4 rhythm, usually referred to as *Canyengue*.

Undoubtedly this new style is very charming and attractive. However, the use of the name "Canyengue" for it may be slightly misleading, as people think that when they are doing it they are doing an authentic early Tango style. It would be nice if another word had been used to describe this charming new Tango style which emerged in the 1990s.

If we genuinely want to discover what the original *Canyengue* was like, there are a few sources available to us. My own studies have led me to examine a number of books published in the years running up to the start of the First World War - the period of the height of [Tangomania](#) across the world, and also the period of the music with the 2/4 beat. Many of these are clearly filled with the fantasies of the particular author, or with steps taken from other dances. However, one stands out from the others that I have seen.

This was a book published in 1914 called [Secrets of the Tango](#) and it is clear that the steps in it were recorded by an Argentine of good family, who had come to London to study engineering, but had found himself instead making a handsome living teaching and performing Tango. He claims to have learned Tango on his grandfather's farm, but this is very unlikely. Presumably he did not want people to find out exactly what kind of place he had been visiting to practice his dancing!

The earnestness and seriousness with which he approaches his subject, and the apparently genuine and deep desire for people to learn the real Tango rather than steps made up in London or Paris, or imported from other dances, seem to me to make him either a fabulous liar, or the most genuine, authentic witness we will ever find for the early Tango danced in Buenos Aires to the music of the *Guardia Vieja* (*the old guard*, the term used for the great musicians of this period), and probably the only style that deserves the name [Canyengue](#).

How was Tango danced at the height of Tangomania?

The worldwide Tangomania at the beginning of the Twentieth Century was so massive as to be almost unimaginable.

There are records of Tango being danced in Paris as early as 1907, but the passion for Tango shook the elite of Paris in 1912, and until the outbreak of the First World War the Tango was a powerful cultural force, catalysing changes in fashion and in the mechanisms of social interaction, and influencing powerfully the birth of Modern Ballroom dancing.

What was this Tango, that played such a pivotal role in world culture, like? By the time the Tango Revival began in Buenos Aires in the 1980s, there were no dancers left who had been adults in 1912, when Tangomania began.

Certainly, the music was significantly different from the music of the Golden Age, and while many of the great tango melodies were written at this time, the rhythm - the cornerstone of the dance - had a different swing.

Outside Argentina, as Tangomania swept people up, the dance was talked about and discussed in print by a wide range of people, from self-proclaimed experts, to people proud of never having even seen the shocking dance, and a variety of sources exist, giving tantalising glimpses of the dance.

Many of these sources are obviously fanciful, and others are clearly influenced by a variety of other dances and techniques. But as there is practically no record in Argentina of how the Tango was danced at this time, the few reliable European sources are the best guide to the authentic Tango in this early, Canyengue period.

Wading through the original material to find the occasional specks of gold that illuminate the real nature of Tango in Argentina at that time is a massive job - made much harder not just by the difficulty of locating these documents, rarely stored in any but the most complete and exclusive academic libraries, but also by the problem of trying to work out what someone really means by the description they give of a step.

[Christine Denniston](#) has spent many years studying Tango in great detail, always going back to the most authentic sources. For her research in the styles of the Golden Age she worked with a wide variety of dancers who danced in the milongas of Buenos Aires at that time. For her research into the first great age of Tango, she hunted down and examined a wide variety of original sources.

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Christine says, "The Tango that was danced in Paris, London and New York in 1913 and 1914 had its origins in Buenos Aires and the authentic early Tango style. The massive popularity of the dance meant that there were many teachers, and some of them had learned the Tango in Buenos Aires and danced it as it was danced there. Sorting through the fanciful inventions of other teachers and the additions from other dances, it is possible to get a feel for the core of the real dance - a central body of steps that probably came directly from Buenos Aires.

"Amongst the various sources I found, one stood out. That was **Secrets of the Tango**, attributed to Samuel Beach Chester, but with figures supplied by a young Argentine dancing professionally in London under the stage name Juan Barrasa. The steps Sr. Barrasa presents seem to me to cover the core movements of the Tango at that time, including the *corte*, so often mentioned in descriptions of the dance at this time."

The job of trying to work out exactly what each author means by a description of a step is a difficult and time consuming one. Christine has undertaken that work, and has presented Juan Barrasa's steps in a really clear and useful format, with simple animations that clarify exactly where the feet go.

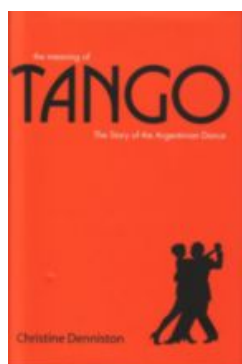
We are delighted to be able to make Christine's analysis of Tango at the height of Tangomania available to anyone interested in the true history of this fascinating dance, as **Secrets of the Tango - 1914** by Christine Denniston.

And as the music is so vital to understanding the dance, and since the music of that great period of the Tango is not quite the same as the music most Tango dancers are familiar with, Christine has carefully selected a fine recording from the period to include with Secrets of the Tango - 1914 as part of the electronic book, so that you can try the steps straight away with the music with which they fit so perfectly and charmingly!

Secrets of the Tango - 1914 by [Christine Denniston](#) is available on CD ROM or to download. Order the download now and in minutes you could be learning the secrets of the dance that shook the world.

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The Meaning of Tango - The Story of the Argentinian Dance

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In this new book, published by Portico, Christine Denniston records what Tango meant to the great generation of dancers who learned to dance the Tango in the Golden Age, and who were the cornerstone

of the Tango Renaissance of the 1980s and 1990s.

The book reveals the secrets of Tango in Buenos Aires, including the technical secrets that made the dancers of the Golden Age so wonderful to dance with - secrets any dancer can apply to their own dancing today. It explains how Tango left Argentina for the first time in the years immediately before the First World War, and charts the global Tangomania that led to the development of Ballroom Tango, American Tango, and indirectly, the Modern Ballroom dances. It also explores the Tango Renaissance, and the development of new styles of Tango by a new generation of dancers.

For the person who enjoys watching Tango but does not dance, this book is a fascinating exploration of why Tango is unlike any other dance. For the person who already dances Tango and whose aim is to be a pleasure to dance with, the book is filled with invaluable information.

From the suburbs of Buenos Aires, to the elite salons of Paris in 1912, to its current popularity around the world, through social and political upheavals, *The Meaning of Tango* follows the fascinating story of the real Argentinian dance.

We love the things people are saying about this book. Here are some reviews from [Amazon](#) and [Amazon UK](#)

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<p>a must-read book... more</p> <p>It is rare for me to find a book on any dance that really excites and interests me. This was one of those rare books... more</p> <p>The essence of Tango!... more</p>	<p>required reading for anybody who is interested in Tango... more</p> <p>I have many books on Tango and this one is my favourite... more</p> <p>the book that the Golden Age dancers themselves never wrote!... more</p>

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*[Christine Denniston is author of **The Meaning of Tango**](#)*

[Tango Dance Styles of the Golden Age](#)

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*[Christine Denniston is author of **The Meaning of Tango**](#)*

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