

# MILONGUEROS

## TANGO LEGENDS IN PRIVATE

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## THE FEELING IN TANGO

The yearning to go dancing at night accompanies milongueros<sup>1</sup> throughout the day. All of them have the same thought: They want to experience that “special feeling” over and over again. To describe this feeling, the comparison of dancing with making love is often used. The quote “In love for one tanda<sup>2</sup>,” as Julio Dupláa puts it, shows the finiteness of that sentiment. To my question as to how many times that happened, single men and women replied “rarely.” Precisely for that reason, they hit the dancefloor every day – *caminar a la pista*. For couples, however, it is different: With each dance, that “special feeling” grows among them and, with it, love. I hear phrases like “With each tango we dance, I love him more” or “I feel as if I were in heaven”.

Tango is about self-love and self-doubt, self-awareness and self-affirmation. It is apparent that tangueros like watching themselves in the mirror while they dance. Confirmations such as “You dance for yourself,” or “I love myself very much,” “I want to be the best” also emphasize the observation of self-reflection.

Tango helps people cope better with life by surrendering to the illusion that everything is fine in their world. Jorge García, for example, deposits his *paquete* (his sorrows) at the wardrobe and takes it back when he leaves.

It is also a common ritual to imagine that one is young again or “rejuvenated by dancing” (Eduardo Pareja). Toto Faraldo says that he imagines being twenty again.

The individual experiences of tango dancers are also mirrored in the choice of their favorite tangos. For Nelly, it is the nostalgic tango *Grichel*. The poet of this tango falls in love unhappily and only finds his love again much later. A reflection of her life: Pocho married Nelly only on his deathbed.

1 / MILONGUERA, MILONGUERO: TANGO DANCERS, WHO DANCE (ALMOST) EVERY DAY.

2 / TANDA: THREE OR FOUR PIECES OF MUSIC THAT A COUPLE DANCES TO. AFTER A BRIEF PAUSE, THEY THEN CHANGE PARTNERS.

Since their infancy in the 1940s and 1950s, tango has played an important role for the protagonists of this book. When they were young, everyone danced; all of Buenos Aires went out on Saturday night to go dancing. Every evening, fifty or more dance events took place (Pedro Sánchez) and after the theatre performances everyone would go out to eat. The bars on *Avenida Corrientes* were packed to the brim (Tito Rocca).

Of course, dancing took place among families as well. Both fathers and mothers took over the leading roles when dancing with their children.

The boys – unlike the girls – could meet and practice in the street, at the corner, which is mentioned in so many tangos. The older ones led the younger ones. And the boys impatiently waited for the day when they could finally wear long pants. For them, the most important thing was to develop their own style, to make their dance unique. Those were the times when a *bandoneonista* joined these meetings or a poet shared his latest works (Toto Faraldo).

According to Eduardo Pareja, at that time, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays there were special practices just for young men.

The best of the era met there: Copes, Petroleo, Calisi, Finito. Pareja calls Petroleo the “*Papá de todos los bailarines*” (the father of all dancers). Another famous dancer of that era was El Negro Portanera.

At a milonga<sup>4</sup>, the daughters stood or sat next to their mothers around the dance floor, while the gallant young men gathered in the center. This is how the daughters presented themselves in public. Mothers wielded considerable influence over their daughters' choices. Marriages were also arranged at the dance.

The role of women in tango is ambivalent: The brothels of Buenos Aires are considered as the cradle of tango. In the past, therefore, the word *milonguera* was synonymous with prostitute. The bourgeois woman, on the other hand, may have conquered her husband by dancing, but from the moment she started a family, she stayed at home or only went to milongas accompanied by her husband.

Today, however, the label *milonguera* is carried with great pride. It refers to women who, like men, dedicate their lives to tango.

<sup>3</sup> / SONG LYRICS TRANSLATED BY DERRICK DEL PILAR, “POESÍA DE GOTÁN: THE POETRY OF THE TANGO,” URL: [HTTPS://POESIADEGOTAN.COM/2009/04/14/ASI-SE-BAILA-EL-TANGO-1942](https://POESIADEGOTAN.COM/2009/04/14/ASI-SE-BAILA-EL-TANGO-1942) (ACCESSED NOVEMBER 25, 2021). “MALENA” REFERS TO THE SONG BY HOMERO MANZI (LYRICS) AND LUCIO DEMARE (MUSIC).

<sup>4</sup> / MILONGA: TANGO DANCE PARTY

At that time, a tanda consisted of two or three tangos, valses or milongas. In one evening, a tango orchestra and a jazz orchestra alternated every 45 minutes. The usual dance style was the elegant Tango Salón that had replaced its predecessors, the Tango Canyengue and the Tango Orillero. A very elegant version that spread throughout Buenos Aires was cultivated in the Villa Urquiza neighborhood.

Today's dancers sorely miss the elegance and gallantry that reigned back then. It was customary to help the lady put on her coat or to wipe the rim of the glass with a napkin before serving her the drink. A white shirt and well-polished shoes were a must. Women used to judge men by their shoes (Eduardo Pareja).

The milongueras of today are displeased with the fact that the today's manners leave much to be desired: There is too much "*chapar, chapar*" (smooching) and a lot of naked skin on the dancefloor. Moreover, no eighty-year old man used to dance with a twenty-something back in those days, except within the family.

Elegant men flocked to Devoto's Sports Club, dressed in the style depicted by the cartoonist José Antonio Guillermo Divito's (1914–1969) drawings: jackets that emphasized the shoulders and tight-fitting trousers in different colors. Eager to wear different outfits every time, young men simply exchanged their jackets between them. As Eduardo Pareja told us, manicures and colorless nail polish, plucked eyebrows and make-up powder were also quite commonly used among men and contrasted sharply with their often less elegant living situation. After work, men would go dancing and afterwards return to the *apartamento chorizo* in the *conventillos*<sup>5</sup>. Constant quarrels took place in these modest dwellings and everyone was looking for a way to get ahead somehow, as Pedro Sánchez described it.





