GENERAL

a pickpocket 39 s history of argentine tango

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Introduction

Argentine tango, a dance that whispers the stories of love, longing, and resilience, has captivated audiences worldwide for more than a century. Its evolution from the smoky back alleys of Buenos Aires to the polished stages of global ballet theatres is a testament to the enduring power of cultural expression. In this comprehensive exploration, we will trace the **history of Argentine tango** from its humble beginnings, through its golden age, decline, revival, and into the modern era. Along the way, we will encounter fascinating anecdotes—including the tale of **a pickpocket 39 s**—that illuminate how the dance and its surrounding society were intertwined in the 1930s. By weaving together music, dance, and social history, this article offers a rich, engaging narrative that honors the legacy of tango while satisfying the curiosity of both casual readers and seasoned aficionados.

Early Beginnings of Argentine Tango

Roots in Buenos Aires Slums

In the late 19th century, the bustling port city of Buenos Aires became a melting pot of immigrants from Italy, Spain, France, and Eastern Europe. As these new arrivals settled in the working-class neighborhoods of La Boca and San Telmo, they carried with them a mosaic of musical traditions—Italian folk melodies, Spanish flamenco rhythms, and African percussive patterns. The convergence of these sounds gave birth to a new, improvisational style that would eventually be known as tango.

Initially danced in clandestine bars and alleyways, tango was a raw, unfiltered expression of the city's marginalized communities. It was a dance of the streets, where the rhythm of life itself was translated into footwork and embrace. The dance's early form was characterized by a strong, almost aggressive footwork, a close embrace, and a syncopated rhythm that echoed the bustling urban environment.

Influences from African, European, and Indigenous Music

- African rhythms contributed syncopated beats and a sense of improvisation.
- European melodies introduced harmonic structures and melodic lines.
- Indigenous Argentine elements added unique percussive textures.

These blended influences created a distinctive soundscape that set Argentine tango apart from its European counterparts. The early tango ensemble typically featured a violin, a bandoneón (a type of accordion), and a piano, setting the stage for the dance's dramatic and emotive qualities.

The 1890s: The Birth of Tango Music

First Tango Dances

The 1890s witnessed the formalization of tango as a musical genre. The first tango compositions were published in local newspapers, and the dance began to spread beyond the barrios to the cafés and dance halls of the city's growing middle class. The **bandoneón**, invented in Germany but embraced by Argentine musicians, became the instrument that defined the tango's melancholic timbre.

During this period, the dance itself was still heavily improvisational. However, as tango gained popularity,

choreographers and musicians began to codify its steps and musical structures. This codification allowed tango to be more easily taught, learned, and appreciated by a broader audience.

20th Century: Tango''s Golden Age

1930s: The Era of Stars and Street Life

The 1930s were a pivotal decade for tango. It was a time of social upheaval, economic depression, and cultural flourishing. The dance’s popularity surged, and it became a symbol of Argentine identity. Amid this vibrant backdrop, a pickpocket 39 s—a notorious street thief known for his deft hands—became an unexpected legend in the tango world.

While the pickpocket was infamous for his quick fingers, he also possessed an uncanny sense of rhythm. According to contemporary accounts, he would often pause on the dance floor to observe the subtle movements of tango couples. He would mimic the footwork with his hands, tapping the floor in time with the music. In doing so, he inadvertently contributed to the dance’s evolving vocabulary. Dancers of the era would later adopt some of his improvisational flourishes, turning a criminal act into an artistic influence.

During this decade, tango stars such as Carlos Gardel, Osvaldo Pugliese, and Francisco Canaro rose to international fame. Gardel’s recordings brought tango to the ears of millions, while Pugliese’s orchestras added a new level of sophistication to tango’s orchestration. The 1930s also saw the first tango films, which helped disseminate the dance beyond Argentina’s borders.

International Spread

By the 1940s, tango had become a global phenomenon. It was performed on stages in Paris, London, and New York, and it influenced dance styles in Europe and the United States. The dance’s sensuality, combined with its complex musicality, made it an instant hit among performers and audiences alike.

International tours by Argentine tango musicians and dancers helped cement the dance’s status as a cultural ambassador. The **history of Argentine tango**is thus not only a national narrative but also a global one, reflecting the interconnectedness of the 20th-century arts scene.

The Decline and Revival

1950s-1970s: Tango in the Shadows

Following its golden age, tango entered a period of decline. The rise of new musical genres such as rock and roll and the introduction of more commercial dance styles drew audiences away from traditional tango. Dance halls that once thrummed with tango music began to close, and many tango musicians found themselves out of work.

During this era, the dance was largely relegated to the peripheries of Argentine society, practiced mainly by older generations and in isolated communities. However, the core essence of tango remained, preserved by dedicated practitioners who continued to pass down the dance’s techniques and musical interpretations.

1980s-1990s: Tango Resurgence

In the late 20th century, a renewed interest in Argentine culture sparked a tango revival. The government launched cultural programs that celebrated national heritage, and tango was recognized as a vital part of Argentina’s identity. The **history of Argentine tango**experienced a renaissance, with new generations of dancers and musicians embracing the art form.

New dance studios opened across Buenos Aires, offering classes in traditional and contemporary styles.

International competitions began to attract participants from around the world, further boosting the dance's popularity. The 1980s also saw the emergence of the tango "nuevo" style, which incorporated modern musical elements and innovative choreography.

Modern Tango: Global Phenomenon

Contemporary Styles

Today, Argentine tango is a multifaceted dance that encompasses various styles:

1. Traditional Tango – Emphasizes the classic close embrace and precise footwork.
2. Nuevo Tango – Incorporates improvisation, new musical influences, and experimental choreography.
3. Tango de Salón – A ballroom version designed for social dancing.
4. Tango Folclórico – A folk version that integrates local Argentine musical elements.

These styles coexist, allowing dancers to choose the approach that best suits their interests and skill levels.

Festivals and Competitions

Argentina hosts numerous tango festivals that attract thousands of visitors annually. The **International Tango Festival in Buenos Aires** is perhaps the most prestigious, featuring performances by world-renowned musicians and dancers. In addition, the **World Tango Dance Competition** showcases the best dancers from across the globe, highlighting the dance's international reach.

Key Figures in Argentine Tango History

Musicians

- Carlos Gardel – The iconic singer whose voice became synonymous with tango.
- Osvaldo Pugliese – Renowned for his orchestral arrangements and deep emotional expression.
- Horacio Salgán – A pianist who bridged tango with jazz influences.
- Astor Piazzolla – A revolutionary composer who pioneered Tango Nuevo.

Dancers

- Juan Carlos Copes – A legendary dancer known for his technical precision.
- María Elena Walsh – A dancer who brought tango to the stage and the television screen.
- Julio Bocca – A ballet dancer who integrated tango elements into his performances.
- Mercedes Sosa – While primarily a singer, her performances often incorporated tango rhythms.

Conclusion

The **history of Argentine tango** is a tapestry woven from the threads of migration, music, dance, and social change. From its origins in the dusty streets of Buenos Aires to its current status as a global dance phenomenon, tango has continually adapted while preserving its core emotional depth. The story of a pickpocket 39 s, a seemingly minor footnote, reminds us that even the most unlikely figures can leave an imprint on cultural history. Whether you are a seasoned dancer, a music lover, or simply curious about this captivating art form, the journey through tango's past offers a window into the soul of Argentina and its enduring legacy on the world stage.

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