

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Two To Tango

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes the *tango* as “a ballroom dance of Argentine origin,” which “evolved about 1880 in lower class districts of Buenos Aires from the *milonga*, a fast, sensual, and disreputable Argentine dance” which, in turn, shows possible influences also from the Cuban *habanera*.” The description continues with an explanation that “in the early 1900s the tango became socially acceptable and by 1915 was a craze in fashionable European circles. The first tango music by known composers was published around 1910.”

So how was it that Spanish colonial Governor Esteban Miró, after having received a complaint about the *bamboula* being danced on the Sabbath, ordered that “*los tangos*” or “*bailes de negros*” (the blacks’ dances) be delayed until after vespers? The *tango* as a dance obviously had a much earlier meaning.

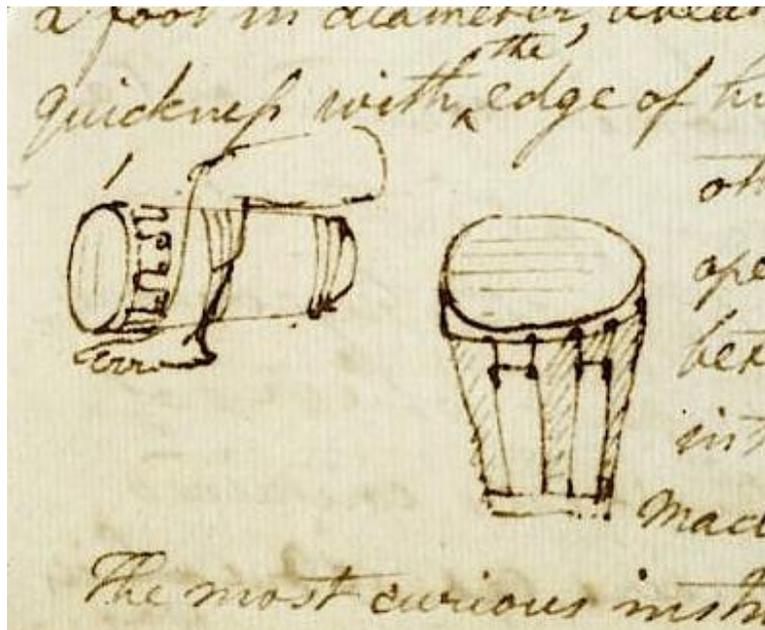


Governor Miró: “Tengo un problema. Los Tangos!”

Historian Ned Sublette, who inspected the original *Bando de Buen Gobierno* (*Edict of Good Government*), dated June 2, 1786, in which this order is contained, concluded that this was “apparently the earliest written instance of the word *tango* anywhere.” And that was in New Orleans, almost a century before the Argentine variety emerged.

Of equal importance is that the *tango* of colonial New Orleans was equated with dancing the *bamboula*, at least by Governor Miró.

The *bamboula*, from the *Bantu* languages of central and southern Africa, is derived from *kam-bumbulu* and *ba m'bula*, meaning a drum fashioned from a section of giant bamboo with skin stretched over it, as well as the rhythmic dance accompanied by music from these drums. This rhythmic form appeared in Saint-Domingue as early as 1757 in a Haitian song and made its way to New Orleans even before the 1791 slave revolt. The *bamboula* was danced in Congo Square and was the inspiration for New Orleans-born piano prodigy and composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk’s work of the same name. The city’s second-line parades and the chants of Mardi Gras Indians are deeply rooted in the *bamboula* rhythm from Congo Square, where once enslaved Africans were allowed to drum and dance on Sundays. To Governor Miró, it was all “los tangos”.



Bamboula drum sketches by architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe, made in Congo Square, 1819

Cousin to the *bamboula* is the *contradanza*, also known as *danza criolla* (Creole dance), which became an important genre in Cuba in the 19th century, the first written music to be rhythmically based on patterns of African rhythms, the precursor of the *cha cha* and the *mambo*. Away from the island nation of Cuba, the *contradanza* became known as the *habanera*, the dance of Havana, and became an

international sensation. It's that "Spanish tinge" that Jelly Roll Morton talked about, which ended up in W.C Handy's "St. Louis Blues". Its four-pulse (Dum-Da-Dum-Dum) *habanera/tango* rhythm can be heard in music throughout the Antilles to this day. The *contradanzas* composed by Gottschalk laid the groundwork for later ragtime compositions by Scott Joplin and Jelly Roll Morton.

The *milonga*, from which the modern *tango* evolved, is nothing more than an excited *habanera* that is said to have originated in the *Río de la Plata* areas of Argentina and Uruguay.

As for the Argentine *tango* dance craze, it certainly made a significant appearance in the Crescent City in diverse and fascinating ways.



New Orleans States Headline, August 23, 1926

In 1921, the film "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" was being shown in New Orleans at the Shubert St. Charles, located at 432 St. Charles. This silent epic war film was significant in that it turned then-little-known actor Rudolph Valentino into an international heart throb and movie superstar. It forever associated him with the image of the "Latin Lover" and popularized such fashion fads as gaucho pants and inspired a *tango* craze across the globe.

Later that year, Valentino starred as "The Sheik" and the silent screen sex symbol had a new exotic nickname. With all that adulation came a backlash of male criticism over such female hysteria. Some men preferred to call him "Vaselino" for his slicked back hair.

In 1922, *tango* enthusiasts could watch the "captivating dancers", Patorno and Prosperie "gracefully dance" the steps to this new dance craze "to the soft, seductive cadences of Max Fink's jazz Orchestra." All of this tantalizing terpsichorean entertainment was featured at "The Oriental", located at 414 St. Charles, which had just opened that same year as a chinese restaurant.



PATORNO
Formerly
with TOM PATRICOLA
en four of the
Coast

PROSPERIE
Formerly
Ballet Danseuse Premier
New Orleans.
French Opera

No Cover Charge

TONIGHT!
INTRODUCING THE
ARGENTINE TANGO
In Modern Slow Step

These captivating dancers, presented by Marvin D. Brown, are introducing the Argentine Tango, the exotic dance of South America, to the patrons of the ORIENTAL. You saw Rudolph Valentino dance it in "The Four Horsemen"; now see Patorno and Prosperie gracefully dance its steps to the soft, seductive cadences of Max Fink's Jazz Orchestra.

Dine and dance at the ORIENTAL these glorious summer nights. You will enjoy the superb cuisine, the wonderful dancing floor, the marvelous jazz music, and the dancing of these artists, who perform every night at 11:15; and Sunday at 7 P. M., beginning May 20th to May 26th.

Luncheon, 11 A. M.—2 P. M.
Dinner, 5—8:30 P. M.

Sunday Dinner, 12 M.—9 P. M.
Dancing, 10:30 P. M.

The ORIENTAL
414 ST. CHARLES STREET.

Previously, "The Oriental" was Fabacher's Rathskeller, which had "fared well until prohibition settled over the country," reported the *New Orleans Item*. Before that it was the site of the old Academy Of Music. The Original Fabacher's, which for many years operated at the corner of Royal and Iberville streets (today's Mr. B's), "flourished" back when it "drew its patronage from actresses and the demimonde of the 'Tango Belt.'" It was more the rule than the exception to see a pretty actress standing on a table dancing while her admirers drank champagne from one of her slippers." Now the "Famous Old Rathskeller", said the paper, would be serving "chop suey and bird's nest soup". More on the "Tango Belt" later.

In 1923, two years after the release of "Four Horsemen" and "The Sheik", Valentino and his wife were invited to the Crescent City.



Valentino and in his wife in tango attire

Valentino's visit, wrote Meigs O. Frost in the *New Orleans States*, was the city's "opportunity to gauge the astounding degree to which Valentino had taken possession of the romantic heart of American girlhood." On a "barnstorming tour" across the nation, thousands greeted the pair at Union Station, "hundreds on hundreds" of them "young girls in their teens and twenties". Young men, too, "were jammed in that crowd side by side with the frantic flapper." And don't forget the "women of middle age, even grey haired." They were on hand, as well.

Dominick Tortorich, prizefight promoter, engaged Valentino and his wife, "Winifred Hudnut, daughter of the millionaire cosmetic and perfume manufacturer" to perform at the Athanaeum. Natacha Rambova was Mrs. Valentino's stage name. Inside their limo, the local impresario provided Mr. and Mrs. "Sheik" with a bundle of "costly Italian cheese, imported spaghetti and other Italian delicacies". Fans were jubilant and could not wait to see the pair dance the *tango* on stage.

The Athenaeum, located at the corner of St. Charles Avenue and Clio Street, was "packed to overflowing" for the show. The structure was built for the Young Men's Hebrew Association and was one of the city's more popular venues. Enrico Caruso also performed there, and Rex used the Athenaeum for its balls from 1907 until 1936.



The Athanaeum on St. Charles Avenue, destroyed by fire in 1937

The enthusiasm for the *tango* did not fade with Valentino's visit to New Orleans. According to an article dated April 13, 1924, in the *New Orleans States*, Mr. and Mrs. Albert Godchaux celebrated their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary with a festive Spanish costume dinner-dance at the Patio Royal (present-day Brennan's Restaurant). "Mrs. Godchaux," according to the account, "wore an exquisite costume of silver brocade and a Spanish veil of real lace ... held very high by a beautiful Spanish comb." Mr. Godchaux was also effectively attired in traditional Spanish garb "and their young son, Justin Godchaux, wore a 'Valentino' tango costume." In addition, and "a special feature of the evening," a tango was danced "by Mrs. Raymond Saal and Mr. Jeff Feibleman, which was executed with indescribable grace and charm."

So, what's the story on the "Tango Belt"? Back in 1914, a decade before Mrs. Saal and Mr. Feibleman made the Society Page with their graceful *tango* dancing, sixteen "Women Tango Fiends" were arrested by police. One Virginia Nealey was suspected of being a confidence woman. "The wholesale arrests of women who go from cabaret to cabaret to dance the tango and other steps" was the beginning of a police crusade, reported the *Picayune* on December 4, 1914. At its peak, the "Tango Belt" was home to one of the highest concentrations

of commercial jazz venues in the city. Problem was, they weren't just dancing to *jazz* or the *tango*.

Women Tango Fiends Arrested by Police

The "Tango Belt" was located in the French Quarter just across Basin and North Rampart streets from Storyville and featured numerous cabarets, saloons and theaters employing jazz musicians, such as the Oasis Cabaret, the Black Orchid and the Haymarket. But there was also prostitution. An article in the *Item* dated March 4, 1915, reported a raid on the "Tango Belt":

"Nearly fifty sad little daughters of joy were yanked from their beery dells in the tango belt early Thursday morning by Superintendent Reynold's 'squab squad', and deposited in the night court with their flimsy garments awry, their lip-rouge streaked over cheek and chin, and their curls from which rain had taken the gimp, clinging to their ears, little frightened tendrils [*sic*]."

As for the Original Fabacher's on Royal Street, it was established 1880 by Lawrence Fabacher. When he left ten years later to found the Jackson Brewery, he sold the restaurant business to his brother, Peter, who leased the *Rathskeller* at 414 St. Charles from Dr. George King Pratt in 1907. Favrot and Livaudais were the architects for Dr. King's German concept restaurant, begun in 1904. The word *Rathskeller* means "council's cellar" in German, since a restaurant or tavern was often located in the basement of a German city hall (*Rathaus*). Tulane University opened its own "German beer parlor", *Der Rathskeller*, in the University Center (UC) basement on March 19, 1966, according the *Times-Picayune*. Approximately one hundred students showed up for the grand opening as beer flowed from the spigots, with comments ranging from "I don't believe it," to "This is tough." "Tough" was a compliment back in the 1960s.

A popular song entitled "Takes Two to Tango", written by Al Hoffman and Dick Manning, was recorded by New Orleans' own Louis Armstrong for Decca Records in 1952, charting on Billboard's Best Seller list on October 17th. "Satchmo" solidly sold the song's catchy lyrics:

"Takes two to tango, two to tango,
two to really get the feeling of romance.
Lets do the tango, do the tango,

do the dance of love.”

Also in 1952, the instrumental “Blue Tango” by Leroy Anderson reached No. 1 on the Billboard charts.

In addition to the world of music, *Tango* has become one of the twenty-six code words in the NATO phonetic alphabet, representing the letter T, but it is not the only dance step used. *Foxtrot* represents the letter F. And last but not least in this parade (and well-recognized in New Orleans) is *Zulu*, representing the letter Z.

In present-day New Orleans, dancing the Argentine *tango* is as popular as ever. On June 8 – 11, 2017, the 2017 New Orleans Tango Festival will be held at the Astor Crowne Plaza Hotel on Canal Street. Also mentioned is a “pre-Festival Milonga Wednesday, June 7, 2017.” Many people of all ages enjoy dancing the *tango* on a regular basis by belonging to various dance groups or attending numerous venues in the Greater New Orleans area.

In 2015, before the closing of the Galvez Restaurant along the River, I had the pleasure of participating in and greatly enjoying dancing the Argentine *tango*. When one of the elegant dancers glided past me and accidentally bumped into my foot, she said, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to *gaucho* you.” I have been unable to discover the origin of this expression to my satisfaction, but perhaps it had something to do with the rough-and-tumble nature of an Argentine horseman. The *tango*, after all, is a dance where your feet must caress the floor. It is akin to a kind of rhythmic walking.



Tango dancers at the Galvez, May 2015

I also saw my dance partner enjoy the thrill of executing a successful *ocho*. *Ocho* is one of the oldest and most important figures of the *tango*, where the woman makes a figure 8 motion just above the dance floor – hence its name.

The *tango* has played a significant role in numerous motion pictures, perhaps none quite so elegantly as the one danced in "Scent of a Woman" (1992) by blind Frank (Al Pacino) and Donna (Gabrielle Anwar). This classic and beautiful *tango* written by Argentina's most prominent *tango* figure, Carlos Gardel, is entitled "Por una Cabeza," and was also danced by Arnold Schwarzenegger in "True Lies". It means "by a head," making an analogy between gambling on racehorses and women.

Upon Rudolph Valentino's untimely death at the young age of 31, an estimated 100,000 people lined the streets of Manhattan to pay their final respects at his funeral. On August 15, 1926, the world-renowned "Latin Lover" collapsed at the Hotel Ambassador on Park Avenue from perforated ulcers mimicking appendicitis. Despite surgery, Valentino developed peritonitis and his condition worsened. He died on August 23rd. A star was gone. His film, "The Four

Horsemen of the Apocalypse,” in which he first danced the *tango*, was one of the first films to earn \$1,000,000 at the box office, and holds the record to this day as the sixth-highest grossing silent film ever.



Rudolph Valentino, ready to tango

Meigs O. Frost wrote in 1926 that many believed Valentino “deserved great credit for having risen from the ranks of an immigrant boy to that of a star of filmdom.” According to “one of the best informed men in the film industry of New Orleans,” Valentino “did something that all should be proud of. He came from obscurity, brought something new to the screen, and marked a new epoch in picture making.”

Of himself, Valentino said, “Women are not in love with me but with the picture of me on the screen. I am merely the canvas upon which the women paint their dreams.”

As for the enjoyment of the *tango*, what follows is a beautiful quote by Ricardo Vidort who danced the *tango* for over sixty years. This *milonguero*, a person who dances social *tango*, died in 2006:

“To be a milonguero, first of all you have your own style of dancing. It means that you have a unique feeling for the music, rhythm, cadence and embrace. When you have all this, the music invades your body

and mind and then, only then, the chemistry begins that really makes you transmit to your partner as if both were talking, whispering, sliding on the floor with sacadas, corridas, turns, dancing only one for the other, not for the people. In that moment, when both are listening to the magic of the music, the skin of one in the skin of the other, the smell, the touch produces the miracle of something like a mantra, and the ying and the yang is there!!! We are dancing tango!!!”

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“Two To Tango”
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