

# A TANGO IS A TANGO - RIGHT??

*Compiled by Chris and Terri Cantrell from a variety of reference and personal sources.*



Most of the dance rhythms called tango can be classified into one of the following three types: International, American, or a variety of tangos that fall into the Argentine category.

The forms of Tango are like stages of a marriage. The American Tango is like the beginning of a love affair, when you are both very romantic and on your best behavior. The Argentine Tango is the next stage when you are in the heat of passion and all kinds of emotions consume you. The International Tango is like the end of the marriage, when you are staying together for the sake of the children.

## Argentine Tango: *Four legs, 2 heads, one heart!*

"Tango is like love in the afternoon, naughty, but nice! In its purest form, Tango is a sensual coupling, forged by raw emotion. The closest thing you'll find to a vertical expression of a horizontal desire" (Angela Rippon). "Is one supposed to dance it standing up?" (Countess Melanie de Pourtales).

The most popular definition of the word "tango" comes from the Latin word "*tangere*" which means "to touch." In the ballroom world, Argentine Tango is a member of the Latin rhythm (e.g. cha cha, rumba, mambo, etc.)

They face each other, assume the position, and breathe in with anticipation. The powerful music of the bandoneon (squeezebox originally from Germany) and the guitar (introduced from Spain) swells and immerses them in the moment. The man initiates movement; the woman feels the direction and timing from his close body positioning and right hand. He guides his partner's rapid-fire and sudden changes in position and direction, and then is contrasted with very smooth slow movements. Thus far, the Argentine Tango that Round Dancers execute is much tamer. It is his nudge that moves her forward or backward at his discretion. He sets the pace, from steamy and languid to perilously. The female must do whatever the man tells her, and she must do it whenever he tells her.



This type of tango reflects a macho society; the man always wins because he has control over the woman and when he has had enough of the tricky' foot game, he can always move on to other challenges.

The Argentine basic steps are built out of grapevines, figure eights, turns, and walking, to which are added, for example: dramatic pauses, quick steps, syncopations, foot decorations, and leg hooks. It is done with determination, with a slight forward full body lean (head to ankles) by both partners; it is not a bending of the waist or a curve the spine. When walking backward move the torso first, then reach back and test the floor (slinky & cat-like in nature) with your foot, move your body weight over the stepping foot and collect the other foot next to it. Steps are generally even, with feet kept close to the floor and knees are bent slightly.

Controversy surrounds the genesis of the tango, but it is known that the dance originated in the bars, brothels, and streets of the 'barrios' (districts) of Buenos Aires, and that it was a dance with mixed ethnic origins. The vocabulary of the dance combined the rhythmic patterns of African dance with footwork that resembles the kicks & flicks of gauchos on horseback from the Argentinean pampas; sensuous, sexually & suggestive moves danced cheek to cheek in the brothels; and basic turns and walking steps from European folk dance. The Argentine tango was banned in Argentina just prior to World War I. It surfaced again in Paris where certain refinements made it popular all over Europe. Many people associate this rhythm with Rudolph Valentine, who made it popular when he danced it in a 1921 movie.

## International Tango:

Argentine immigrants moving to Paris at the beginning of the 20th century brought the Argentine tango with them. The Europeans fell in love with the music but found the dance far too vulgar. So, they stripped it of the various intricate leg movements and adapted it to the conventions of the ballroom at that time. Both International and American styles developed from this tango. The Germans further perfected International Tango.

International style is a highly disciplined and distinctively structured form of the Tango. The dance is traditionally danced in closed position and utilizes both legato (smooth & flowing) and staccato (sharp & military like) aspects. International Tango is considered a smooth dance (e.g. Waltz, Foxtrot). The actions, body mechanics, and footwork follow the general rules in smooth dancing, but there is no rise and fall and the inside of the foot is used to a greater extent. The smooth footwork involves using the heel (forward movements) and ball/toe (backward movements) of the foot. The hold is solid and the lead comes from the man's rib cage as opposed to the full body & hands in the Argentine Tango.

The head snaps in tango are very often said to have not come into play until the 1930s; however, they may have stemmed from the old stories of the beginnings of the Argentine Tango. The gauchos would come into the salons directly from the range and the women, getting a whiff of body odor, would try to keep their heads to the left despite what the men were leading.

### American Tango:

The fundamental basic rhythm is the same in both the American and International style - QQS, with the two quicks sometimes being replaced by a slow, but the basic figures are definitely different. When the International Tango eventually arrived in North America, it was thought to be too stiff, so some of the aspects of the Argentine style returned to the dance such as fans (known as ochos in Argentine) and the tango draw. The dance also became less staccato than the International version and allowed dancers to execute the figures and actions from either closed or open positions. It is generally classified as a 'modern' or 'American' style dance (e.g. American foxtrot). It has been said that the Americanized version is a combination of the best parts of each (Argentine & International).



Vernon and Irene Castle were instrumental in the early development of the American style. Vernon & Irene Castle earned fame while living in Paris when down on their luck, were asked to dance the new American Turkey Trot and Grizzly Bear for a few bucks. Not knowing the steps, they took a newspaper article sent from their mother about the new dances and faked their way through them. Prior to the performance, they would be sitting in the audience, (very unusual at the time for performers), the announcer would announce them, they would rise, walk to the floor, and dance. Despite their graceful and elegant way of dancing (for the time), the audience related with them as they thought they were just regular dancers just like them. The Castles became a huge hit in Paris and eventually returned home to New York City. The Castles opened a school for dancing in New York City called the Castle House, and went about the task of trying to refine the "Modern Dances" with such advice as: "do not shake the

hips or twist the body, flounce the elbows or pump the arms." (*Do any of these pieces of advice sound familiar?*)

In 1913 Arthur Murray was a student at Castle House. He learned the dance style taught by the Castles and eventually became an instructor. After Vernon Castle died during World War I in 1917, the Castle House was closed. Arthur Murray left New York and enrolled at Georgia Tech and in order to pay some of his college expenses he returned to teaching dancing again. He started the Arthur Murray Studios and is credited with developing the syllabus of figures for today's American Tango and many other American dances.



We leave you with one last quote from an unknown source...

"El tango no esta en los pies. Esta en el corazon."  
(*Tango is not in the feet. It is in the heart*)