

# The Parallel World of the Tango

*by* Con Chapman

I did not recall why or from where I had clipped the article on Carlos Gardel, Argentina's—and the world's—best-known and most beloved tango vocalist, so when I found it in my desk drawer it touched off a massive man-hunt through my memory.



Had there been a time in my pathetic life in which I envied Gardel? When I wanted to replicate his success three-quarters of a century after his untimely death in a plane crash in Colombia en route to a 1935 Caribbean tour? I could not recall.



*Gardel, before the crash*

Attached to the clipping was another, a fatuous letter to the editor of a newspaper complaining about a review of Hari Kunzru's *Gods Without Men*, chiding the reviewer for thinking that what he called "Translit," a genre in which time telescopes and spatial differences don't matter, was something new. (I abhor the trivial disputes of letter-to-the-editor writers, even though I have been one myself!) No, said the irritated correspondent: Western time is linear, but "In much of Asia . . . time moves in spirals or cycles," and "Australian Aborigines believe the dead are among us in a parallel world."



*Gardel, belting out "Sus Ojos Se Cerraron."*

I omit the name of the author of the work criticized, and the reviewer, and the insufferable fellow who felt called upon to publicly clear the record on such a mundane point. How readers at home must have had a hearty laugh at the fellow's overwrought complaint! "Listen to this!" a respectable burgher might have said to his wife before reciting a line or two of the writer's purple prose. Then he would turn back to the table of prices on the Sociedad El Camoatí, Argentina's first first exchange.



*Chicks dig tango singers!*

I leaned back in my chair, musing upon the shifting nature of time and memory, when I heard from the large room off the kitchen that my wife refers to as the “family” room—even though members of my family are free to roam throughout the house!—the suspirating sounds (and try saying *that* five times fast)—of the tango.

I crept on tiptoe into the kitchen and pulled back the folding doors to the family room and saw—Gardel himself, strumming the ninth, thirteenth, major seventh, augmented and diminished chords that I had spent hundreds of dollars of my father's hard-earned money at Shaw's Music Studio, Sedalia MO 65301, trying to learn.



When at last I abandoned hope of ever mastering the most basic fundamentals of the instrument that is so closely associated with the

tango, I could not bear to tell my *padre* the reason: all of the instructors suffered from chronic flatulence, making every 45-minute session like a forced march through a fetid swamp.

Still, I harbored a dream that through some miraculous means I might one day become a tango singer like Carlos, admired not so much for my skill as my rarity; like the top (and only) scrimshander in Arizona, I hoped to become the *numero uno* tango singer in the western suburbs of Boston.



### *Scrimshaw*

“Excuse me,” I said in a soft and hesitant voice as Gardel sang *El Día Que Me Queiras*, which may be roughly translated as “My parrot admires your fedora.” Lost in the passion of the tango he did not hear me, so I cleared my throat.

“Oh—I thought you were perhaps napping, so I shut the door,” Gardel said, a picture of polished urbanity. “I was just serenading your cat.”

I looked at the best chair in the house, and there sat Rocco, our tuxedo male, in violation of the Code of Feline Behavior that he chafes against daily.

“Rocco,” I said, “you know you're not allowed to sit there.”

“Please, indulge him just this once,” Gardel said in the suave tone that belied his humble upbringing in the poor neighborhoods around the docks of Buenos Aires.

"Just this once today, or since noon?" I asked skeptically.

"I am practicing some new material on him," Gardel said. "He seems to like *Lejana Tierra Mia* . . ."

"Which means?"

"No smoking within 25 feet of building."

"That's funny . . . he runs from the room whenever I play guitar."



*"I have lusted for your bunny-style bedroom slippers!"*

"You do not play—what is the expression—*molto simpatica*."

"And you do?"

"I have him drooling out of both sides of his mouth."

I looked over at Rocco and Gardel was correct, although this meant nothing. "He does that all the time," I said with a snort of contempt. "If you are truly a singer of passion, he drools out both sides *and* between his front teeth."

Gardel was impressed. "This is truly a cat *formidable*," he said. "But it is no matter—I am merely practicing on him."

"For what?"

"My real goal," he said, "is to seduce your wife."



I could only laugh. “You do not know her,” I said with scorn. “My wife appreciates the finer things in life; she would hardly be enchanted by the tango, a musical form that sprang from the lowest dregs of humanity!”

“You underestimate her, my friend,” he said. “Within every woman there is a torrid river of passion that is restrained by a large hydroelectric dam . . .”



“Like Bagnell Dam, Lake of the Ozarks, Missouri?”

“*Si*—except that the dam within a woman, it is made not of concrete and steel, but of society's many externally imposed inhibitions.”

I considered this for a moment. “Any other differences?”

“The dam in Missouri—it is surrounded by tacky shops selling t-shirts, taffy and cheesy Indian belts. The dam within a woman, it is flanked by hidebound conventions imposed by society.”

I was silent. “Well, she *has* asked me to take tango lessons with her before, but I never took her seriously.”

Gardel was in my face in less time than it would have taken him to play two sixteenth notes. “You *must* take seriously these little hints that she drops around the house like a 12-pound woman's pink swirly bowling ball,” he said with a tone both fierce and yet at the same time, bespeaking a tragic loss.



“You sound sad as you say this,” I noted, and his lip quivered; the first sign of weakness since he had appeared on our sofa from a parallel universe where he was king and I a mere possibility.

“It is because,” he said, and I noted a catch in his voice, “if you do this for her, she will be yours—and not mine.”

“I see,” I said, and I saw. “Very well. I will take her up on her long-standing request, even if it seems . . . frivolous.”



“There is *nothing*,” Gardel said with barely-controlled fury, “frivolous about the tango.”

With that he placed his hat on his head at the jaunty angle that was his trademark, chucked Rocco under the chin, and said merely “Adios” as he walked to our front door.



As he exited my wife entered from the garage and I detected on her face the same look of repressed fury with which Gardel had been seething only a few moments before. Maybe he was right; perhaps she did yearn for me as Argentinian lovers do, and wanted nothing more than to clasp her body tightly to mine in an imitation of—and an invitation to perform—an act more intimate when the night is through.

“Sweetie, I know you're interested in learning the tango, so I was thinking that . . .”

“Don't 'Sweetie' me,” she snapped. “I leave you alone for a *second* and you let the cat get on the best chair in the house!”

