

Article 13

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL EUROPE.

The New Tango Adopts Hot, Fast Moves --- Heavy Beat, Lots of Twists Attract a Younger Crowd; Mr. Ladas's All-Nighters

By Kim-Mai Cutler

975 words

30 August 2005

[The Wall Street Journal Europe](#)

A5

English

(Copyright (c) 2005, Dow Jones & Company, Inc.)

Berkeley, California -- IT STILL TAKES two to **tango**, but young urban aficionados have added some surprising new twists to the tradition-bound Argentine dance.

For most of a recent Saturday night, Homer Ladas staged what appeared to be a program of traditional **tango** at a small studio here. Locked in tight embrace, dozens of couples gently swirled on the scuffed wooden floor as the sound of violins from the golden age of **tango** in the 1940s floated in the air.

By about 4 a.m., though, it was time for something quite different on the dance floor. With the traditional crowd gone home to bed, Mr. Ladas dumped the orchestra music and replaced it with the sort of modern, bass-heavy dance music that might be played in a hip nightclub. The dancing was different, too: The people in their twenties who remained switched over to a new kind of **tango** that had them lifting, twisting and ricocheting around the room.

This is "neotango," a new millennium version of the dance that was born at the turn of the previous century in the brothels of Buenos Aires. It is booming all over the **tango** world.

For years, the very word **tango** brought images of sophistication and glamour: tuxedoed, rose-clutching tangueros strutting across the floor with leggy women -- tangueras -- in dresses slit up the thigh. But the **tango** was withering away.

Now, in city after city across the U.S., a new generation of **tango** dancers is packing the floor again. They swerve and kick, not to the traditional violins of, say, the great Francisco Canaro's orchestras, but to the dub beats of Massive Attack or wailing guitar lines of Jimi Hendrix. Formal wear is out; sneakers, low-rider jeans and halter tops are in.

And the dance itself is different: faster, more fluid and requiring more floor space. While old-school dancers, enjoying simple steps, might press themselves heart to heart, the new versions rotate over swaths of floor at high speed.

One popular neotango DJ played gigs in Beijing, Washington, and St. Louis this summer. At Mr. Ladas's Berkeley studio, there is usually a global assortment of partners on hand.

Mr. Ladas, who hosts all-nighters in the San Francisco area and in other U.S. cities, is emblematic of the new generation of dancers. A former mechanical engineer in Tucson, Arizona, he saw a flier for **tango** when he was 27 years old and became obsessed. He took lessons and, soon, 10 hours of dancing a week became 15 and then 20. At an Amsterdam **tango** festival, he danced for 26 hours nonstop.

But **tango** remained just a hobby for Mr. Ladas, now 36, until two cataclysms shook up his life -- his mother's death and the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, just a day later. He took a leave of absence from his job to teach **tango**; he never returned. At around the same time, neotango was growing increasingly popular in American and European dancing circles. It had its roots in the pounding club music, the experimental stylings of a few prominent Argentine dancers and modern fitness regimes.

While the traditional form of **tango** can be highly structured, neotango's early proponents believed dancers had to be free to experiment.

Mr. Ladas set out to spread the word about the new **tango**, teaching classes and hosting milongas, or dance parties, around the country. In 2003, he and a group of like-minded San Francisco dancers opened the doors to the city's first large-scale alternative milonga. "There was a group of young people who were frustrated who wanted to have more expressiveness in **tango**," he said.

But when neotango started picking up steam, the passionate **tango** community divided into cliques over which kind of **tango** is best. Even as Mr. Ladas's neotango events have swelled in popularity, some dancers have branded him a "**tango** philistine" or have avoided his events.

Traditionalists simply long for the older styles: chest to chest, cheek to cheek, and eyes closed in what is known as the **tango** trance. "**Tango** is very close to the heart," dancer Moti Buchboot said. "That makes it really easy for crazy zealots to go in there and say that their style is the style and that's the only right style."

It isn't just the dance moves that are dividing the audience, it is the more beat-oriented music. "**Tango** requires music with a human breath, and without that it isn't danceable," said longtime Denver teacher Tom Stermitz. But even Mr. Stermitz, who promotes the older, closer style, recently added an alternative milonga to his popular annual festival.

The debate has even come home to Argentina. **Tango** was repressed there from 1955 to 1983 under regimes that broke up milongas and jailed dancers. Argentine **tango** went underground. Although it came roaring back to life when several Broadway shows in the 1980s and early '90s, including "**Tango** Argentino" and "Forever **Tango**," sparked interest abroad, the music didn't catch up with the times.

When neotango music first emerged, just one club in Buenos Aires would play Carlos Libedinsky's homemade compilation of electronic tangos called "Narcotango." A

fter spreading it to friends in Europe and North America in 2003, the musician has sold about 20,000 CDs, mostly through word of mouth, and it has become part of standard playlists at several Buenos Aires clubs.

"Many people say that it's not **tango**. Even I'm not sure -- I don't say that it's traditional **tango**, of course," Mr. Libedinsky said. "But it's something new, something refreshing. It brings new colors to the music and to the dancing."

Document WSJE000020050830e18u00002