



The King of Tango

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Most people think of tango as a dance. That sensuous coupling of bodies moving in a sultry choreography of intricate steps that envelops the dancers in an intimate space of their own. But for true fans, it is also a song.

Tango was born in Buenos Aires and Montevideo in the late 1800s. It was a fusion of European musical styles, local folk music, and African rhythms that was originally played as instrumental dance music in low dives and bordellos in port cities on the Río de la Plata. In the early years of the twentieth century an ambitious young musician earned his living singing opera arias and Spanish *zarzuelas* in bars and restaurants in Buenos Aires. He then started singing tangos and, in 1917, recorded *Mi noche triste* (My Sad Night). That was the beginning of a musical revolution that paired poetic lyrics with tango music and moved the genre out of the slums and into respectable living rooms and dance halls in Argentina and Uruguay and, eventually, all over the world. The young man's name was Carlos Gardel.

He was born Charles Romuald Gardès in Toulouse, France on December 11, 1890. Shortly thereafter, his unwed mother set sail for Buenos Aires where she and her son arrived in March 1893. They settled in the Abasto neighbourhood, where Berthe took in ironing to support them. The boy grew up speaking Spanish and his friends called him Carlos. Once he got his start as a singer, he changed his surname to Gardel and took to wearing his trademark fedora. His first recording was a huge success, and he went on to become the most famous tango singer of all time.

He started touring Latin America and performing in New York, Paris, Barcelona, and Madrid in the 1920s. Parisians, especially, went wild over tango, which struck a chord with post-war Europeans and was soon all the rage in nightclubs everywhere. Gardel was known for his warm

baritone and his dramatic phrasing which, together with his matinée idol good looks, made him one of the most popular celebrities in the world. Like many other stars, he was a sex symbol and, to avoid disappointing his adoring fans, he and his handlers took pains to keep his personal life private. He was close to one particular girlfriend for about ten years, but they were rarely seen in public together and their relationship was a closely guarded secret.

Gardel soon began making movies, working for Paramount Pictures while living in Paris in the early 1930s. It was there that he met the writer and lyricist Alfredo Le Pera, who would become his full-time collaborator. Together they created some of the tango classics that endure to this day. Le Pera wrote the script and lyrics for the movie and song *El día que me quieras* (The Day You Love Me), a megahit thought by some to be one of the most beautiful melodies ever composed. Gardel and Le Pera were nearing the end of a promotional tour for the movie when their plane crashed into another aircraft on the runway at Medellín airport in Colombia and they and their entourage were killed. On June 24, 1935, the King of Tango's golden voice was stilled forever.

Gardel's millions of fans went into deep mourning for the loss of the man who had voiced their deepest emotions in poignant songs about life, love, and the human drama. Massive farewell parades were organized in New York, Rio de Janeiro, and Montevideo, where his mother was living at the time. Finally, in Buenos Aires, his coffin was borne on a horse-drawn carriage through streets packed with grief-stricken mourners and laid to rest in La Chacarita cemetery. Eighty-six years have passed since that sad day, but his popularity has never waned, and new generations of his fans remain as devoted as their parents ever were. They like to say that "Gardel sings better every day," meaning that his music improves with age, like fine wine.