

Piazzolla and I

By Sam Hasegawa

Editor's Note: According to our contributor, this is a translation from the Spanish of a previously unknown manuscript by Borges discovered among the papers in the Jorge Luis Borges collection of the Fundación San Telmo in Buenos Aires. We believe this piece is apocryphal. While the content may be based on historical fact and could be argued to have stylistic affinities with Borges' published works, the manuscript is signed "J.L.B., Buenos Aires, 1992." Borges died in 1986, in Geneva, Switzerland. A call to the Fundación San Telmo to confirm the existence of a manuscript entitled, "Piazzolla y yo," was not returned.

He died this summer, on July 4th, just six short years after I, Borges, left Geneva to return to the place where I started. When I learned of his passing, a flood of aural memories filled my head. I never knew his face, since when we first met person to person, my sight had departed. But I had long known his music—its passionate intensity, its baroque extravagance, its refinement, its violence, its longing. I adored his tangos the way I cherished my sister, the way I would have loved a brother.

I remember our first conversations in my office in the National Library. He told me he wanted to record an album of music he had written to lyrics and texts taken from my poetry and fiction. I was flattered by his selections from my poetry, especially "Tango," from *The Self and the Other* and the three milongas from *For Six Strings*. But I was most touched by his choice of "Man on Pink Corner," the story that some thirty years earlier had established my name. I started to tell him how much of myself I heard in his music, but he interrupted, laughing, and said he had to tell me how much of himself he discovered in my writing—in my stories and poems of barrios with blue-washed walls, broken concrete sidewalks, and withered roses, where the sound of a tango strummed on a guitar could become the harsh breathing of two men fighting with knives to the death.

Later, when I first heard "El Tango," the album he recorded, I was transported back to the Buenos Aires I knew after the turn of the century, to Palermo with its cabarets and brothels, its tangos and milongas, and its *compadritos* with their black clothes and black high-heeled shoes, their pride and courage, their flashing knives. I heard the voice of my father, who spoke and read English, talked philosophy, and explained Xenon's paradox to me over the chessboard. I saw the proud, erect carriage of my mother, descended from soldiers and freedom fighters. I remembered how my sister, Norah, and I played with imaginary playmates while wandering through the library and the vast garden. I marveled at how evocatively he had captured that lost time in "*Hombre de la esquina rosada*," the tango music he composed for my story.

In what has become one of my best-known works, I wrote that I moved from creating mythologies of the slums and outskirts of the city to playing games with time and infinity. As I listened to his "El Tango" that day, the memory of something he told me made me realize I had merely traveled in a circle. He was explaining how he had started playing tangos as a child, performed with Carlos Gardel, played bandoneón and arranged for Anibal Troilo. All the while, he was teaching himself how to compose in the classical European style. He told me how he had shown some of his compositions to Arthur Rubenstein, then living in Buenos Aires, and how Rubenstein introduced him to Alberto Ginastera, who became his first teacher and taught him the music of the twentieth-century masters.

Strangely enough, he told me the pivotal event in his artistic development occurred in France. I remember his laugh when he said, "I had to go to Paris to learn from a French woman who I was." He had won an international competition and received a grant to study there with Nadia Boulanger. At their first meeting, he showed her his compositions, which she started to read. But she suddenly stopped and said, "These are very well written, but I can't find you in any of this." She then asked him about his personal

life: Was he married, what composers did he admire, what was his instrument? Was it piano? With hesitation, he said he played the bandoneón, a concertina-like instrument, and he played tangos in nightclubs. She told him the next time he should bring his bandoneón and play tangos for her

The next lesson, he brought his bandoneon. When he finished his performance of tangos, she took his hand in hers and said, “This is who you are. This is the music you must write.”

And now, it occurs to me how alike we two *porteños* were—me, Borges, with my love of Stevenson, Hölderlin, Spinoza; he, Piazzolla, with his love of Stravinsky, Bartok, Ravel; and for both of us, underneath those obsessions, the sound of a tango that summons memories of a barrio with a pink corner store, the face of a young woman who does not want to be remembered, the nearness of death, the inevitability of loss.

Not long before he recorded “The Rough Dancer and the Cyclical Night,” a second album inspired by my texts, an interviewer asked me for my thoughts on tango, this music that originated in the bordellos of Buenos Aires at the turn of the century. I concluded my little dissertation by saying, “All the hustle and bustle of the city, all the emotions that move men—anger, fear, desire, sexual pleasure—become central motifs for the authors of tangos. I don’t think it is absurd to consider the tango as a vast expression of the incoherent *comédie humaine* of the life of Buenos Aires.”

Now, that unfortunate statement seems to be evidence of what I once characterized as a vanity that turns personal preference into theatrical props.

I would much prefer that my readers look for my thoughts on the tango in “*Hombre de la esquina rosada*,” my story that he set to music.

Everything I feel about tango is in that tale, which tells how Francisco Real, the *cuchillero* from the north, came to Maldonado to challenge Rosendo Juárez, the fiercest man with a knife in the barrio; how Rosendo refused to fight and walked away, never to return; how Real then called for tango music and danced with Rosendo’s woman, La Lujanera, and how she went out the door with Real, still in his arms, still dancing; how Real returned alone later, bleeding from a knife wound delivered by an unnamed assailant, and died on that same dance floor; how La Lujanera went home with the man who told me this story, the man who said he barely knew of Real and only crossed paths with him three times, all on the same night.

And thinking back to the hot, humid night when I wrote the final sentence of that fiction so many years ago, I wonder why it is I am certain that the tango I imagined then is the tango that he, Piazzolla, composed for my story so many years later.

— J.L.B.
—Buenos Aires, 1992

Discography

“El Tango: Astor Piazzolla y su Orquesta — Canta Edmundo Rivero, ‘El Tango’ textos de Jorge Luis Borges,” Polygram, 1965, Argentina. Music by Astor Piazzolla. Out of print.

“Borges and Piazzolla,” Milan Entertainment, 1997, U.S.A. Performance of the music by Astor Piazzolla, with lyrics by Jorge Luis Borges, originally recorded on “El Tango.” Daniel Binelli, arranger and bandoneón, Jairo, vocalist, Lito Cruz, narrator.

“The Rough Dancer and the Cyclical Night (Tango Apasionado),” Nonesuch, 1987, U.S.A. Music by Astor Piazzolla, performed by Astor Piazzolla’s sextet.

Bibliography

“Astor Piazzolla: A sad, current and conscious tango,” interview by Gonzalo Saavedra, Barcelona, 1989, www.piazzolla.org.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *A Personal Anthology*, ed. Anthony Kerrigan. Grove Press, New York, 1967.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley. Penguin Books, New York, 1998.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Selected Poems*, trans. Alexander Coleman. Penguin Books, New York, 1999.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Twenty-four Conversations with Borges*, interviews by Roberto Alifano, trans. Nicomedes Suárez Araúz, Willis Barnstone and Moemí Escandell. Lascaux Publishing, Housatonic, 1984.