

## On Our Cover

# A Rag to Riches Tango Tale

*Francisco Canaro was a promoter and an ambassador of the Tango, from neighboring Uruguay and Chile to Spain, France and the United States. Perhaps his most important outreach was Japan where Pirincho's fertile compositions set the foundation for the Rising Sun Empire's infatuation with the Argentine Tango. His compositions number over five hundred titles spanning fifty years of dedicated labor to the development of the business of Tango.*

There are no historical records about weaklings. To name **Francisco Canaro** is to name somebody who represents the very essence of the development and growth of the Tango both as a musician and a director. Few examples of perseverance, dedication and passion for his trade are as evident as in the case of **Canaro**. His legacy includes an example of constructive tenacity applied not only to the circles in which he reigned, but also to the rest of the community at large. He was a typical example of a self-made man who rose from a life of misery and poverty with an uncompromising determination. His struggle was primarily motivated by a materialistic purpose, lacking in brilliance and everlasting creativity. Somehow for him the end justified the means, but the hefty benefits resulting from his hard work also trickled down to the bohemian Tango movement of which he became the undisputed captain: the fearless navigator that sailed through the troubled waters of unfair labor practices to bring the rights of authors and composers to a safe port.



**A rare mug shot of Francisco Canaro circa 1907 when he first began to make inroads into the recording industry**

His critics from the academic halls of the Argentine Tango establishment are quick to point out his lack of artistic temperament. **Francisco Garcia Jimenez** wrote, *because of that, he (Canaro) couldn't introduce a single note of significance in the interpretation of the music of Buenos Aires. He adhered to a familiar rhythm impressing on it an accentuated sonority.* In other words, no devoted purist would find ecstasy listening to any recording of his orchestra, but for the rest of the world **Canaro's** name and sounds will be forever associated with an irresistible desire to hit the dance floor because dancers were who **Canaro** played for.

**Canaro** wanted to be a musician, and intuitively he was one from an embryonic stage. He lacked resources, means, principles and mentors to guide him through the scholastic paths of the art of music. What he had instead, all around him, was the continuous spin that emerged from the popular harmonic sounds and cadenced dances that stuck to his ear, matched his cordial heartbeat, communicated through the lips and incited his sensitive fingers to want to join their legion of interpreters. The rhythms danced at the dawn of the twentieth century in **Argentina** were foreign by adoption, but progressively being naturalized. Waltzes, polkas, mazurkas were quickly changing their original threads to enter the vernacular prairie. The **European** waltz settled in **Buenos Aires** and became **Creole**. Soon the mazurkas would evolve into **rancheras**, and polkas into **chamames**, moving deep inside the countryside.

In **Buenos Aires** another dance music was cornered and limited to an obscure underworld. It had been born out of the conjunction of various immigrant rhythms. It possessed the evident genius and silhouette of the city demographics. The Tango, music and dance, was explicitly banned from salons and family living rooms and held in disre-



**The signs of fatigue after almost sixty years of uninterrupted professional activity are evident on Francisco Canaro's tired face in one of the last photographs taken of him before his death.**

pute because of its association with back room illegal gambling, bordello waiting rooms, seedy bars and the irrational fear of the characters populating the dangerous empty lots of the outskirts.

This was the state of things when **Francisco Canaro** was born on November 26, 1888 in **San Jose de Mayo**, a small city of the **Republica Oriental del Uruguay**. As a matter of trivia, it is said that a neighbor quickly noticed the baby's rebellious fuzz of hair and exclaimed, *he looks like a 'pirincho' (a South American bird of the magpie family)*, and the nickname stuck to him for the rest of his life.

What also followed was almost fifty years of uninterrupted labor for the music and the Tango which set **Canaro** apart as one of the key men of the history of the music of **Buenos Aires**.

## Dodging poverty in a crowded tenement room

The **Canaro** family, numbering ten between immigrant parents, sisters and brothers, crossed the **River Plate** and moved to **Buenos Aires** towards the end of the nineteenth century. They struggled to make the essential ends meet, living in the extreme poverty of a tenement's crowded room. Barely ten years old, **Pirincho** took to the streets as a shoe shiner and a paper boy.

Entering adolescence, he first graduated to a thick brush wall painting job, and eventually to an apprentice job at an olive oil can factory. There, the dawn of his musical vocation awakened, and with the help of a friend he built a violin with wood and an empty oil can and begun to play the makeshift instrument "by ear." With the rudimentary instrument he joined other youngsters forming minor groups with whom they entertained neighborhood parties and family reunions. As his musical ambitions continued to grow, at age eighteen he purchased his first violin, an old and beat up instrument with a sound that matched its inexpensive price and the limited technique of its player. However, this made his incipient dream about owning a real violin come true.

### Cradle of thugs and tough men

The year was 1906 when he made his professional debut in a remote village far away from **Buenos Aires** with a trio consisting of his violin, a guitar and a mandolin. This is when he first made the decision to choose the popular music of the Tango to entertain those on the dance floor. We all know now how popular and prestigious the Tango would become because of his influence in rescuing it from scorn and contempt, and earning it the credential of citizen of the world. But first, young **Canaro** had to witness the worst spectacle of human behavior at sleazy cantinas and seedy houses of prostitution lined up along the dirt roads that dug deep into the guts of the desolate province of **Buenos Aires**. A rigorous childhood and the daily contact with thugs, tough guys and dangerous criminals toughened **Canaro's** character. His music in the beginning didn't pretend to please anybody's ear, but to keep moving the swift legs of the rowdy element that made up his audience.

His adventurous spirit constantly took him to the most remote villages in the province of **Buenos Aires**. He spent lengthy periods with the trio playing at dances and social events. In 1908 he finally left the boondocks and returned to set roots in the capital district of **Buenos Aires**, joining trios and ensembles that competed for popular acclaim with the likes of **Vicente Greco** (*Rodríguez Peña, El flete*), **Agustín Bardi** (*Gallo ciego, Que noche*), **Roberto Firpo** (*Alma de bohemio, El apronte*) and others. He performed at the legendary cafes of the **Italian** quarters south of downtown by the mouth of the river, today known as **La Boca**. He established friendships with **Eduardo Arolas**, the tiger of the bandoneon (*Derecho viejo, Comme il*



*Director Francisco Canaro and his orchestra in 1957 during a performance of Tangolandia, one of his musical comedies.*

*faut*) and **Angel Villoldo** (*El choclo, El porteño*).

### Stepping up to the plate

From the cafes of **La Boca** to **Hansen's** in the garden district of **Palermo**, well-to-do men mixed it up with the thugs from the *arrabals* in their pursuit of female favors. Seeking the acceptance of one of those gangs, **Canaro** wrote his first composition, **La barra fuerte** (The tough gang), a mercifully forgotten piece that deflated his pretensions of being a composer. That did not deter him from continuing to step up to the challenge of his fellow *tanguistas*. With a limited education and unrefined manners, he resorted to using a resolute practical approach to test the ground where he would step on, always moving forward. The images of his initial poverty and misery drove him to seek the accumulation of money as his main priority. In that, he foresaw clearly the fortunes afforded by the Tango as it captured the imagination, heart and adoration of the mass population. This was also going to be his ticket for admission to the higher strata of society where he became the Tango caterer de jour.

**Pirincho's** guiding law was to work; to work hard and to earn money no matter how much or how little. He'd rather be the head of a mouse than the tail of a lion. This led him to join his screeching violin to the good bandoneon sound and the inspiration of **Vicente Greco**. What followed was a successful enterprise that attracted multitudes to

the center of the city as the duo made their way to hold court in **Calle Corrientes** where the Tango would become synonymous of the legendary street's name. **Canaro** and **Greco** played to the delight of the best dancers at the milongas of **Salon La Argentina** located on **Rodríguez Peña**, steps away from **Calle Corrientes**.

It was during this period that the record label **Casa Tagini** produced their first records, a milestone of sorts in Tango history. Seeking a catchy slogan, **Vicente Greco** coined the phrase **Orquesta Tipica Criolla** to identify the group. This denomination, **Typical Creole Orchestra**, with the **Creole** later dropped, became the defining phrase to identify any group that interpreted Argentine Tango with authenticity.

Eventually **Canaro** moved on and out from the shadow of **Greco** to join an intuitive pianist named **Martinez** in a trio that began playing at **Teatro Olimpo**. They soon converted it into a dance academy of Tango *con corte* led by another legend, **Benito Bianquet**, better known as **El Cachafaz**. It was there when **Martinez** wrote a Tango of fresh inspiration and named it **Canaro** as a show of appreciation to his friend and colleague. The name **Canaro** flying on the wings of a catchy melody became a household word. Meanwhile **Pirincho** continued bringing water to his wind-mill.

### Los bailes del internado

On September 21, 1914, marking



the beginning of the Spring season, the students of the **Medical School** called him to headline the first **Baile del Internado**. These were lavish balls organized by the interns of the city's hospitals. At the first ball held at the famous **Palais de Glace, Francisco Canaro** premiered his Tangos **El alacran** (The scorpion) and **Matasano** (Killer of the healthy, a humorous way to make fun of the medical doctors). Sharing the stage, **Roberto Firpo** premiered **El apronte** (The heat or preliminary horse race). The following year **Canaro** presented one of his everlasting compositions, **El internado** (The intern) dedicated to preserve the memory of those outrageous Tango parties.

In 1916 the **Bailes del Internado** moved to a more ample venue, **El Pabellon de las Rosas** (The Rose Pavilion) located at the site where today stands the **Argentine Automobil Club** building on **Avenida del Libertador** in the posh **Barrio Norte**. The pavilion was demolished after the **carnaval** festivities of 1929.

These were orgies of excess to the beat of the Tango. Year after year the practical jokes got out of hand and a few days after the 1924 edition of the **Bailes del Internado**, a hospital administrator shot and killed an intern because of a practical joke he had been the victim of. The interns of all **Buenos Aires** hospitals went on strike and the yearly parties were forever suspended. **Oswaldo Fresedo** was the last headliner and for that would-be-historical occasion he composed and premiered **El once** (The eleventh, following the custom of naming Tangos written for each edition of **Bailes del Internado**) with the subtitle **A divertirse** (Let's have fun).

## A blueprint for success

Towards the end of 1915 the Tango named **Canaro** had achieved such a popular success that a promoter from the city of **Rosario** located a few hundred miles north of **Buenos Aires** hired **Canaro** to headline the 1916 **Bailes de Carnaval** in the second largest city of **Argentina**. There he shared the stage with **Roberto Firpo** and **Eduardo Arolas** with such a success that he went back for the **Carnaval** celebrations in 1917 and 1918. The friendship developed between **Canaro** and **Firpo** and their professional association had the undertone of a cordial and sincere envy on the part of **Canaro** for the inspired composer of **Alma de bohemio**, the hit of the most prestigious cabarets. **Canaro's** envy also was aimed at **Firpo's** successful recording career with the



*The Canaro et sa Symphony on April 1925 donning gaucha attire to satisfy the stereotypical vision of French promoters towards Argentine artists.*

prestigious label **Max Glucksman**. Towards the end of the 1920's decade, **Canaros'** primary goal of amassing a fortune focused on the emulation of his friend **Roberto Firpo**. It took him five years to get a break, but finally he moved into **Firpo's** territory at the **Royal Pigall** during the Summer season when **Firpo** played the **Armenonville**, located in a garden setting that offered more pleasant summer nights for the crowds.

By the winter of 1918 the **Canaro** orchestra became the headliner at

**Royal Pigall**, and at the **Armenonville** in summer time. Here is when his entrepreneurial vocation began to take over his musical career. With an uncanny vision for business he managed three orchestras simultaneously. One in which he played, a second one led by his brother **Juan** (bandoneon) and a third one led by his brother **Humberto** (piano). Soon the number of the **Canaro** orchestras were four with yet another brother, **Rafael** (counter bass) at the helm.

## Canaro in Paris

With presentations in cabarets, night clubs and other venues, **Francisco Canaro** managed to cut a deal to take his orchestra on a tour of **Paris** and **New York** in 1925. In his memoirs **Canaro** boasted about the experience as one of greatest and most significant triumphs in which not only his orchestra achieved international recognition, but the Tango also reached a world wide diffusion.

The truth is that the Tango had already become a huge success in **Europe** after an impasse forced by **World War I**. The music of Tango ruled **Paris** played live by the resident orchestras of **Manuel Pizarro**, **Tano Genaro** and **Juan D'Ambroggio "Bachicha."** At the beginning of the 1920's thanks to the talented pianistic fingers and dancing feet of **Angel Villoldo (El choclo)** and **Enrique Saborido (La morocha)**, the voices of the **Gobbi's**, a husband and wife duo, and the legendary legs of **Casimiro Ain**, **El vasco**, the



*Pirincho with Homero Manzi, who succeeded him as president of SADAIC.*

Tango explosion in **Europe** reached new heights

**Canaro's** performances contributed to enhance the hegemony of the Tango in all of **Europe** even when he received some criticism at home for dressing up his musicians with *gaucho* outfits for added effect while using *Canaro et sa Symphony* and *Attraction Canaro* to present his shows disguised as variety acts.

He claims in his memoirs that the attire and the packaging of his show was supposed to be a way to get around labor union regulations that blocked the performances of foreign musicians. So, rather than presenting an orchestra, he was bringing in a show. However, according to brother **Rafael Canaro**, who stayed behind in **Paris** at the helm of one of **Canaro** orchestras, the **Parisian** promoters wanted to impress with a genuine touch of localism to all of their productions, and the stereotype for everything Argentine at the time was *gauchos* and *pampas*. To that effect, there were extreme cases where musicians were forced to wear their *gaucho* outfits on the streets from the hotel to the night club and back, in order to add to the attraction and interest of a cosmopolitan public.

This honestly does not matter any longer. He was a hit in **Paris**. Meanwhile in **Buenos Aires**, musicians **Alejandro Scarpino** and **Juan Caldarella** could not come up with a title for a great Tango they had written together. One morning they saw the headlines in the local newspaper heralding the arrival of **Francisco Canaro** to the **City of Lights**. That's how the phrase *Canaro en Paris* was attached to one of the most brilliant compositions of the time.

## Tango Inc. goes public

The **Canaro** story from rags to riches could have happened in **America**. He was the prototype of rugged individualism, a self-made pope of the Tango industry who was driven to success by the haunting images of poverty and misery he had logged onto his childhood memory.

Once he returned to **Buenos Aires**, **Canaro** dedicated a great deal of time to recording hit after hit. By the time his half a century of artistic life was over he had pressed about seven thousand records. On them, the voices and instruments of the best singers and musicians of greater renown have been preserved forever as a testimony of one of the best moments for the Argentine Tango. Musicians of the caliber of **Cayetano Puglisi**, **Minotto Di Cicco**,

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## Tango Traveler

# Tango in the Land of Gelato and Canelones

STORY BY TIM MEINER

On a recent trip to **Italy** my wife, **Cecilia**, and I had the opportunity to check out some Tango haunts or "Milongas" in the "Boot". A pre-trip search on the **Internet** revealed a thriving Tango scene. Since the main objective of the trip was business, our opportunities for Milongas were limited, but richly rewarded.

A delayed flight due to weather in the **Dallas-Fort Worth** airport – the flight from hell – put us in **Rome** late Sunday instead of Saturday as planned, a cruel slice into our Tango time. After some phone calls to my Internet list we found a Milonga on Monday night at **La Maggolina**. After an endless taxi ride, we arrived at a graffiti bedecked building located at **Via Bencivenga** 1-00141.

We were greeted by **Daniel**, and required to join the **Associazione Socio Cultural la Maggolina** to enter. To the best of my recollection it set us back about 15,000 lira or \$7.00 each, but we're members for a year. So, hey, if anyone wants to borrow my membership card just let me know. My Spanish was good enough to get me an Italian espresso and we danced to some good old timey Tango tunes in **Rome**. The dance floor had two sets of columns in its center, and we could almost imagine dancing in the **Roman Forum**.

Once inside **la Maggolina** our comfort level increased substantially. Pretty much intermediate level on the floor with some beginners and one or two accomplished Milongueros. From the dress of **la Maggolina** membership and the appearance of the neighborhood it appeared to be blue collar, but what do I know? This was my first day in **Rome** and we were American tourists from the hotel zone.

Due to social commitments at my business meeting, our next opportunity to visit a milonga didn't arrive until Friday. I finished my last engagement on Wednesday night, and Thursday we left by train for **Venice**. The trip included an intermediate stop in **Florence** that deserves a page or two;

but, hey, this is a Tango article, so I'll stick to the subject. I can't resist the following tip, however. Don't ever pass up the opportunity to visit **Il Accademia in Florence**. It contains **Michelangelo's** original **David**, sure to impress even to most hardened museum junkie.

Coincidentally our visit to **Venice** coincided (redundancy can be a literary tool) with the local Tango club "**La Milonga del Domingo's**" annual **Festival del Tango**. The directions to the festival from the Internet were to the island of **Lido** and the **Centro Soggiornno F. Morosini** that absolutely no one in Venice knew anything about. Undaunted, we took the 10 minute **Vaporetta** ride over to **Lido**. Even if we hadn't found the **Centro Morosini**, the trip itself was worth it. The Venetian lights reflecting off the water on this late May evening made a very romantic excursion. The line "B" bus was waiting for us on **Lido** and 10 stops later we arrived at the **Centro Morosini**. **Signore Sabino Cerulli**, one of the organizers listed on the web page, soon had us through the door and on the floor. My wallet was 70,000 lira (about \$30.00) lighter, but it was worth every cent. Lots of good dancers that respected *el Circulo*, a live trio complete with an Argentine bandoneon player and a giant rectangular wood dance floor. We did this place until about 1:30 in the morning, afraid of missing the last train to **Venetia**, we dragged our tourist tapped out bodies back to our hotel in **Venice**.

I only wish we had more time during this trip to hunt up more milongas. From the net there appears to be a thriving Tango scene in **Florence**, **Torino**, **Milan** and other cities. After all the Italian immigrants to **Argentina** are largely responsible for the Argentine Tango as we know it.

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(Left) The cover of Matasano lampoons the medical practitioners to whom Canaro dedicated his first contribution to the Bailes del Internado. (Center) A symbol of the times, the speed of the electric streetcar or "tranvia" was controlled by a rotary wheel with nine points of contact. The expression 'nine points' became popular as a way to describe moving at maximum speed. It is possible that Canaro was seeing his own meteoric climb up the Tango world when he wrote this genial Tango, Nueve puntos. Carlos Di Sarli, in the 1950's made it even more famous. (Right) The cover of Canaro, the Tango, showing on the side columns, a partial list of other hits composed by Francisco Canaro.

## CANARO - Continued from page 7

**Mariano Mores** and **Ciriaco Ortiz**. Famous singers **Ernesto Fama**, **Charlo**, **Agustin Irusta**, **Ada Falcon** and **Nelly Omar** among others, at one time or another were part of **Pirincho's** orchestras.

**Canaro's** extraordinary vision allowed him to profit both financially and as an entrepreneur.

He had taken the big leap from an obscure tenement room where he lived with an oil can makeshift violin to a trio performing in the boondocks of the vast province of **Buenos Aires**. He kept growing with the city, formed his own orchestra, recorded, traveled to the **Old Continent**. But he still needed to do more. Without neglecting his prolific recordings, he foresaw the oncoming changes brought by the movies and took advantage of people's new favorite pastime, the musical reviews.

And if that weren't enough he was an active fighter for the rights of the composers and interpreters lobbying for the passing of the **Copyright Law**. His efforts were crowned when, on May 4, 1940 he founded SADAIC, the **Argentine Society of Composers and Authors** of which he was its president for several terms.

**Canaro** had the vision of reinventing the musical comedy. From his long theatrical engagements he foresaw the possibility of producing a singing comedy for a general audience consisting mostly of middle class families. So,

on June 17, 1932 he premiered the first one of many musical comedies with the participation of top actors and actresses of national renown: **La muchachada del centro** (The gang from downtown). In 1949 he ended the cycle after twelve productions which touched on themes of the **porteño** life, with **Con la musica en el alma** (With the music in the soul).

During this period he associated with playwright **Ivo Pelay**. It is important to notice that a long list of Tangos, vales, milongas, polkas and mazurkas composed by **Canaro** with lyrics by **Ivo Pelay** were first introduced as part of all twelve of those musical comedies. This also opened the door to a new generation of singers that grew up out of the opportunities created by the various **Canaro** enterprises.

He couldn't resist the temptation of emulating the enormous success of **Carlos Gardel** in the movies. However contrary to **Gardel's** lack of concern for the incipient national film industry, **Canaro** was tempted by the local production of movies even when his instinct was warning him that this aspect of his business was going to be a loss leader. What's fundamental is the historic importance of his work. His first outing as a movie producer was **Idolos de la radio** (Radio idols) an artistic marathon which included the voices of **Ada Falcon** and **Ignacio Corsini** among many others. Paradoxically, his last movie production coincided with his last theatrical production, **Con la musica**

**en el alma** which premiered on January 10, 1951.

He also played on the radio like many other orchestras of the time, but this aspect of his career was brief since his plate was already full with his many different excursions in the movies, theater and of course the recording sessions.

He died on December 14, 1964 but like all those figures who contributed to the enhancement of the popular culture of **Buenos Aires**, his name is missing from the government sponsored **National Week of Tango** celebrations which only mention **Gardel** and **De Caro**, both born on December 11. However his creativity and his work were everlasting through many of his disciples as he continues to be an example of a vision for the future.

## CANARO BY CANARO

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