

Cáceres reveals the African roots in Argentine tango

On March 13, just before the Doble Ocho 2010 tango festival, Juan Cáceres gives a concert in Nijmegen (Mirror Tent in city centre of Nijmegen, 20:30, 15 euro). Juan Carlos Cáceres is a remarkable musician, painter and life long student in tango history, who pays tribute to the African roots in Argentine tango.

Cáceres (vocal, piano & trombone) will perform with Maria Mercadé (bandoneon), Sedef Ercetin (cello), Javier Estrella (percussion, vocal, cajón & murga drum) and Marcelo Rusillio (percussion, cajón & drum set).¹ In this article I will give a short sketch of Juan Carlos Cáceres's colorful career in music and zoom in on two typical 'black' phenomena in Argentine tango: murga and candombe.

Buenos Aires

A year after the death of the greatest tango icon of all times, Carlos Gardel, Juan Carlos Cáceres was born in Buenos Aires. The decade before the second world war tango experienced a low in popularity. The artistic (but hard to dance to) tango music of Julio de Caro, the tango canciones of Gardel, the rise of jazz music and other forms of entertainment, caused a low in tango's popularity. It was only after D'Arienzo formed a new orchestra that tango dance music experienced a majestic revival in the forties.

Cáceres, apart from being a painter and musician also a tango researcher, described this pre war period as a time when "tango lost its bite. A vogue for sung tango came in, with Carlos Gardel as its representative figure. Then came a tango revival in the 1940s".² Cáceres's formative years coincided with the golden age of tango (la época de oro); a period which generally is considered to be the summum of tango.

Let me offer an illustration of the richness of tango in the forties: some years ago I attended in Aachen (Germany) a lecture by Eric Müller on the history of tango music.³ After the lecture he showed me a page of (I think) the Clarin from 1941 or 1942. This page was filled with dozens of advertisements for milongas in Buenos Aires, where the all the great tango orchestras performed. Eric said: Imagine that there was a time, that if you wanted to go out and

dance, you could choose between Miguel Caló, Alfredo De Angelis, Juan D'Arienzo, Carlos Di Sarli and many other famous orchestras. This was definitely a moment that he regretted that H.G. Wells's time-machine is only science fiction.

If you grew up in Buenos Aires in those days, it was impossible not to be soaked in tango and jazz. Music was everywhere. As a child Cáceres listened a lot to music. In an interview with Isabelle Leymarie (1996), he commented on this: "As a child I spent a lot of time listening to the radio. At that time there was a program on the tango of the 1920s, but they also played recordings from the last century - what they call today the tango of the Old Guard. I can still remember the program's opening announcement, which said: Tango of the Old Guard, from the candombe to the habanera, from the habanera to the fandango, from the fandango to the milonga, from the milonga to the tango."

His interest in music was most certainly not limited to only tango, also jazz fascinated him. During his art studies in Buenos Aires, the trombone and piano player Cáceres managed for six years the famous jazz club Cueva de Passarato, a club which was characterized as "not only an important musical venue, but a gathering place for revolutionary and existential thinkers".^{4 5}

Paris 1968

In May 1968 Cáceres left for Paris, where he arrived in a period of great social unrest, a time that clouds of smoke drifted through the streets and obscured the view and that the barricades were constructed to fight the establishment. Students and laborers manned the barricades together. It all had started rather innocently as a series of strikes by students (for better education), but exploded into a national crisis, when the government led by Charles de Gaulle tried to suppress these strikes by using excessive violence. At first there were only street fights in Quartier Latin, but soon it grew into a general strike, where approximately two thirds of the France working population participated in. This movement with a rather

vague ideology was led by Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Herbert Marcuse, Jean Paul Sartre, Jacques Derrida and Rudi Dutschke. A political crisis was there, but after the elections (won by de Gaulle) the unrest faded out just as quickly as it was born.

It was in this revolutionary period that existentialist JCC decided to pursue his artistic career in Paris.⁶ At first as a painter, but soon the call of the music proved too strong. By participating in groups as Malon (1972), Tangofon (1979) and Gotan (1992), he functioned as a trailblazer for the new generation of Argentine tango musicians, such as Juan Jose Mosalini, Juan Cedron, Gustavo Beytelmann, Tomas Gubitsch, Osvaldo Calo and Enzo Gieco. who fled Argentina, because of the junta's dirty war on subversism.⁷ ⁸ In the eighties Paris was not only a safe harbor for tango artists, but also for many African musicians too. The French had discovered that African music was well fitted for dancing, but "they wanted the beat faster and the production slicker, more in line with European standards." ⁹ The musical idea of this period is cultural fusion. The band Mano Negra with its leader Manu Chao with their multi culti mix of punk (the Clash), Latin, Arabic and Balkan music, are probably the most well know example of this musical genre. Cáceres must have felt at home in this musical scene of the eighties.

Cáceres also participated in several (latin) jazz and world music festivals in Europe and Northern America. While traveling he met and played with well known artists such as Richard Galliano, Tania Maria, Bebel Gilberto, Ray Barretto, Youssou N'Dour, Goran Begrovic, John Cale and the Buena Vista Social Club.

Juan Carlos Cáceres is an energetic and multifaceted personality and can be labelled as a renaissance man.¹⁰ He is just as colorful as his paintings, as can be seen on the artwork of the CD Toca Tango and the November 2003 cover of El Farolito. He paints, composes music, plays piano and trombone, sings, produces shows, does research into the history of tango rioplatense and many other things. Micheal Stone describes Cáceres as "a longtime student and conservator of tango, candombe, murga, and milonga - and a painter

and scholar of the history of music in the River Plate - Cáceres is among few artists born in the 1940s to champion the neglected African influences in Argentine music".¹¹

1993 is the year that Cáceres decided to go solo and started his career as a singer. Because of his rough and unpolished style of singing and the fact that he was well over fifty years old before he started his singing career, he has been nicknamed the Paolo Conte of Latin America. With his CD's *Tango Negro* (1998) and *Toca Tango* (2001) Cáceres broke through in the world of tango dancing. His style can be characterized as a mix of tango and jazz, clearly hinting of carnival in Rio and a voice like Paolo Conte, but above all his music accents the African roots of tango.

Murga

Cáceres is an advocate of the African roots in tango, a phenomenon that has been overlooked, ignored or even denied by generations of tango researchers and other Latin cultural historians.

In the *La historia negada* (History denied) attachment of the CD *Murga Argentina* (2005), he defends the African roots of tango by fire and sword.: "To give back African heritage its rightful place in Argentinean culture is only fair. The tango is the most significant exponent, and the most exported one, of that Afro-Argentinean expression. Usually the duality of tango's origin is ignored in favor of the European contribution Let us not forget that Buenos Aires used to be a slave harbor and that a third of its population was black until the middle of the 19th century."¹²

For many decades Argentina has been gradually 'whitening', a practice Cáceres despises: "this willful forgetting is a product of racism prevalent in a society that looks towards Europe and self censorship on the part of the African community".¹³

About tango he adds to this, in an YouTube interview: "tango is not only a dance. Tango is a style. It is a style taking in a series of rhythms. It is this phenomenon that used to be called, and still is today, *ira y vuelta*, which means coming and going with music".¹⁴

With the CD *Murga Argentina* Cáceres focusses on a primarily African phenomenon in Argentina and Uruguay: the murga. Murga is a cultural form of musical theatre which takes place Buenos Aires and Montevideo during the carnival season. In Buenos Aires murga focusses more on dance than on singing, which is opposite in Montevideo. Bruni describes murga as "a phenomenon of the carnival, occurring once a year. An integral phenomenon where different elements are valued equally: the dance, the music, the picturesque words, and the clothes. [...] first manifestations of the murga or the comparsas are tied to the presence of Negro slaves. The aristocracy later took part, creating the first official carnival in late 1850's. During the beginning of the twentieth century, the carnival was mainly composed of Spanish and Italian immigrants who went into the street with horse drawn milk wagons decorated as carriages. [...] In recent years, the murga came out of the carnival to be present year round. Her songs and music are used to protest the difficult social situation of the Argentine people. Her lyrics reflect the present problems of the country".¹⁵

About the carnival parades Sebastian and Labrana stated that "the carnival parades lost their couleur locale and would never regain the atmosphere from the rhythmical, colorful days from before the Confederacy. The upper class of Buenos Aires, liberal and Unitarian, didn't accept this lacuna and urged their young members to go into the streets and replace the black joy. [...] This is how the comparsa (a masked group) of the society of Los Negros came into being, who made a great impression at the carnival of 1866. [...] A year later, only a few days after carnival, the negroes left their Barrio de Tambor and paraded through town while beating their drums".¹⁶

Candombe¹⁷

The word candombe has multiple, but interrelated meanings. Apart from a form of dance and music, candombe also means a society of slaves from a distinct African region (tribe) and also a place where they could meet each other and maintain their own culture.

When Columbus discovered Latin America, it was a relatively sparsely populated continent with a lot of great economical possibilities. To exploit the riches of this newly discovered continent, a lot of work needed to be done. The indigenous inhabitants of Latin America, were not suited for this purpose. Either they weren't suited physically to do so or they wanted to stay independent.¹⁸

So labour had to be imported. In the beginning this meant slave trade. Millions of slaves were kidnapped from Africa and transported to Latin America to work there. When the slave trade was abolished in the middle of the nineteenth century, immigrants from all over Europe were called upon to fulfill this need.

The slaves, which originated from different regions from Africa, succeeded to cling to their own tribal culture and adapt it to the predominantly catholic culture they had landed in. They were allowed to celebrate catholic holidays and they used these holidays to celebrate their own religion under the disguise of Catholicism.

When slaves arrived in Latin America they had established (with their masters' permission) a sort of tribal societies, which rested on the principle of solidarity.¹⁹ Their main objective was to free slaves by buying them from their masters and also the celebration of their own culture and religion.

An important function for the maintenance of their own culture, was fulfilled by the dance festivals they organized. Especially the carnival with its murgas and comparsas was one of the most attention attracting activities in this phenomenon.²⁰

Just after the Revolution of 1810 Argentina abolished slavery. Juan Manuel de Rosas freed the slaves and took part in the carnival festivities himself.²¹ After the Confederates lost their power in 1852, the negro carnival also lost its protector De Rosas.

The negroes withdrew to their own neighborhoods and danced in their own clubs. Sebastian and Labrana conclude that "the carnival parades lost their couleur locale and would never regain the atmosphere from the rhythmical, colorful days from before the Confederacy. The upper class of Buenos Aires, liberal and Unitarian,

didn't accept this lacuna and urged their young members to go into the streets and replace the black joy. [...] This is how the comparsa (a masked group) of the society of Los Negros came into being, who made a great impression at the carnival of 1866. [...] A year later, only a few days after carnival, the negroes left their Barrio de Tambor and paraded through town while beating their drums.”²²

Candombe played a major role in the formation of tango. Latin American music in general and tango especially is the result of a gradual fusion of the music of the indigenous people, the European conquerors and the African slaves. The candombe was born between 1750 and 1850. It is likely that candombe had a energizing effect on the rural milonga and in doing so created the urban milonga (the one we dance to during our milongas today).^{23 24}

Both candombe, milonga and tango can be seen as transgressive dances; which means dances which transcend social barriers.²⁵ In the phenomenon tango both black and white elements fused. In a later stadium tango was stripped of the black elements, as was to be expected of a country which strove to be the most European country of Latin America.²⁶

The African influence in Latin American music and especially tango do show in the polyphonic character of the music. There are always several musical lines in tango, which are exchangingly dominant and supportively underlying.

Emancipation

In his battle for emancipation of equal rights for the African roots of tango, Cáceres is not alone. The last five years have presented some compatriots who back him up. For example Robert Farris Thompson (*Tango, the art history of love*, 2005) and John Charles Chasteen (*National rhythms, African roots. The deep history of Latin American popular dance*, 2004) also emphasize the significant African heritage of tango. And on top of this, Ned Sublette (*Cuba and the music, From the first drums to the mambo*, 2004) explains at great length that South European music also have undergone a great and

persistent influence during the Moorish conquest of Spain (711 till 1492), which still can be noticed today.

In his musical career, which spans more than half a century, Cáceres played with Tangofon, Malon, (Trio Paris) Gotan, Trio Tango Negro, Los Estudiantes Argentinos, The Jesters, Barbara Luna, Roughcut en The Gotan Project. This resulted in more than a dozen of records (LP/CD). His discography contains: Hot en la carpa (1958, LP), El camino dale negro (Malon) (1972, LP), Rebellion (Malon) 1982?, CD), Solo (1993,1994), Sudacas (1994,1995), Intimo (1996), Live à la Chapelle (1997,1998), Tango Negro (1998), Toca Tango (2001), From Buenos Aires to Paris. Best of 1958-2003 (2003), Champan Rosado (2004) Murga Argentina (2005), Tango Negro Trio (2007) and Utopia (2007).

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Footnotes

¹ A cajón is a wooden box which is played as a box drum, by slapping the front (thin ply wood) with the hands. The cajón is often used in Peru and Cuba. Probably the cajón was developed in Peru in the early 1800's.

² Leymarie, 1996.

³ Eric & Jeusa; www.tango-ericandjeusa.ch.

⁴ Gutierrez, www.allmusic.com.

⁵ The combination of jazz and tango, as one can hear in Cáceres's music, is not so remarkable as most people think it is. Both jazz and tango have strong (but often ignored or even hidden) African roots, which were introduced into the New World by slaves, originated in harbor cities (New Orleans and Buenos Aires / Montevideo) where many cultural influences merged and mixed and possessed (in the early days) a strong improvisational character and a more (jazz) or less (tango) syncopated style. Fuentes (1992) comments that "from the beginning black music facilitated the listener or dancer with an autonomous, personal, free and even rebellious rhythm, instead of attempting to force a dominant, predictable or prescribed pattern, which is customary in European music."

For more info on the link between jazz and tango: **Ruyet**, Murielle, *A Comparative Survey of the Social History of Early Jazz and Tango in New Orleans and Buenos Aires (1880 - 1920)*, Université Stendhal Grenoble, 2006.

⁶ Existentialism is a philosophical ideology, which considers every human being as unique and therefore responsible for its own deeds and destiny.

⁷ Birkenstock & Ruegg, 1999.

⁸ The band Gotan is not to be confused with The Gotan Project, although JCC's CD *Murga Argentina* has been produced by Eduardo Makaroffi, who is one of the founders of The Gotan Project.

⁹ Nickson (2004).

¹⁰ A renaissance man is "a man with extraordinarily broad and comprehensive knowledge, a modern scholar who is in a position to acquire more than superficial knowledge about many different interests" (Wiki definition).

¹¹ Stone, www.rootsworld.com.

¹² Liner notes CD *Murga Argentina*.

¹³ Goutier, Hegel, *Latin America. A history denied*, *The Courier* *special edition), July 2009.

¹⁴ YouTube Interview, Cáceres: *Murga Argentina*.

¹⁵ Bruni, www.esprit-tango.com.

¹⁶ Source: Sebastian & Labrana, 1988. Translation by author.

¹⁷ The section on Candombe is a summary of an unpublished paper I wrote: *Candombe, the black roots of tango*.

¹⁸ Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century there have been skirmishes between the indigenous inhabitants of Argentina and the governmental power in Buenos Aires.

¹⁹ The *naciones* were tolerated by the authorities, but just barely tolerated. For most activities they had to ask for a written permission, which could be revoked at any time, for no reason at all. At the end of the nineteenth century the *naciones* disappeared from the Argentinean society.

²⁰ *Murgas* and *comparsas* are a sort of informal *orquestas*, who were dressed in patriotic costume made music and danced for the public which were viewing the carnival parades. From Canaro it is known that he took part in these little *orquestas*. The difference between a *murga* and a *comparsa* lies in the race of the musicians and dancers, who accompanied the carnival parades. A *murga* is predominantly white while a *comparsa* is a black affair (Plisson, 2002).

²¹ Juan Manuel de Rosas was a conservative Argentine politician, who ruled Buenos Aires province from 1829 till 1952 (with a three year interlude from 1832-1835).

²² Source: Sebastian & Labrana, 1988. Translation by author.

²³ Nowadays most people associate *candombe* mostly with Uruguay and not the role it played in tango's origin.

²⁴ Piazzolla often uses the rural *milonga* (*milonga campera*) rhythms. Listen for example to the bass lines of *Milonga for three* and *Milonga del Angel*.

²⁵ Chasteen (2004) states that *candombe*, *milonga* (Argentina), *maxixie*, *samba* (Brazil) and *danzon, son* (Cuba) are transgressive dances. The social barriers which are transcended in these dances are: race, gender, social-economical status and religion.

²⁶ This stripping of black elements is called "whitening". For more info on this phenomenon: **Edwards**, Erika D., *An African Tree Produces White Flowers: Black Consciousness in the Afro-Argentine Community During the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, and **Reid Andrews**, George, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires*, 1980.