

# Argentina's María Volonté celebrates the urban Latin sound in Copia debut

Tango — a dance, a culture, a way of life.

Although it has come to epitomize the glamour and elegance of high society — with women in sleek elegant evening gowns and men in tuxedos — the tango originated in society's underbelly, in the brothels of turn-of-the-century Argentina.

As immigrants from Europe, Africa and ports unknown streamed into the outskirts of Buenos Aires during the 1880s, many gravitated toward the port city's houses of ill repute. In these establishments, the portenos (as they were called) could drown their troubles in a few drinks and find some companionship. They looked desperately for a distraction to ease their sense of rootlessness and disfranchisement as "strangers in a strange land."

From this heady cultural brew emerged a new music which became the tango.

Though musical historians argue as to its exact origins, it is generally accepted that the tango borrowed from many nations — the relentless rhythms that the African slaves, the candombe, beat on their drums (known as tan-go); the popular music of the pampas known as the milonga, which combined Indian rhythms with the music of early Spanish colonists; and other influences, including Latin. Some say the word "tango" comes from the Latin word "tangere," to touch.

Ironically, as these lonely immigrants and societal outcasts sought to escape from their feelings, they instead developed a music and dance that epitomized them. The wail of the tango, it is said, speaks of more than frustrated love. It speaks of fatality, of destinies engulfed in pain. It is the dance of sorrow.

And tango has returned to our musical vocabulary. Five outstanding recordings, in fact, were nominated for best tango album at the fifth Latin Grammy Awards celebration this year.

Irrefutable proof that the venerable tango can be performed in a variety of formats could be found in those five nominated recordings. A student of legendary Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera, pianist Gerardo Gandini performs a solo recital on "Postangos En Vivo En Rosario." Gandini uses

compositions by the likes of Astor Piazzolla and Carlos Gardel as a launching pad for his decidedly knotty but thrilling improvisations. The piano is also at the core of "Fuimos," a collaboration between veteran keyboardist Horacio Larumbe and tango diva María Volonté.

Since 1995, Volonté has been performing at Buenos Aires' famous Cafe Tortoni every Thursday evening when she's in town. Another talented female tango singer, María Estela Monti, took her sweet time to release "Cuidadana," her debut as a solo artist. The classy quintet format of bandoneón, guitar, piano, bass and violin is honored by young bandoneonista Pablo Mainetti on the excellent "Tres Rincones," which includes Mainetti's original compositions as well as standards by Gardel and Osvaldo Pugliese. Finally, the internationally revered Orquesta El Arranque unleashes its two-bandoneón attack on the lavish book/CD concert package "En Vivo En El Auditorio De La Rete Due En Suiza," culled from a Swiss date during the octet's latest European tour.

Tango and more at Copia

The electronic-music collective known as Gotan Project has made tango hip again, while a new generation of performers is breathing life into a musical style that seemed old-fashioned, even out of date, not so long ago.

Today, Argentine vocalist María Volonté figures prominently in the widespread revival bringing new life to the quintessential Argentine song style.

While many tango purists exist, Volonté is set apart by a style that incorporates jazzy undertones. She is one of several women who are at the forefront of tango's resurgence. "It's not a nostalgic movement anymore," Volonté points out. "There's a wave of intense experimentation, of opening new paths. Tango is very much a modern art form these days."

Volonté is a good example of an artist who is respectful of her roots yet not afraid to go beyond musty old formulas. But Volonté is no purist. Her musical concept is refreshingly broad, incorporating pop balladry, touches of jazz and Brazilian formats such as choro and

bossa nova.

"Not too long ago, the stuff that I do was looked at with a raised eyebrow by the tango establishment," she points out. "Now those same innovations are cherished and defended."

Volonté made her northern California debut on Thursday night with a polished performance at Copia.

Backed by a talented quartet led by sensational Bay Area jazz pianist/arranger Larry Vuckovich — including a sensational rhythm section of bassist Buca Necak, John Santos (congas) and Orestes Vilato (timbales) — Volonté presented a 90-minute program that featured the guest artist as urban Latin singer, proficient in a number of musical styles. Unfortunately, Volonté had been billed as a tango singer and, for many in the audience, that's what stuck in mind.

"We sin with boleros," Volonté told the appreciative crowd that had turned out for her auspicious Bay Area debut. "Then we repent with the tango." By her own definition, there was a whole lot of sinning the other night, and very little repentance, as she performed but a pair of tangos — one of which, "La Cumparsita," kicked off her concert.

But the varied program allowed Volonté the opportunity to display her diverse talents, a rich alto delivered with dramatic flair on material ranging from the music of one of the most important vocalists in the history of Peruvian music, Chabuca Granda, to Portuguese fado, from the exciting bossa nova of Antonio Carlos Jobim ("Chega de Saudade") to a blend of salsa and candombe.

On top of that, we got to hear Vuckovich and company engage in some first-rate jazz — a mambo version of "As Time Goes By" and a sizzling rendition of the classic Duke Ellington barnburner, "Caravan."

Copia is celebrating the music of Latin America this month. Coming up next is San Francisco's William Morin who is putting together a night in Cuba for his Oct. 27 performance. Tickets for the Morin show are \$25 and can be reserved by calling 707-259-1600 or logging online at [www.copia.org](http://www.copia.org).