

Three Corners¹

Tango, 1941

Music: Ángel D'Agostino / Alfredo Attadía

Lyrics: Enrique Cadícamo

Enrique Cadícamo

The tenth child of an Italian immigrant marriage, Enrique Cadícamo was born in a manor nearby Luján² on July 15, 1900. At the age of ten, he moved with his family to the Buenos Aires barrio of San José de Flores. After finishing his studies, he began to work as a clerk in the National Council of Education. Around 1920, he made his first letter known among his friends; in 1924, with music by Roberto Emilio Goyeneche, under the title of “Soap Bubbles”, this famous tango was premiered by Carlos Gardel. “The Thrush”³ has recorded a total of 23 songs from Cadícamo. He is the most prolific poet of tango, not only in works, but in successes.

He has left more than 800 musical compositions. He published books of poems, novels, biographies. He was theatrical writer, film director, boxer and tireless traveler. He ignites the tango culture of the cities where he worked, Buenos Aires and Paris, New York and Tokyo, etc.

His work was intense until the last moment of his life. He received many awards and distinctions, although he preferred to always keep low-profiled. In 1990, he did not want to be conferred tributes anymore. However, in that decade not only his awards and recognitions multiplied, but arose the baptisms of libraries, squares, corners with his name, an honor that few artists have received in life. In 1997, he began to have health problems, though it had been 17 years since he quit smoking — “because tobacco no longer came as before.” He passed away in 1999, at the age of 99.

Barracas⁴

At the end of the 18th century, on the left bank of the Riachuelo River, the southern limit of the modern Buenos Aires City today, barracks began to be built. Improvised and precarious, many were used to store leather and other products that were going to be shipped, and to house the African slaves who arrived at Río de la Plata. The tango “Three Corners” describes a famous area of this barrio.

In the 19th century, barracks and meat slaughterhouses abounded in Barracas. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the place had already become a neighborhood of luxurious mansions. By the action of the railroad, the barracks of the port had intensified

¹ **Three Corners:** In Spanish “Tres Esquinas”.

² **Luján:** A city in the Buenos Aires province of Argentina, located 68 kilometres north west of the city of Buenos Aires.

³ **The Thrush:** Nickname of Carlos Gardel.

⁴ **Barracas:** A barrio in the southeast part of the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina. It is located between the railroad of Ferrocarril General Manuel Belgrano and the Riachuelo River.

their activity. Factories and workshops began to be installed nearby, giving it a vivid profile. Large chocolate, cookies and sweets factories perfumed the air. However, it was still the fringe, a scenery of interaction between the countryside and the city.

Enrique Cadícamo says: "It was picturesque, because they were parades of cars that came from the provinces. They brought merchandise". The trains to the South also acted as a link between the countryside and the city. Near the river, at the intersection of the present avenues Montes de Oca and Osvaldo Cruz, was the railway station "Three corners"⁵. This name is still being used.

In this barrio, there was the singer Ángel Vargas, who immortalized the tango "Three Corners". As a child, Ángel sang tangos in bars. One early morning of 1940, after a performance by his orchestra, the maestro Ángel D'Agostino talked with the singer Ángel Vargas about some old instrumental compositions. The maestro played a never-played tango, which he composed two decades ago, under the title of "Poor Girl"⁶. Enrique Cadícamo, who was listening, approached and proposed the main lines of the lyrics. Soon he presented it to D'Agostino with the new title, and it was performed in the voice of Vargas. They recorded it on July 24, 1941 for the RCA label Víctor.

Cadícamo calls this corner of Barracas "old bastion of the suburb". Although it is no longer the border between the countryside and the city, Barracas is still a barrio today. And you can find patios adorned with flowers, and some vines that gives shade in the summer.

Tres Esquinas

Three Corners

Yo soy del barrio de Tres Esquinas,
I am from the barrio of Three Corners,

viejo baluarte de un arrabal
old bastion of an arrabal

donde florecen como glicinas
where the pretty aproned girls

las lindas pibas de delantal.
blossom like wisteria.

Donde en la noche tibia y serena
Where in the peaceful and warm night

su antiguo aroma vuelca el malvón
the geranium spills its ancient perfume

⁵ The name "Three Corners" probably comes from the intersection of Osvaldo Cruz with Pedro de Mendoza, at the edge of the Riachuelo River. Pedro de Mendoza Avenue turns 90 ° to the south following the route of the Riachuelo. Osvaldo Cruz is the natural continuation to the East. No street emerges to the north. There are then 3 crossing points (although not corners): Pedro de Mendoza and the Riachuelo (southwest), the corner of Osvaldo Cruz and the turn to the south Pedro de Mendoza (southeast) and the "corner" northeast where Osvaldo Cruz emerges as continuation of Pedro de Mendoza.

⁶ **Poor Girl:** In Spanish "Pobre Piba".

y bajo el cielo de luna llena
and under the sky of full moon
duermen las chatas del corralón.
sleep the wagons of the lumberyard.

The protagonist begins like the ancient tangos: “*Yo soy (I am) ...*”⁷ He says where he comes from, who he is: the barrio of Three Corners, one of the places where the life of the suburb survives. The metaphor suggests a confrontation: this barrio is an old bastion. We understand that it has stood the test of time and has successfully played his defensive role, but a bastion is a fortification, it also means a shelter for defense. What is necessary to defend itself against?

Like a machine, the development advances from the center of the city to the outskirts. The train always moves the limit a little further. The old suburb that described by the protagonist was already in an incipient process of urbanization and industrialization. In the description of the neighborhood, we observe a dialectical interaction of the urban and the rural, which is an essential characteristic of the shores.

The barrio appears in a figurative way: some elements are focused, as references to an ideal, imagined totality of the suburban landscape. In how the letters paint out of the barrio, you can find essential elements of tango poetry, present in many letters: beautiful women, meetings of men, milongas⁸, an affair, a streetlamp, a corner, a knife duel...

In this piece of barrio, the figure of the blooming wisteria represents the multitude of beautiful young women workers who were seen, at the time of leaving work, in the vicinity of the factories. Their typical clothing was aprons. Clusters of wisteria also characterized the decoration of patios and balconies from houses to houses, and mixed their perfume with the sweet aroma of chocolate and vanilla that permeated the neighborhood air.

The protagonist emphasizes, nevertheless, another perfume, the one of the geranium, another ornamental plant of the district, very frequent in Buenos Aires. The geranium is a humble flower, a little rustic, that grows without too many demands in any outdoor corner. This is a flower of the humble suburb, and in its aroma the protagonist paints the soft climate of the evocation. At night, when other aromas extinguished, the perfume of the air is the humble geranium.

The Moon illuminates the night of the neighborhood. The workers are no longer there, it is time to rest. The horses [that pull the wagons] sleep in the lumberyard. A wagon, an element of the outskirts, depends on blood traction, so it is associated with the suburban. On the other hand, the agglomeration of the lumberyard associates it with the urban – in the Argentine Pampas, there is no agglomeration, because there is a lot of place.

⁷ “Don Juan” (1900), *Yo soy el taita del barrio / nombrado en la Batería...*; “El Porteñito” (1903), *Soy hijo de Buenos Aires, por apodo “El Porteñito”...*; “La Morocha” (1905), *Yo soy la Morocha / la más agraciada...*; “El Taita” (1907), *Soy el taita de Barracas, / de aceitada melenita...*; etc.

⁸ **milonga**: a place or an event where tango is danced.

Soy de ese barrio de humilde rango,
I'm from this barrio of humble rank,

yo soy el tango sentimental.
I am the sentimental tango.

Soy de ese barrio que toma mate
I'm from the barrio that drinks maté

bajo la sombra que da el parral.
under the shade of the vine covered arbor.

En sus ochavas compadrié de mozo,
On its angled corners I strutted as a kid,

tiré la daga por un loco amor,
drew the dagger for a crazy love,

quemé en los ojos de una maleva
burned in the eyes of a bad woman

la ardiente ceba de mi pasión.
the loaded fire of my passion.

The protagonist cuts a fragment of barrio that he defines as his origin. We already know where it is from. Someone may ask, who is it? It's the tango, the sentimental tango. This is the tango that was invented since Contursi⁹'s "My Sad Night¹⁰", the tango canción¹¹.

It is a humble barrio, according to the protagonist. People do not drink champagne, as in the city center, but maté¹², in the afternoon, in the patio [with a garden], under the vine shade.

The protagonist continues with his presentation. As in the ancient tangos, he narrates his exploits: when he was young he acted like a compadrito¹³ and joker, boastful and audacious. As in the ancient tangos, he fought for the woman he wanted. He fought with a knife, like the old thugs. And in the same vein of the old guard's tango, we expect him to boast in the love field: he does not put the accent on quantity – he only names one "maleva" – but on intensity.

A woman he has loved, but a "bad woman". We know then that it is a woman inclined to do "bad" things, probably close to the life of the underworld. A prostitute, like the environment where tango grew.

⁹ **Pascual Contursi:** (1888-1932) Poet, lyricist. Widely known as the father of the tango canción genre.

¹⁰ **My Sad Night:** In Spanish "Mi Noche Triste". First tango canción in history wrote by Pascual Contursi.

¹¹ **Tango canción:** Instead of the blunt, simple prose of the ancient tango, tango canción focuses on the mental, emotional description of the protagonist, especially the sentimental, sad feelings.

¹² **Mate:** the most popular herbal drink in South America.

¹³ **Compadrito:** A man from the lower class porteño suburbs, vain and conceited, used to imitate the compadre.

Love is described as an artillery. It is the gunpowder, which lights up the eyes when detonated. The protagonist was a loaded weapon, according to the expression of lunfardo¹⁴, “loaded” means frenzied, very enthusiastic and yearning.

Nada hay más lindo ni más compadre
There is nothing more beautiful or more compadre
que mi suburbio murmurador,
than my murmuring suburb,
con los chimentos de las comadres
with the chatter of the womenfolk
y los piropos del Picaflor.
and the flirtation of the Casanova.
Vieja barriada que fue estandarte
Old slum that was the symbol
de mis arrojados de juventud...
of my reckless youth...
Yo soy del barrio que vive aparte
I am from the barrio that lives apart
en este siglo de Neo-Lux.
from this century of neon lights.

In the last stanza, the protagonist summarizes and concludes: this barrio is the most typical of the compadre¹⁵, the working class. This barrio is the most beautiful, he says, as a simple aesthetic assessment that runs through the whole poem.

The first stanza closes with the silence of the serene night; in the second, the word *tango* concentrates a complex set of phonic images and logical relations; the third opens another sound image: the barrio is murmuring, the sound of the barrio voices is like a murmur.

The next sentence continues another sense of murmuring: gossiping. We then hear the picturesque scene of the womenfolk speaking of the neighbors. What stories do they talk? In the barrio we always hear flirtations, flatteries or compliments addressed to women who pass by: The Casanovas say them.

In the first stanza, the women workers were compared with flowers. This image is complemented by the Casanova, which in the original lyrics *Picaflor* (hummingbird). In lunfardo, by reference to its habit of traveling from flowers to flowers, a hummingbird also

¹⁴ **Lunfardo:** Slang used in Rioplatense area, notably Buenos Aire and Montevideo.

¹⁵ **Compadre:** used as an adjective to characterize a particular way of behaving, speaking and dressing. At the end of the 19th century, the Rioplatense suburbs were populated by Creoles and immigrants. The gauchos, displaced from the countryside by progress, brought their ancient traditions based on honor and courage to the outskirts. On the edge of the city, the gaucho became a compadre, he maintained the cultivation of the value that characterized the mythical predecessor, but changed his language, his clothes, his music and his dance.

means “Casanova” or “womanizer”. In the barrio, this Don Juan character could be easily identified.

These characters and this landscape of the suburb have been not only realities, but also a symbol for the protagonist. There seems to be a battle, a duel with courage, but he does not explain it in detail.

Our protagonist concludes in the last sentence: it is suburban, it is not the center. He comes from the barrio to which the modern neon lights of the center still — in the twentieth century — have not arrived. Living in the barrio world requires rejecting the modern lighting artifact, since the light of the idealized barrio is the moonlight.

Barrio Tango

The picturesque suburban landscape the writer describes seems to enjoy a certain balance. However, if we review the aspects from the tango universe and observe how they are presented, we can see that the protagonist is immersed in a tragic irony. The elements that he selects as typical of the barrio, opposed to the modern lights of the city center, contain the seed of transformation and urbanization.

The title of the lyrics also refers to a railway station. The train, machine that brings progress, was already replacing the wagon. At the beginning of the 20th century, it was the city's main outpost to the countryside. The train, as a building agent of expansion of the city, could always take the margin a little further, and the suburb it left behind was becoming a city. On the other hand, the very presence of the workers indicates that this barrio is on the way to disappearance, at least part of its characteristic serenity is becoming precisely a place for people to accumulate, which is not characteristic of the outskirts but of the city.

Enrique Cadícamo has confessed that he has always felt a strange emotion when contemplating something that belongs to the past. The “Three Conners” railroad station already did not exist in 1940, as the station had worked there only until 1910¹⁶. The nostalgia for that barrio is not expressed directly: the protagonist says about the original suburb and describes it with tenderness, without noticing the urban transformation. The receiver [understands the irony, and] completes the idea: that barrio is not like as it was, it will never be like yesterday.

Our protagonist is presented in the manner of the ancient tangos, blunt and simple, declaring his origin, his name, his deeds and his loves, but it is by nature a sentimental tango. It is not the young wild and boastful tango, the tango of compadritos, in which the tenderness never takes place; It is the post-contursian tango of deep feelings.

¹⁶ The closure of the station was part of the reforms in transportation, due to the greater number of people and products. In that time, the Argentine economy grew with the population, because of the large numbers of immigrants arrived. The banks began to industrialize, to modernize, to overpopulate, and they became part of the city. The station was demolished in 1955.

Every description is an evocation. The relationship with the evocations of the barrio also supports the tragic nature of the landscape presented in Three Corners; something that is in the process of disappearance is being celebrated. The fringe is, in this sense, a process; it is not static, but dynamic, it is always transforming itself into a city; it is always going further, in space and also in time, leaving the suburb past an antique for longing. The transformation of the fringe is also an expression of the changes experienced by the tango character.

The tango speaks of itself in "Three Corners". The lyrics is in a thematic line that would be visited in the 40s: tango is aware of its existence, reflects on itself, defines itself. This self-reflective dimension, characteristic of postmodern art, exposes a crisis in the representation offered by Tres Esquinas lyrics: tango does not speak of reality, but of art. The elements of the landscape described are artistic objects, the same with the protagonist — tango.

Now, it happens that our protagonist is the tango itself. We can understand that the origin of tango is the barrio of Three Corners, and by extension the suburban barrios in general, as with other similar tangos, for example, "Barrio de tango" by Homero Manzi, which is located in Nueva Pompeii, also in the South of Buenos Aires city. This is an evergreen theme in tango creation: The Barrio.

Three Corners is a "Barrio Tango". On the one hand, we know that the tango presents itself in the manner of pre-contursian way. It comes from the suburb, fought with a knife, loved a girl from the underworld. On the other hand, it possesses the sentimentality and exquisiteness of a post-contursian way. It possesses two wings, and from the suburb it went up to the sky.