



**ARGENTINE PASSION** is hard to explain. From it pervades *everything*. It's like trying to hold onto air. You don't *do* it, you *feel* and *live* it. It's there. Everywhere. I honestly think politics come into play here. Over the years, the average Argentine *porteno* (the port people of Buenos Aires) hasn't had a lot of control over much of anything. A little over 30 years ago, their own government killed them by the thousands. They threw people out of helicopters and into the River Plate next to the city. Over 30,000 people disappeared off the streets. Imagine that reality on the streets of Middle America, on the streets of Chicago or St. Louis.

Today, in spite of the continued love for Eva Peron and the Peronist Party from the '50s, there's very little faith in the government. The peso is doing lousy, beef is no longer the major export (soy holds that place) and the *porteno* often think only about themselves and don't feel they can do much to change things. It's not that they're lazy by nature, and it's not that there isn't opportunity. It's that too many of them feel it will not do

any good to work because they can't see any future resulting from that work. It's been like that in Argentina for a long time. The only safe place to turn is inward, and it doesn't matter if the resulting behaviors make a lot of sense or not. Sooner or later, the steam from that simmering self-contained pot needs a place to go.

In Buenos Aires, Argentines grasp for every opportunity to define themselves

(Above) Tango dancers at a milonga embrace. (Right) Sensuality rules the night in tango.

# TANGO

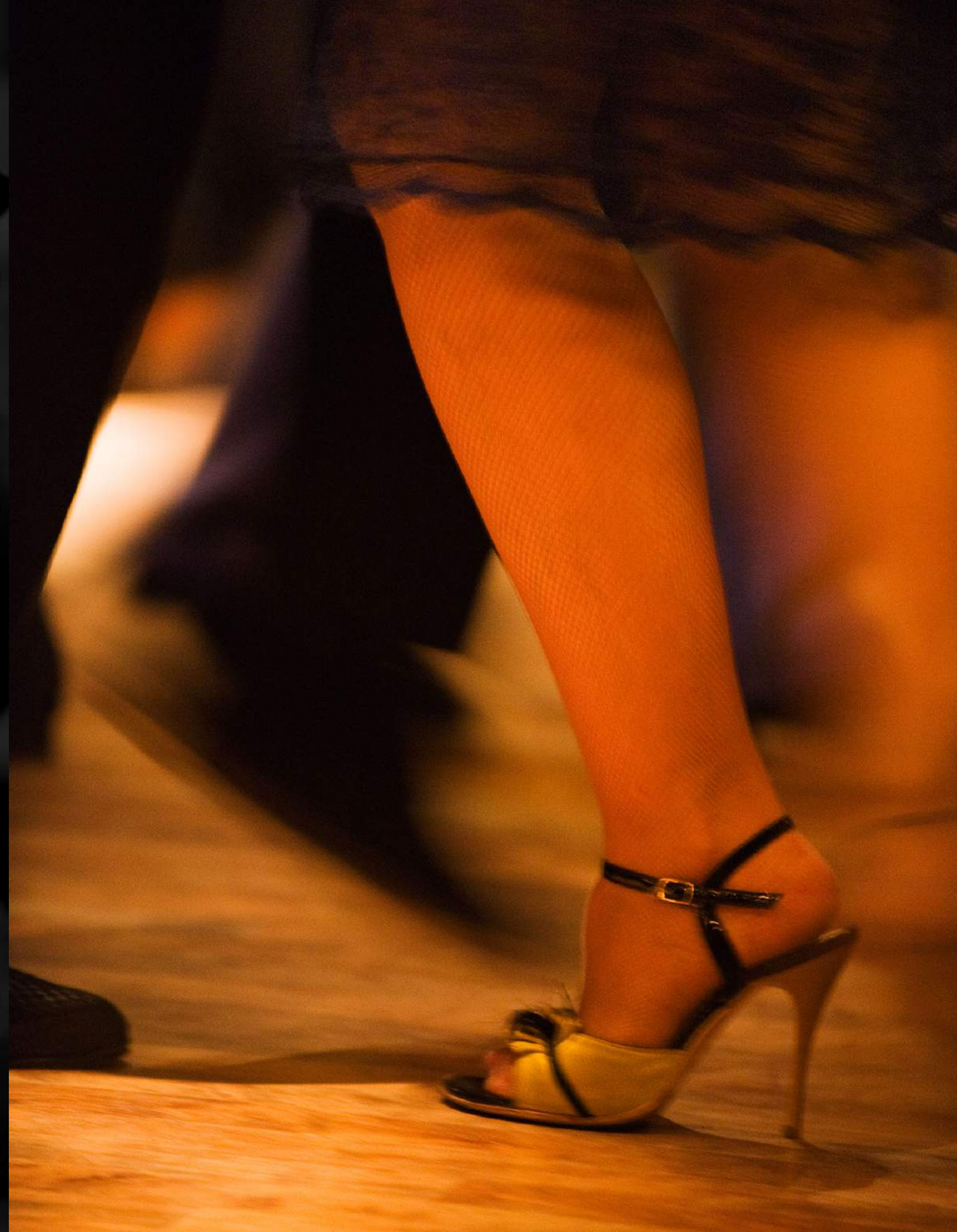
*passion, in a word*



*You hear it everywhere: in the back seats of cabs;  
through open apartment windows; around open-air cafés  
and neighborhood markets; drifting on the perfume  
of the small hours in the early morning;  
riding the thermals in the radiant sun  
and the languid humidity of midday.  
It's the heartbeat of the city.*



Dancers at milongas early in the morning in downtown Buenos Aires.





as individuals because so little of their surroundings improve over time. They look to the simple things as those things are close by, predictable and real, and they can get their hands on them and hold onto them, almost like a child grabbing for a parental pant leg, reaching toward definition and a sense of security. These things are not in an idealized future. These are the things from right now. Things such as soccer, family, conversation, wine, food, friends and sex. Everything goes into this rather desperately steaming teapot and it all steeps and simmers at the constant temperature of the passions of the moment.

Some *porteno* have even tried to contain and embrace all of these passions at the same time. Some *porteno* even have a word for this embrace and a physical manifestation for it.

It's impossible to describe, so call it tango.

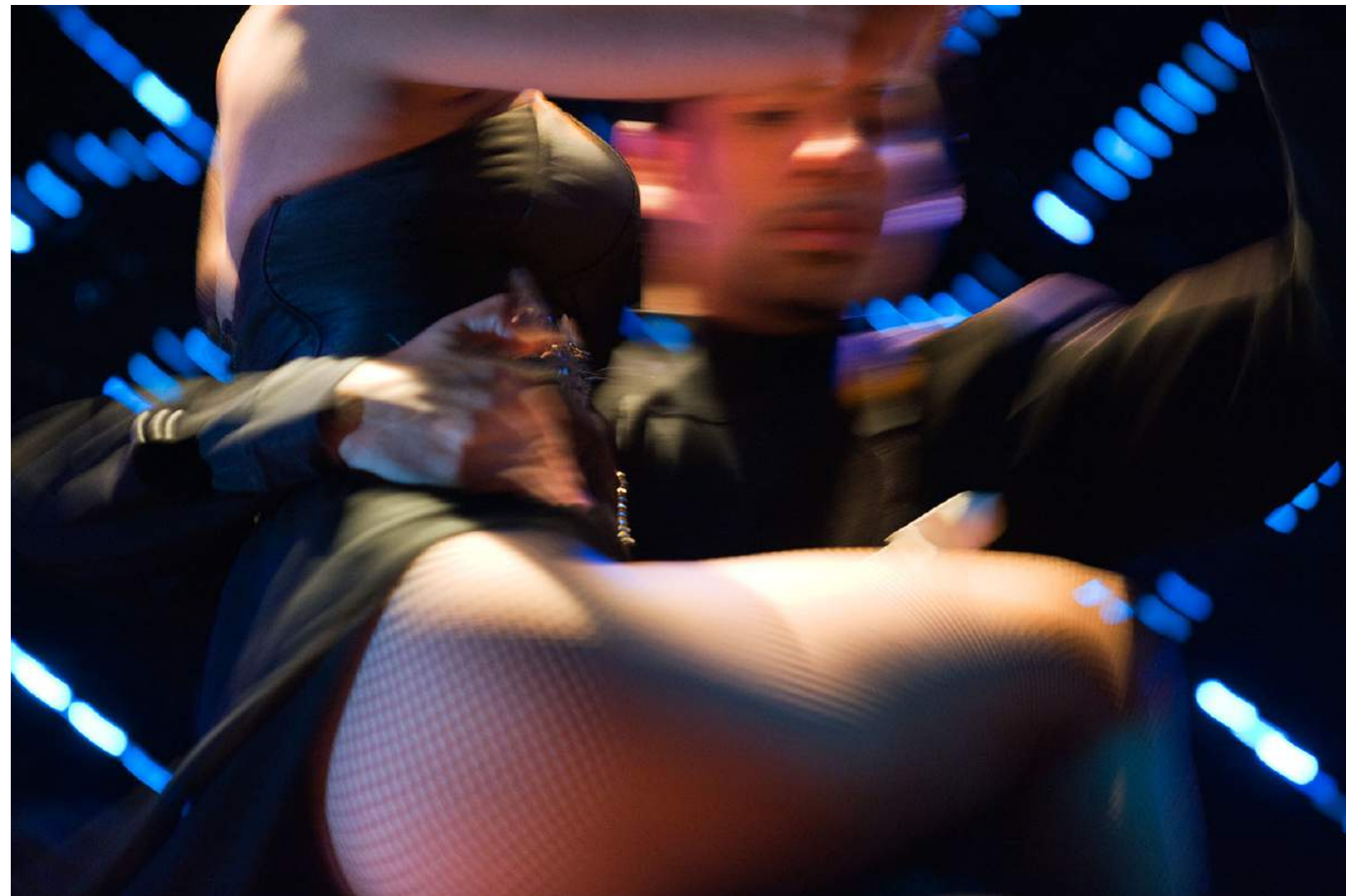
Call it life.

### TANGO OF THE TOURISTS

Tango *is* Buenos Aires. It's the blood. It permeates the entire culture. You hear it everywhere: in the back seats of cabs; through open apartment windows; around open-air cafés and neighborhood markets; drifting on the perfume of the small hours in the early morning; riding the thermals in the radiant sun and the languid humidity of midday. It's the heartbeat of the city.

Tango has always been fixated on competing interests: life and death; sex and war; to have and have not. Born in the brothels of the poor southern *barrios* of Buenos Aires in the last quarter of the 19th century, the dance began by mimicking the street life of the docks and the violence in the slums. During World War I, Europeans popularized a more refined tango, and since then, it has seduced people all over the world. But its heart is still in Buenos Aires, and over the years it's been constantly rejuvenated, reinvented, reimagined and redefined by everything from its own classic history to techno and hip-hop. Its manifestations fit the evolution of the city and it's capable of being whatever you need it to be at the moment you need it.

Tango has a number of personalities and I saw two of those manifestations during my time in Buenos Aires. Tourists flock to [tango shows](#) all over the city. There's an entire industry built on the time-honored traditions of Las



Vegas and Radio City Music Hall. Give the people what they want. Give them a show. This is the tango of exact steps and form, costume and presentation, slit skirts with fishnet tights, sex-set eyes, slicked-back black hair and latino lovers crying and singing over lost love. If a Las Vegas show is what you want, you can get it. The top of the line for this gig appears nightly at the five-star [Hotel Faena](#). A great dinner and a show. It's called [Rojo Tango](#). A friend told me it was worth it to go to the Hotel, sit outside the theater and just watch the women walk around. As Maurice Chevalier said, "Thank heaven for little girls, they grow up in the most delightful way." For a less expensive,

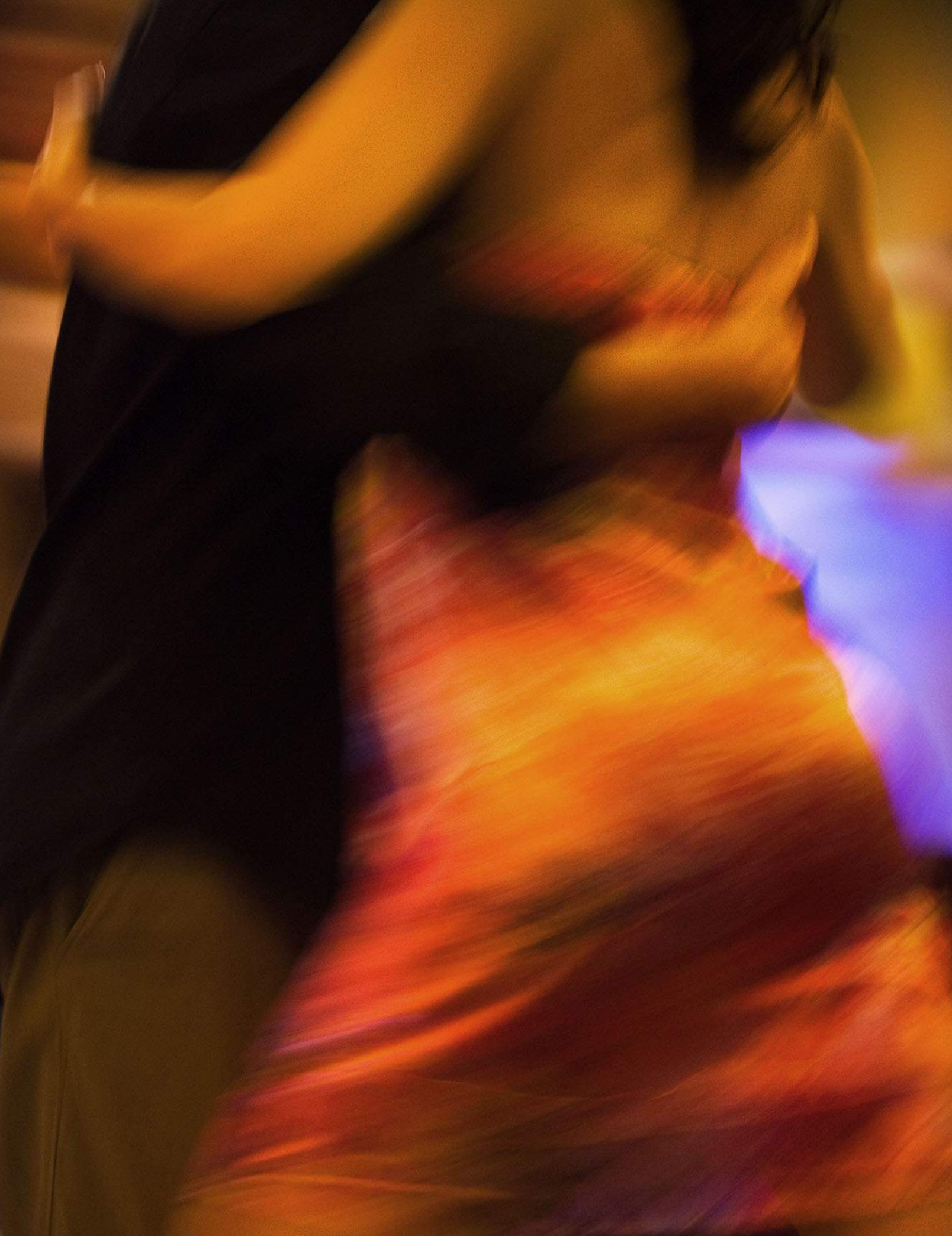
more intimate lower-key affair, try [El Querandi Tangueria](#)—a more traditional tango restaurant built from an 1867 house in the *barrio* of Montserrat.

That's show tango. There are, however, other forms of the dance. There are those who dance to exact requirements of presentation: The tango masters. They take years to learn exactly how to move. They grace the stage with their expertise and stand apart from the average *porteno*. There are also the newer forms of tango danced by young people influenced by everything from jazz to hip-hop to techno and rap music. All this evolved with elements from the early forms of tango.

The *porteno* have their own version

Tango shows fill the night in Buenos Aires to the delight of tourists and locals alike.

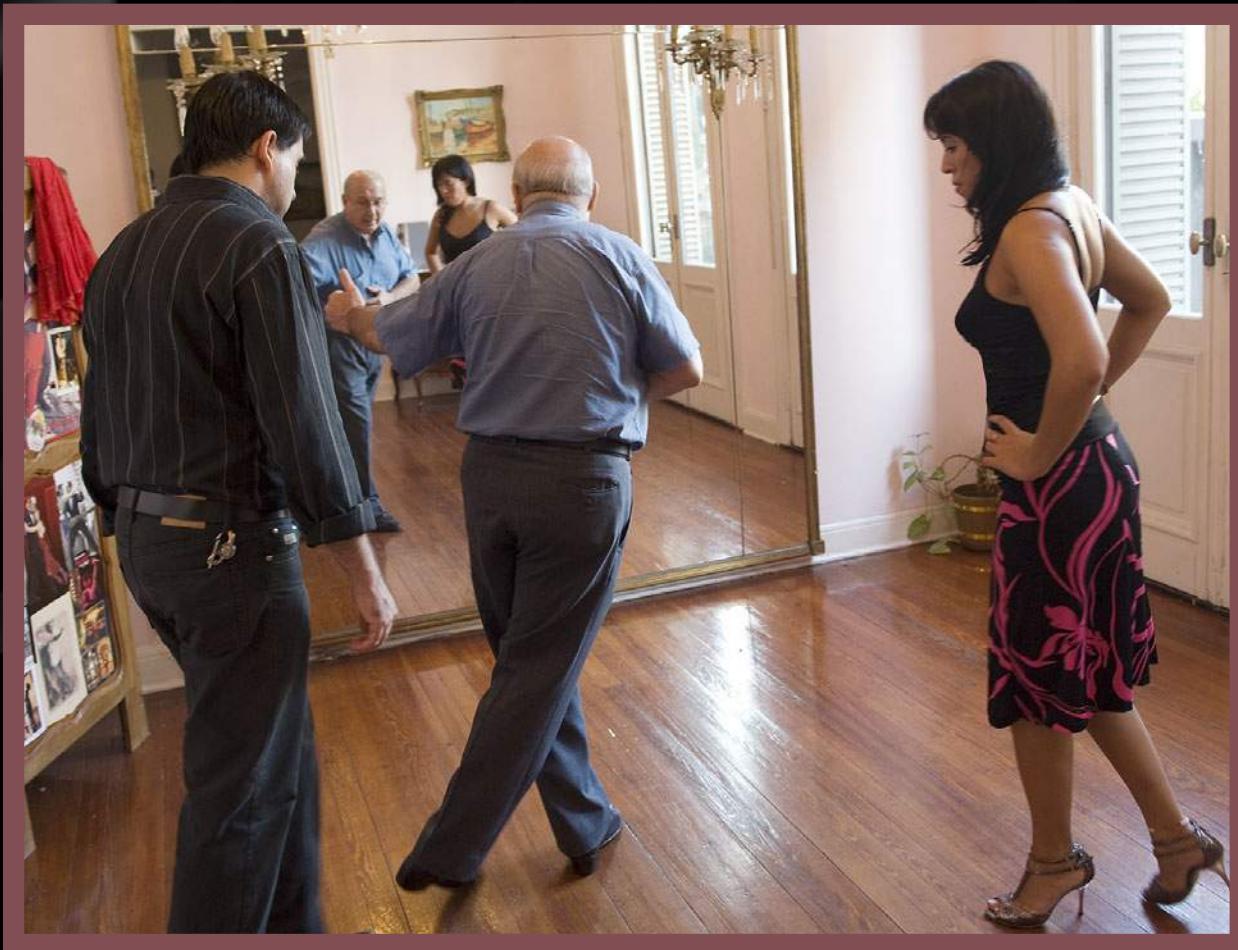




*The woman drapes herself around the man with her left arm around his neck, her head over his right shoulder. She often closes her eyes; she surrenders completely. Silence reigns, but if there is any talking, it's simply a whisper in an ear.*







Pedro Sanchez teaching *milonga*-style tango at his apartment studio in the Montserrat Barrio of Buenos Aires.

of tango as well. They say show tango is the tango of tourists. They say real tango lives in the heart and fuels the passion of Buenos Aires. They say their tango is the classical style born in the '30s and '40s with the music of people such as [Francisco Canaro](#) and [Carlos Gardel](#). They say theirs is the style of the original street. They say theirs is the dance of life. They say that nothing but family is more important than tango—and even that might often enough be called into question. They live every moment for this dance. They call it *milonga*.

*Milonga* is a style of tango, a place to dance and a mood of dance. Tourists hardly ever see it. On any given night, as many as 15 organized *milonga* dances materialize at various clubs around the city. Like an intact ecosystem, *milonga* exists in and of itself. It lives very late at night and into the early morning hours when nothing else moves, with the caveat that in Buenos Aires, midnight is very early. The hotels know where some of these locations are, and you can get into them, but it helps to hire a guide, and it helps to know the territory. Many times, there are implied codes of conduct and unspoken ways to behave. Go to a *milonga* with serious respect, and have a look at a real slice of Buenos Aires. Be respectful with your camera. Be respectful with your presence. Dance if you dare.

In the most classic *milonga*, men sit on one side of the dance floor and women sit on the other. All communication prior to actually dancing is done by glances and turns of the head. There are no verbal signals and no one goes up to another person and asks them to dance.

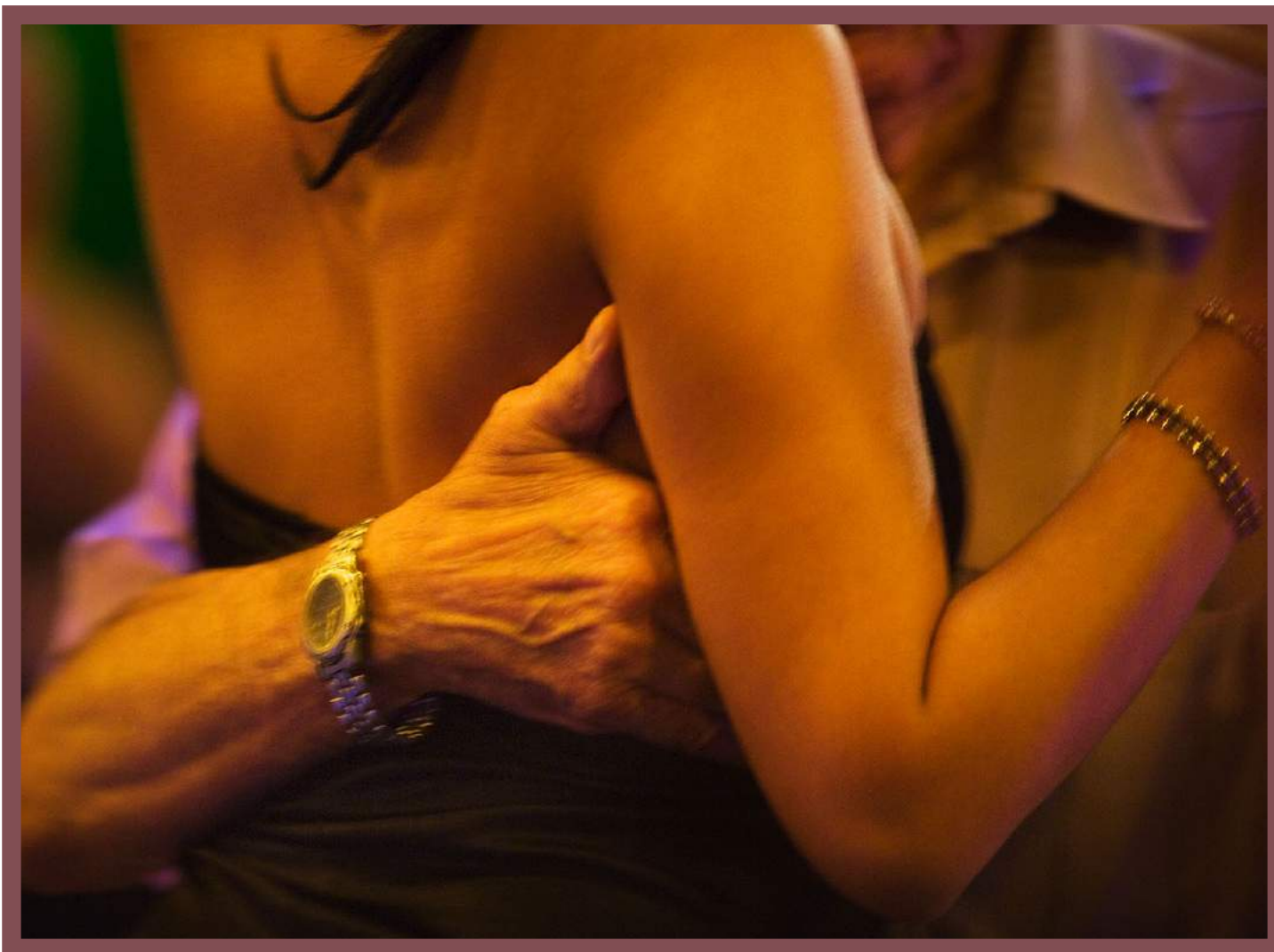
It's all done with the eyes and expression, and it happens across the room. If a man asks a woman to dance with a glance, she has the option of meeting his eyes and responding in kind, or simply ignoring him and looking away. It's all very polite. It's full of ritual and entirely amazing to watch. I took photographs, but had to be extremely cautious and nonintrusive. After all, that striking woman he's dancing with might not be his wife.

My guides to the *milonga* were a 39-year-old dancer named Alejandro Gee and his mentor Pedro Sanchez, a 75-year-old master. Think a larger, graceful, more charming Yoda from "Star Wars," and you know Pedro. A retired machinist, Pedro started dancing in the streets of Buenos Aires when he was 15. To this date, Pedro remains the most energetic, vibrant person I've ever met. Imagine what you'll be doing tomorrow at 3:30 in the morning. There's a good chance Pedro Sanchez will be drinking wine, dancing and holding a woman in his arms. Tango, wine, food, friendship and women. Pedro dances in order to live. The Yoda quote is appropriate: "Do or do not. There is no try." Tango is the blood in his veins.

### A THREE MINUTE LOVE

The *milonguero* is a male dancer and a style of dancing in a *milonga*. The style evolved to compensate for a large number of people dancing in the small space of a club. The result is a form of tango that allows for simplicity of steps while encouraging a natural connection between the dancers. The most striking





quality of *milonguero* style is the very close embrace and reserved leg movements that are a requirement of the dance. The couples lean forward to make contact from the waist to chest and the hold does not change throughout the dance. The woman drapes herself around the man with her left arm around his neck, her head over his right shoulder. She often closes her eyes; she surrenders completely. Silence reigns, but if there is any talking, it's simply a whisper in an ear. Pedro and Alejandro say when it's done correctly, the man and the woman dance for three minutes and, in those three minutes, they fall in love.

They say the secret to dancing correctly is in the freedom of allowing it to happen.

Like love, there is no formula and there are no proper steps as in show tango. The man leads, but the dancers allow themselves to be taken by the music and by each other. Americans have trouble learning this dance, because Americans want a formula and steps. Dancing in the *milonga* is much more.

I sat at an out of the way table and watched impassioned people dance the night away, with fiery faces and steamy thick air. Total strangers fell in love for three minutes, pulled very slowly apart,

smiled and went back to their tables. It was all passionately polite. Some young women in their 20s and 30s were dancing with old men in their 70s or 80s. Men and women searched, stalked and hunted each other. They searched out those who understood and those who dance tango in the *milonga*.

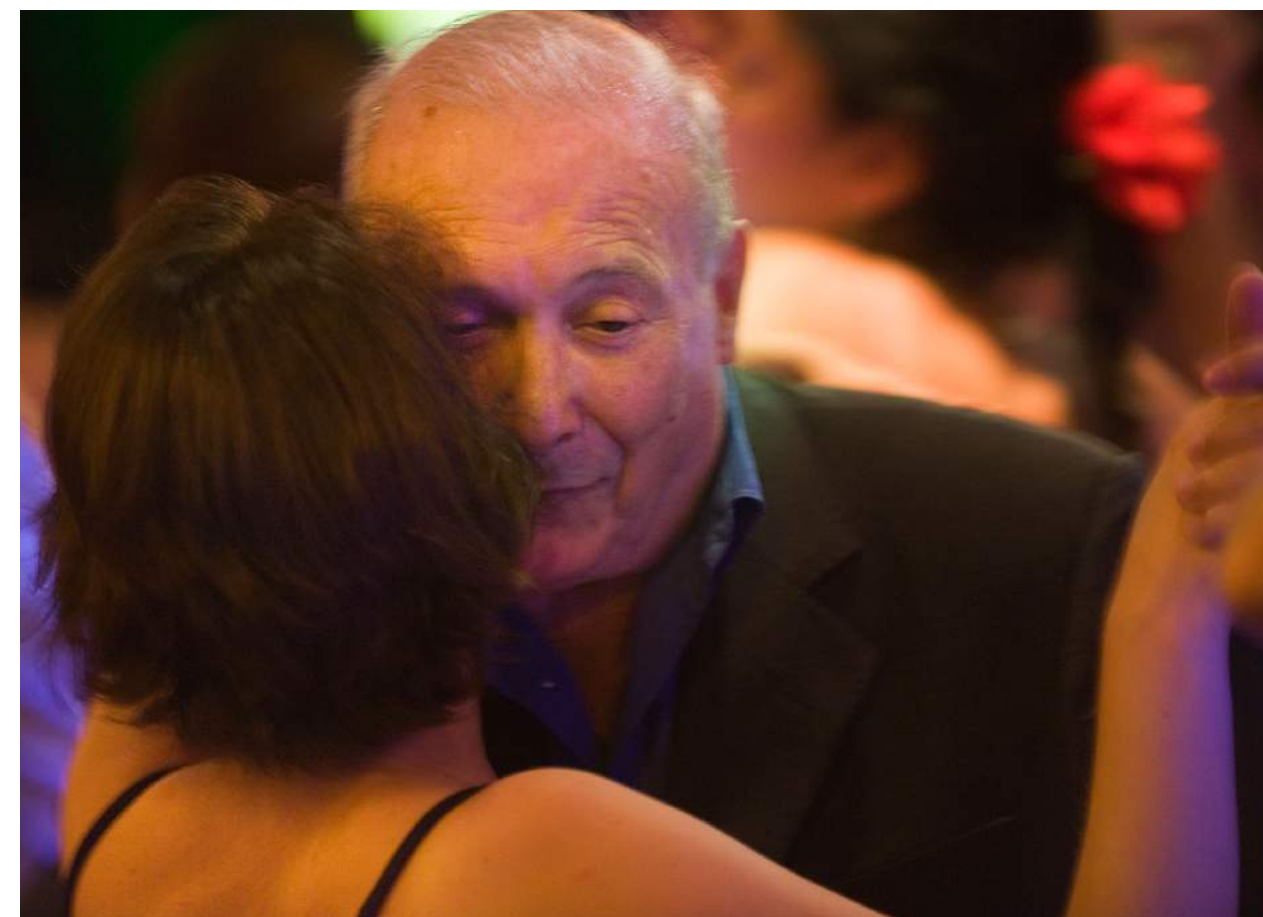
Pedro said, "age may take away some vitality, but it gives back experience."

And so it appears. To the uninitiated, it's an intimidating dance. Surrender always is. Pedro teaches *milonga* in his studio in Montserrat. He gave me a short lesson one day.

"The secret to tango is the same as the secret to life," he said. "Don't think. Just walk to the music and take it easy."

Taking it easy is Pedro's lesson for everyone who wants to learn tango. As we all know, it is not easy to take it easy. The last day I saw him, I asked him how he might like to die.

"I don't think about death," he said. "I want to live forever." Since there is no blood in his veins—only tango—there's a chance he might pull it off. So here's a toast to Pedro Sanchez. God's speed on your path, my friend.



(Left) The tango embrace often finds older men and younger women together. (Above) At 76, Pedro Sanchez has danced the passionate and intense milonga tango since he was 15.