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Tango Fiesta – Gus Flaherty
Overall rating: ★★★★★

Tango Fiesta: My 14-Step Guide to Becoming Patrick Swayze

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...Dammit, I just wanna dance, dance...DANCE...

I placed the task at hand of ultimate tango mastery to a British gent who happens to love Latin-inspired music and dance. He's not a native Argentina, and despite his lack of Latin blood, you can sense the inspiration flowing through his veins. He's **Gus Flaherty**, a Los Angeles-based musician whose English boyhood eventually led him to the Toronto Conservatory of Music. His love for Latin music derives mostly from being the son of a ballroom dancer. When Flaherty's father brought home records from Argentina, he gained inspiration from the works of tango music pioneers like **Astor Piazzola**, eventually grasping the skill to cultivate symphonies on his own.

Tango Fiesta has a few special qualities that allow it exclusionary status from the Latin music cutout bin. First, the album is not just fourteen tracks of typical Argentinean tango music. Mind you, the tango is a worldwide sensation, just like many other forms of Latin dance. This album features original compositions from the perspectives of the many countries that savor the tango like vintage vino. Outside the expected Spanish and South American countries, the disc has representations of tango music from Eastern Europe, Japan, Finland, Sweden, China, France, Italy, the Middle East, Canada and even the United States. Flaherty's skilled and refined production skills and his knowledge of arranging skills, easily place him in the same league as **Quincy Jones** and **Henry Mancini**.

If your guess is that **Tango Fiesta** plays like an original score to a foreign film, your assumption is correct. That's the magic behind the album: it places you in the center of an exotic landscape...some villa in Buenos Aires, a dark basement café with red and orange walls and bronzed-skinned women, or an Oceanside cabana with white sand and sun-drenched natives. There's a typical undercurrent of romance, but also one of sadness. The combination of accordion sounds, guitar melodies and Latin rhythms sometimes has a lamenting, melancholy feel to it, as if you're dancing to push away the grief of a lost love.

The other unique element to Flaherty's music are the classical, jazz and orchestral pop overtones that accentuate the pure Latin sounds of the tango compositions. Occasionally, a robust piano solo of a dash of alto sax will be tossed in, which adds a little kick to **Tango Fiesta's** blend of world sounds and influences. Flaherty also has a knack for arrangements that capture dramatic moments by adding lush string sections and other subtle nuances to the mix. The variety of arrangements and styles prevents **Tango Fiesta** from being bland dinner music or music to wait on hold by.

Cariño is the disc's opener, and it's identified as "A European Film Score." It would fit perfectly, during the opening credits of a **Fellini** Film. Consisting of sorrowful accordion melodies and accompanying guitar, it sounds like a slow drift on a gondola through the canals of Venice. It makes for the perfect introduction to the music that follows by keeping its arrangement simple and straightforward. But wait, the dance gets more intriguing.

Gypsy Nights creates an image of the tango so vivid, you might just grab the most proximate human in an embrace and scamper violently across the room with them. This track represents the most natural form of tango music on the album, even though its origin derives from the Eastern European derivation of the

tango. Expressive melodies are shared by piano, flamenco guitar and the intoxicating violin of **Bobby Bruce**. Playing in a minor mode with a brisk 2/4 meter, Gypsy Nights takes the samba motif of Latin music, with tighter, more distinct rhythms and punctuated percussion. Sometimes, the rhythm will be abruptly interrupted for two seconds to add high drama and deep passion to the music's tone.

But there's so much more to tango music than superficial romantic overtones that fuel its impact. It's earthy, sensual and far from being generic or monotonous. Flaherty's unique compositions vary in both harmonics and rhythm that in some places, seems to be more for a concert hall than a dance floor. But that doesn't affect the music's profound effect in any way.

On **Aviento**, we're introduced to the trademark instrument of tango music, the bandoneón, a large button accordion known for its unwieldy size and difficult fingering system. It originated in mid-1850's Germany and made its way to Argentina via German immigrants. Like the accordion, the bandoneón is played by holding the instrument between both hands and either pushing in or pulling out the instrument while simultaneously pressing one of more buttons with the fingers. Unlike the accordion, half of the notes can only be played by pushing the instrument in, and the other half by pulling it out. On **Aviento** and on the late tracks **Pasion**, **Tango Mexicano** and **Muevete Conmigo** (Move With Me), Coco Trevisono fulfills his daunting task well. In order to play the fast scales and melodies that sometimes surface, he must not only press a certain sequence of buttons but must also reverse the direction of force many times per second. The bandoneón can best be described as an accordion with a more layered, multidimensional sound to it.

Our world passport takes us to Greece on **Tango Hellez**, where the mandolin-like sounds of the bouzouki come to life. The subtle rhythms take shape from cellos and accordion as the staccato melodies of **Danny Papakolos** ring with a rich, charming tone. The image of a Mediterranean village and perhaps a guy named **Zorba** grabbing your arm to circle dance will easily surface.

Ending our transcontinental journey is the soothing French-inspired jazz ballad **Jamais Sans Vous** (or Never Without You). A subdued accordion flows in the background as soprano saxophone from **Justo Almario** and flamenco guitar from **Ramon Stagnaro** form gentle melodies that cascade back and forth, creating a similar vibe as the album's intro. Hence, we see the closing credits of our multicultural tango experience start to roll. And what a wonderful journey it was...

Recommended: Yes

Great Music to Play While: Romancing