

Calendar

Love Language

Local Tango Culture

It's an odd concept and doesn't grow any less odd after you have thought about it awhile. Leon Fajerman, host of Radio Frontera's all-tango program, is a psychiatrist.

On weekdays, he listens; on weekends, he is listened to.

There is more that's unusual about him. Cross-fertilization is a major theme of Fajerman's personal history. "I grew up in Argentina, although my ethnic background is Central European. In the 1930s my parents emigrated to escape the Nazis. I have two older siblings who were born in Poland. I was the only one in the family who managed to be born in Buenos Aires, in 1943."

His father didn't embrace the Argentinean culture. "He barely learned Spanish. Instead, he spoke German, Yiddish, and

Polish. In Buenos Aires, there was a Jewish section, filled with other refugees. My father worked at home as a tailor, and all his customers were men from the old country. Like typical immigrants, they retained the mentality of their former home. Theirs was ghetto-think. But my mother needed to learn Spanish to buy bread. She had more contact with the outside world. And she became more involved with music and movies — the local culture."

Tango culture entered the household through her and through Fajerman's brother, who began bringing home tango records. "Together we developed a liking for it," he says. "Back then, we in Argentina were still enjoying the golden age of tango — it was the equivalent of the Big Band era here. People picked their favorite orchestra. Like Tommy Dorsey and Harry James, the tango greats had their followers."

Some neighbors exposed him to live tango music. "I had a close friend who was Italian. His father played the key instrument in tango, the *bandoneon*. It was invented in the 1830s by a German organist whose church was very small, so he created this cousin of the accordion. Its unique sound gives a lot of tango music its personality."

Most importantly, there was the influence of the air waves: "By the early 1950s TV had come to Argentina, but for me tango was mostly radio."

After medical school in Buenos Aires, the young doctor encountered yet



Leon Fajerman

another culture, when he went to Israel for his psychiatric training. He added still another culture to his repertoire in the 1970s, when he emigrated to the United States. Since 1979, he and his Israel-born wife have lived in San Diego. Even within his profession, Fajerman is a rare mix — a specialist in child and adolescent psychiatry who is Spanish-English bilingual and bicultural.

"I also have some Italian and French; and the languages of my father. On certain days my practice is very multiethnic. Plus, I have Hebrew, which my wife and I speak. That's our love

language," says the father of three grown children.

Fajerman's Spanish-language program on Radio Frontera is just eight months old. For a couple of years in the late 1980s, he cohosted a similar program on KPBS. "One reason KPBS called me was because they knew I owned lots of tango music. I have 400 or 500 albums, as well as CDs and cassettes. Everything that people hear on my program is from my personal collection."

We all know that psychiatrists are stereotypically silent. In a phone

conversation with a reporter Fajerman is chatty, but on radio he limits his commentary, preferring to play as much music as he can. "I squeeze in an average 15 or 16 pieces, from every era — the '20s, the '40s, the '70s. People call in, wanting to dedicate songs. Or they say, 'I haven't heard so-and-so in 27 years. Would you please play it for me?'"

The range of Radio Frontera extends from "the north of Baja to the south of Alta," as Fajerman puts it. "The audience is people over 30. The parents or grandparents of my patients are the ones who know the big names in the history of tango. Colombians are crazy for tango. Peruvians, Ecuadorians, Chileans, too. When they find out about my program, they say, 'Oh! This! That!'"

The dance is a whole other aspect of tango, of course, and every Saturday night, after signing off in Tijuana, Fajerman goes straight to La Milonga at El Mundo del Tango, where he is the deejay. (La Milonga is a broad term, meaning one of the original dances from which today's tango sprang; a tango dance event; and the place where that event is held.)

"I have an assistant, so after I set up, I have time to dance. Last night we weren't done until 2:30 a.m. San Diego is developing a style that's almost 'Buenos Aires,' where La Milonga usually last until 4:00 or 5:00 a.m."

Unlike many psychiatrists of the classic, analytical school, Fajerman obviously doesn't mind if his patients discover the details of his life beyond the office. "I don't think it's detrimental. I think it's more human that way. In all these years it has led to maybe one time a headache. Five hundred other times the outcome was good. That's a very positive ratio."

— Jeanne Schinto

"A Todo Tango"
Radio Program hosted
by Leon Fajerman
Every Saturday 7:00-8:00 p.m.
Radio Frontera, 102.5 FM

Tijuana La Milonga
Every Saturday 9:00 p.m.
El Mundo del Tango
6904 Miramar Road, Suite 108
\$10 cover
858-689-2422 or
www.elmundodeltango.com

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