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Arts

The arts scene in Buenos Aires has traditionally been a lively one, and of late it's really been taking off. The current economic woes seem to be as big a stimulant to creativity as military rule in the 1970s and early 1980s was a drag on it. A refreshing, make-do approach is evident, particularly in cinema, theater and the visual arts. Gone is the booming '90s dominance of sniffy, pricey galleries, lavish cinematic productions, and overhyped plays. Filmmakers have been producing quality works on shoestring budgets, artists exhibit in funky storefront galleries or private homes and drama troupes perform in unconventional venues. Sprinkled over all this is are plentiful dashes of well-done graffiti – including some terrific stencils – much of it political, of course.

Although a lot of talented porteños (inhabitants of Buenos Aires) have fled the country in search of better employment prospects abroad, BA's arts scene has retained a cosmopolitan level of sophistication, and its practitioners remain plugged in to all the latest global developments. A new element in the mix is the ever-increasing number of foreigners coming to the city, attracted by a totally happening place that is now totally affordable for them thanks to favorable exchange rates.

MUSIC & DANCE

Music and dance are well entwined in Buenos Aires, at least when it comes to the city's most famous export, the tango. The Buenos Aires opera performs in palatial Teatro Colón, one of the finest facilities of its kind in the world. The Colón, along with other venues like the Teatro Avenida, frequently hosts classical music, modern dance and ballet. And balletophiles will already know that BA is home to a superstar in the field.

TANGO

The tango, both as music and dance, is without doubt the best-known manifestation of Argentine popular culture. Figures like the legendary Carlos Gardel, the late Julio Sosa and Astor Piazzola, and contemporaries like Susana Rinaldi, Eladia Blásquez, Adriana Varela and Osvaldo Pugliese have brought tango to the world. You'll find the music constantly on the radio (particularly on the 24-hour, all-tango station, FM Tango 92.7), it tops the bill at the capital's finest night-clubs and can often be heard in the streets.

For more on the history of tango, see the boxed text on p26-7; for classes, *milongas* (tango dance halls) and tango shows, see p130.

ROCK & POP

No one can deny that Argentine rock started in the late 1960s, with a trio of groups, Almendra (great melodies and lyrics), Manal (urban blues) and Los Gatos (pop), leading the pack. Evolution was slow however; the

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establishment originally resisted and the 1966 and 1976 military regimes didn't take a shine to the liberalism and freedom that rock represented. It didn't help that anarchy-loving, beat-music rocker Billy Bond induced destructive mayhem at a 1972 Luna Park concert, enforcing the theme of rock music as a social threat.

But underground groups and occasional concerts kept the genre alive, and after the Falklands War in 1982 (when English lyrics had not been allowed on the air) radio stations found *rock nacional* and helped the movement's momentum gain ground. Argentine rock was on its way up, and eventually produced national icons like Charly García (formerly a member of the pioneering group Sui Generis) and Fito Páez (socially conscious pop-hippie). Sensitive poet songwriter Alberto Luis Spinetta also had an early influence on the Argentine rock movement, later incorporating jazz into his LPs.

More recent popular Argentine groups playing *rock nacional* include the defunct Soda Stereo; hippyish Los Divididos (descendants of the famous group Sumo); Mendozan trio Los Enanitos Verdes; the wildly unconventional Babasónicos; cult-like Patricio Rey y sus Redonditos de Ricota; and Los Ratones Paranóicos, who in 1995 opened for the Rolling Stones' spectacularly successful five-night stand in Buenos Aires.

Los Fabulosos Cadillacs (winners of a Grammy in 1998 for best alternative Latin rock group) have popularized ska and reggae, along with groups like Los Auténticos Decadentes, Los Pericos and Los Cafres. Almafuerte, descended from the earlier Hermética, is Buenos Aires' leading (and surprisingly literate) heavy-metal band. The band Les Luthiers satirizes the middle class or military with irreverent songs played with unusual instruments, many of which the band built themselves. Another unusually colorful character is Sandro, a living Argentine clone of Elvis.

Singer Patricia Sosa owns a captivating voice and her closest counterpart in the English-speaking world would be Janis Joplin. The bands Dos Minutos and Expulsados emulate punk-rock legends the Ramones, who are popular in Argentina and have played in the capital several times.

Today some of Argentina's most cutting-edge bands include versatile Los Piojos (mixing rock, blues, ska, *murga* and *candombe*), wacky Bersuit Vergarabat (utilizing multigenre tunes with political, offensive and wave-making lyrics) and free-willed La Renga (blue-collar, no-nonsense and political). And don't miss the multicultural, alternative and eclectic Kevin Johansen: his *Sur o no sur* album is pure genius.

Keep an eye out as well for relatively new arrivals Gazpacho; their self-titled debut album reveals an amazingly polished young quartet performing in a range of rockin' pop styles.

JAZZ & BLUES

Both these brands of music have substantial numbers of fans and performers among porteños, and you should have no trouble catching live shows at bars or cafés (see p124).

A fair number of Argentina's jazz greats have emigrated (Lalo Schifrin and Gato Barbieri among them). Among those who've stayed is guitarist Luis Salinas. Much of his music is mellow and melodic (along George Benson lines but a bit less poppy). Be sure to check out his jazz takes on such traditional Argentine forms as the *chacarera*, *chamamé* and – of course – tango.

Drummer Sebastián Peyceré has toured the country with Salinas, jammed at the Blue Note and played with the likes of Paquito D'Rivera, BB King and Stanley Jordan. He favors a funk-tinged fusion. BA's own version of the Sultans of Swing is the Caoba Jazz Band, who for years have been playing 1920s and '30s New Orleans-style jazz for the love of it (their trumpeter, Rolando Vismara, drives a taxi to get by).

The high degree of crossover between Buenos Aires' blues and rock scenes is illustrated by the path of guitar wizard Pappo. An elder statesman, Pappo was in the groundbreaking rock group Los Abuelos de la Nada and then became involved with the seminal blues/rock group Pappo's Blues, as well as Los Gatos and others. He recently reformed his '80s metal band, Riff. While living in London in the late '70s, Pappo gave up a chance to join the nascent Motörhead in order to tour with Peter Green, former Fleetwood Mac ace. Once he sets to wailing on his Gibson, you'll forget the fact that Pappo's voice and original lyrics aren't so hot. He plays hard-driving, full-tilt rockin' blues and is especially great when covering such American masters as Howlin' Wolf, BB King and Muddy Waters.