

*JJ senior feature writer*

**W**HEN ROCK legend Steve Miller heard Tom Montgomery and his band, MonTango, for the first time, his reaction was nothing short of ecstatic.

"You were magnificent," he told Montgomery after a concert at the Bohemian Club in San Francisco, where Miller is a member. "What a great night."

Miller was so enthralled with MonTango's interpretation of Argentine tango that he produced the ensemble's first two CDs at his Sun Valley, Idaho, recording studio. The second MonTango album, "Recuerdo," will be released July 6 at the group's first-ever concert in Marin County.

In its relatively brief existence, Marin-based MonTango has become a quiet sensation among

musicians and music insiders. Like Miller — whom Montgomery calls "our guiding light" — Marin rock singer Huey Lewis, winery chief executive Michael Mondavi, and Grammy-winning arranger Gene Puerling of San Anselmo are fans of the MonTango troupe — six musicians and a pair of dancers.

"Our concerts are like a theater piece," Montgomery said one morning in the music room of his Marinwood home. "We have never performed when we haven't gotten a standing ovation. Tango is serious music, impressive music. It may be music that speaks especially to musicians."

It certainly spoke loud and clear to him. A sophisticated Bay Area pianist with roots in classical music and jazz, Montgomery was captivated when he saw the Broadway show "Forever Tango" in 1996 and became enamored of the work of the late composer Astor Piazzolla.

"It thrilled me that all the

pieces I liked were by him," he recounts. "I was like someone from another country discovering Miles Davis. I fell in love with the music. I said, 'I want to study this.'"

That turned out to be easier said than done. When Montgomery set out to find Piazzolla's published music, he was stumped to discover that there wasn't any to be had. Nobody in music stores had even heard of Piazzolla. That set off a determined quest that led Montgomery to the Argentinean Embassy in Washington, D.C., which referred him to a composer in Buenos Aires, who put him in touch with Piazzolla's relatives. At the end of the trail, Montgomery came upon a legal quagmire that has engulfed Piazzolla's estate since he died unexpectedly in 1992 of a massive stroke, leaving behind ex-wives,

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# An affair with *tango*

## Montango

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collaborators and confusion.

"Nobody knew who owned the music, and his estate remains in disarray and dispute," Montgomey said.

"The upshot was that Montgomey couldn't pry the written compositions from Piazzolla's heirs. In resignation, he did the only thing he could under the circumstances: He began the painstaking process of transcribing the pieces note for note from the recordings that were available at the time.

"I put on the headphones and started to write it down," he said. "I started transcribing, and I still am."

"That labor-intensive task was hardly the end of Montgomey's arduous journey into the soul of the music. Next, he decided to learn to play the bandoneon, an accordion-like instrument that is the mournful voice of tango. Again, it was more than he bargained for: He ordered a bandoneon from a company in Berlin, one of the few places that make them. It arrived on Valentine's Day.

"I thought it would be my little sweetheart, but it's not," he said, explaining that the convoluted fingering is counter-intuitive and unlike other instruments. "I've averaged three hours a day of practice for a year and a half to learn to play it, and it's not unusual for me to practice five or six hours a day."

Paying such dues has put a solid foundation under Montango, a family affair that includes Montgomey's guitarist son, Matt, 18, a musician and composer who attends the California Institute of the Arts; his violinist daughter, Vanessa, 23, a graduate of the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra; and his wife, Georgia, a jazz vocalist who has come to share her husband's passion for tango.

As a jazz singer, she's accustomed to singing behind the beat. In tango, conversely, the vocalist leads the way. "It's taken me so many hours of listening and get-

### IF YOU GO

Montango will celebrate the release of his new CD, "Recuerdo," at its debut Marin concert at 8 p.m. Saturday, July 6, at the Marin Theatre Company in Mill Valley, 397 Miller Ave. The show is a benefit for the nonprofit Tango Arts Education Foundation. Tickets, at \$22, are tax-deductible. Call 479-6927 for reservations. Further information is available online at [www.montango.com](http://www.montango.com)

ting the feel," she says. "It started as an academic study, then I got bit. It surprised me, I love it so much."

The new album, "Recuerdo" ("Remembrance"), is dedicated to the memory of Piazzolla, on the 10th anniversary of his death. It includes several of his pieces, as well as music by other Argentine composers and a new composition by Montgomey's son, Matt.

Soft-spoken and retiring, Montgomey is an urbane musician who's as comfortable with Hindemith as he is with Oscar Peterson and Bill Evans. He and Georgia performed together for six years at the Top of the Mark in San Francisco as a jazz duo. They've toured Europe and Asia and have written music for network television. Jazz pays the mortgage, but tango has become their obsession.

Born in the mid-19th century among the working classes of Buenos Aires, the music, like the dance, is intricate and complex, despite its humble origins. Montgomey likens it to chamber music. But for him the attraction is more visceral than cerebral.

"Tango has its feet in the dirt, in the soil, in the people," he said. "The lyrics are so universally sad. The thing that pulls people into it is the depth of emotion. It's unashamedly romantic—it makes no excuses for that. It's all about beauty and longing. It faces the sadness of life. It says, 'Yeah, life is sad, but it's also beautiful.'"