

# MEET A MUSICIAN»»

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## Lorena Guillén, classically trained singer of Greensboro, [lorenaguillen.com](https://www.lorenaguillen.com)

In her music and in her academic career, Lorena Guillén aims to tell the stories of immigrants in both her native Argentina and in the United States.

The UNCG professor, who has lived in the United States since 1994, is a classically trained singer, heads the eponymous Tango Ensemble, and has performed throughout North and South America.

She is also director of the Triangle Jewish Chorale and has studied the links between tango and Jewish immigrants in Argentina.

And in 2017, she released “The Other Side of My Heart,” an album based on interviews with about a half-dozen Latina immigrants living in the Triad.

“I have always been very interested in exploring different situations in our society,” she said. “I’ve had some experiences incorporating oral histories in my music. I had this group, my sextet, and I wanted to use it to tell the story of migration of people like me, Latina women coming here.”

In a recent interview Guillén spoke about making “The Other Side of My Heart,” about creating music alongside her husband and about finding inspiration in a variety of musical styles.

### How did you get interested in music?

Through my parents, I was exposed to a lot of wonderful folk music from Argentina, and there was one particular important folk festival every summer I went to with my father. One of my grandparents, also was an avid listener and collector of recordings of opera and tango.

I saw other kids playing guitar, so I asked my mom if I could have guitar lessons. I was 9 or 10 years old. And during my high school years, I got involved in a lot of vocal activities, choral activities. My choral conductor really encouraged me, found that I had a passion and told

### More about Lorena Guillén

**Facebook:** @ Lorena Guillen Tango Ensemble

**YouTube:** [tinyurl.com/4bfhpumk](https://www.youtube.com/4bfhpumk)

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me to go for more vocal training.

So, I finally got into the National Conservatory in Buenos Aires, where I got formal training as a lyrical singer. To pursue further studies, I decided I wanted to go abroad. I explored Europe but decided to come to the United States where the programs looked very interesting and offered good possibilities.

### Who are some of your musical inspirations?

I really wanted to find music that I felt really allowed me to express myself through different styles. I never said, “I’m going to do only opera.” I tend to admire artists who demonstrate flexibility and aren’t afraid of crossing over into different styles. I’m fascinated by the colors and interpretations in the voice of Billie Holiday. I also admire the creativity of Bobby McFerrin. I love the tragic tones that Maria Callas can create, probably not the most beautiful lyrical singer, but an amazing artist.

### What’s your creative process like?

In my tango ensemble, I was able to find a state in which to create my own music. There’s melodies that come to me, and I bring these into the group, and we have been very successful in arranging these materials. I trust the group completely, and they’re all experts in their own instruments, and in all these years working together, we have come to



MARTIN W. KANE, PROVIDED

In 2017, Lorena Guillén released “The Other Side of My Heart,” an album based on interviews with about a half-dozen Latina immigrants living in the Triad.

understand each other.

### How did “The Other Side of My Heart” come about?

My husband Alejandro Rutty (who also plays bass in her tango ensemble) and I had been musical collaborators for many years. And a few years prior to “The Other Side of My Heart,” we had collaborated on another project. I’m the conductor of the Jewish Chorale in Durham, and I happened to know, through some of the members of the chorale, that there was a huge archive of interviews and stories of various Jewish immigrants who had come to this region, telling their stories of migration, and their experiences once they settled here. We did a piece based on those materials. Alejandro composed the music, and during the piece you can hear the interviews.

So, after that experience, I wanted to use the same approach to tell the story of women from Latin

America. I went out into the community to meet different women, and talk to them about sharing their stories, and about how their voices could be amplified through music.

We also had them meet with a photographer, who got pictures of objects important to them. And that visual component is part of the piece when it’s performed live.

### Can you tell about some of the research you’ve done on the links between tango and Jewish culture?

While going through some pieces with the chorale, I found several songs that were cataloged as tango. I found some fascinating pieces in Yiddish, and some pieces that were performed by Yiddish companies in Buenos Aires, where there is a big Jewish community. The Jewish diaspora was fascinated with tango, which was taken up as a mode of musical expression. There are some pieces that are extremely touching,

descriptions of ghetto life that are set to tango music with Yiddish lyrics.

I also looked into the first generation of Jewish composers in Argentina, and how they integrated and became part of the tango scene. That material became a whole concert.

### If you could open a show for any artist, who would it be and why?

There’s this Brazilian artist named Marisa Monte. She’s a wonderful songwriter. She has some classical training and has really used it to enhance her vocal interpretations. She’s very creative, not afraid to fuse styles or to crossover.

### What’s the funniest or weirdest thing to happen at one of your shows?

Playing with my husband, Alejandro, we’ve known each other so long, we can improvise together and know where we’re going. But we have had several situations where our improvisations went too far, and we don’t know how to come back, and how to end it, and we look at each other. That’s kind of a funny thing.

But I do have some touching stories from “The Other Side of My Heart.” When we did the premiere, one of the women, who had been brought by her mom when she was little and had to cross the desert, came and brought her whole family. And it was very nice to meet the mother. She had a phrase, “There is always a hair in the soup,” which is the name of one of the songs. But it was lovely to see the family reunited.

### What’s next for you?

My next album, I’m starting the process. There are some new compositions that I have. We’ll have some arrangements from the tango and Jewish culture project. I’m glad to have support from ArtsGreensboro and my own university. We haven’t been able to perform live much, but we’ve done two streaming shows (since the pandemic started).

– As told to Robert C. Lopez, [roberto.lopez79@gmail.com](mailto:roberto.lopez79@gmail.com)