

ROOTS OF RHYTHM - CHAPTER 2: THE BONGOS FROM CUBA

Instrument:

Bongos, a drum set for dancing

Country:

Cuba (ku-ba)



Flag:

The star stands for independence.

Size and Population:

The country is 42,804 square miles with 2,100 miles of coastline. It is slightly smaller than Pennsylvania. The population of Cuba is estimated at 11,061,886 as of July 2013; ranked 77th in the world.



Geography and Climate:

The Cuban mainland is the largest and westernmost island of the West Indies. About 90 miles south of Florida, Cuba consists of one large island and more than 1,600 smaller ones. With towering mountains and rolling hills covering a quarter of the country, the rest consists of mainly gentle slopes and grasslands. The fertile soil is primarily red clay and provides rich farmlands for crops and pastures. The heavy forests, consisting mainly of pine trees, exist in the southeast.

There are over 200 rivers and streams in Cuba, but most are not navigable. Among the 200 harbors, two important ones are at the capital, Havana, on the north coast and at the U.S. controlled Guantánamo Bay on the south coast.

Cuba has a semi-tropical climate and breezes keep the island mild throughout the year. Temperatures range from 70° F in the winter to 80° F in the summer. The country's dry season lasts from November to April and during the remaining wet season certain areas can get up to 54 inches of annual rain. Strong hurricanes often hit the islands during the fall months.

Background and History:

In 1492, Christopher Columbus landed in Cuba and claimed it for Spain. Spaniards began settling farms there in 1511 and six years later the first enslaved Africans arrived. Most of the original Indians that lived on the island died of disease or fieldwork as large plantations grew. During the 1800s, Cubans revolted against Spanish rule, and after ten years of open rebellion, Spain promised reforms in 1878. Slavery was abolished eight years later but another revolution broke out in 1895 and this time the United States helped Cubans defeat Spain in 1898. After

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several years of American rule, Cuba became a republic with its first president Tomas Palma in 1902. The U.S. had to reoccupy the country after another rebellion but left the country to Cuban control in 1909. A treaty in 1903 gave the United States a permanent naval base at Guantánamo Bay. Following the rule of other Cuban presidents, Fulgencio Batista overthrew the government and controlled the country as a dictator almost continually from 1934 to 1959.

In 1959, Fidel Castro overthrew the Batista government and at first the U.S. supported this change, but the Cuban revolutionaries seized American owned sugar and cattle farms, ending attempts at good relations between the countries. Cuban exiles in America failed to take back the country even with U.S. help in the early 1960s and until recently the Soviet Union has supported Castro's communist state. Outside of Cuba, Castro supported African states that favored communism but that ended in the 1990s. While relations between Cuba and the United States have remained strained since the 1960s, each of the countries established diplomatic offices in the other in 1977.

Since the Castro revolution hundreds of thousands of Cubans have fled the country, and most of them have settled in the United States. Despite the fall of communist control of the Soviet Union and a lifting of restrictions in many communist countries, Castro has maintained a communist state, criticizing these international changes while keeping tight control of his country.

Over the past several decades, Castro has given considerable financial support to traditional Cuban artists. In 2008 Gen. Raul Castro Ruz became president when Fidel Castro stepped down due to health. In February 2013, he was re-elected president.

Culture:

Cuba is a mixture of Spanish and African cultures. Those from Spain came from the southern Andalusia area as settlers and those from Africa came mainly from the Yoruba area of Nigeria as captives for slavery. About 65 percent of Cubans are white and of Spanish decent and the rest are of African heritage, or have a mixture of white and black backgrounds. About three fourths of Cubans live in the cities and towns. Most Cubans speak Spanish and some in the cities speak English. Before Castro's revolution the mostly poor rural population got very little help from the government, but afterward received support for housing, food, and education. Government leaders encouraged extreme patriotism among the population, and Cuban artists have benefited from this policy since folk music expresses local culture. The government sponsors free ballets, plays, and other cultural events, and government scholarships help young people in arts centers. One writer in particular, Fernando Ortiz, has studied and written many volumes about the folk music traditions of Cuban blacks. On the other hand, officials have imprisoned some writers who have been critical of other national policies.

Most Cubans are Roman Catholic but the church is not strong. The government has taken over most church schools and forced many priests to leave the country. Several Christian religions have been banned by the government. Some Cubans believe in *Santeria* (san-tah-ree-ah), a religion that combines traditions of Africa and Roman Catholic ceremonies. Enslaved Africans who were brought to Cuba had greater freedom than those who entered the U.S. These freedoms included playing music, practicing religion, and performing ceremonies derived from their African origins. For example, they combined African and European traditions, believing that Catholic saints represent African gods. Cuban composers have combined African and European traditions to produce a powerful and very influential folk music.

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After the blockade of Cuba in 1958, no more new musical forms came out of Cuba since musicians could not travel freely in and out of the country. As the international influence of Cuban music slowed, the music of other South American countries emerged like the Brazilian *bossa nova* (bah-sah noh-vah) and the Columbian *cumbia* (kum-bee-ya). Traditional Cuban music stayed alive, however, and has been performed in New York and other America cities for many decades. The emergence of salsa music is a direct result of Cuban traditions.

Music: Instruments & Rhythms

Instruments: There are many types of musical instruments used in Cuban music including the guitar, trumpet, flute, bass, and piano. However, percussion instruments are the rhythmic core of Cuban music. A percussion section often consists of a set of conga drums in three sizes also known together as *tumbadora* (tum-bah-door-ah), a cowbell or *cencerro* (sen-sair-oh), a scraper or guiro (gwir-roh), two thick sticks called claves (kla-vez – clave is also a type of rhythm), timbales (teem-bol-ez), two metallic open ended shallow drums, and bongos, two small, single-headed drums. Each conga drum has its own name from the smallest sized *quinto* (keen-toh), to the medium sized conga, to the large sized *tumba*. Also there are two thin sticks called *palitos* (pa-lee-tos) used to hit the side of a conga drum or a wooden chair as a second clave rhythm.

Our focus instrument for Cuba is the bongos, conical or cylindrical single-headed drums made from hardwood shells often hollowed from a tree. The skin or plastic drumheads are nailed on or have tunable screws, and are intended to be a fourth apart (the musical distance of four white notes on a piano). They are played with the hands and fingers, often with a sharp blow like a drumstick. The bongos were invented around 1900 to provide a high-pitched sound for small ensembles. Usually the large drum is placed on the players right side with the instrument held firmly between the legs at the knees. Virtuoso performers can get slide effects and tonal changes from the fingertips, flat fingers and butt of the hand.

Musical instruments in Cuba have been influenced by ideas from West Africa, received through captive Africans over a period of several centuries. It is quite likely that the idea of drums in a set of two, like the bongos, came from the African idea of a drum set with low and high pitches. In Africa the high and low sounds often stand for a female or mother's high voice and a male or father's low voice. African drums in a group are like the members of a family, and this idea carried over through slavery into the music of Cuban drumming.

Rhythms: There are many types of rhythms in Cuba including the son, the cha-cha-cha, the mambo, and the rumba. The rumba is an example of Afro-Cuban rhythms because the beat that begins the rhythm (known as the clave) came from Africa. Our rhythmic focus here is the rumba, a type of dance music that combines African and Cuban influences called rumba *guaguanco* (*gwah-gwong-koh*).

The clave beat is a pattern you may have heard in the movie “Roger Rabbit”; it has a three/two structure and can be repeated with the words, “Shave and a hair cut...two bits.” (referring to when a man could get a shave and hair cut for 25 cents). Many rock artists, one of the most famous being Bo Diddley, have used the clave rhythm. The “Bo Diddley rhythm” became very famous in the early days of rock and roll in the 1950s and continues today. For example, Gloria

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Estefan remembers her Cuban heritage in the 1991 song and music video “Mi Tierra” (me tee-air-ah). The beat that she is using in this song is the clave beat for *rumba guaguanco* (rum-bah gwah-gwong-koh).

Rumba is party music performed and enjoyed by many Cubans. It is thought that this music came from the suburbs after the abolition of slavery in 1886. After moving to the cities, former slaves moved into crowded areas, and in the courtyards where they lived and socialized they created group feasts called “rumbas.” There are several types of rumbas, the older, slower *yambu* (yom-bu), the rapid *columbia* (co-lum-bee-ah), a men’s dance, and *guaguanco*, a dance of seduction, courtship and desire. *Guaguanco* dancers move in a game of attraction and separation, and songs tell of Afro-Cuban life from love to death, nationalism to social problems, and courtship to friendship. It features vocalists and call and response, a technique used by singers and instrumentalists to engage the performers and audience in the performance. In the notation later provided in the Resources section of this chapter, you will see how the clave rhythm is played by other members of the drum ensemble. Songs are in both Spanish and African languages. The *martillo* (mar-tee-oh) rhythm is the main pattern played on the bongos and it can be used in the *rumba guaguanco*. The word *martillo* means “hammer” in Spanish and is used as a dance rhythm in Cuba. This rhythm was used in many types of Cuban popular music, and became well known through the TV theme song from “I Love Lucy” (a sitcom that was very popular in the 1950s) played by the band of Lucille Ball’s Cuban husband, Desi Arnez. Today the *martillo* rhythm can be heard in marching band drum cadences, especially those in the movie “Drumline.” To play the *palitos* or “little sticks” rhythm will require some good rhythmic skills.

Listen & Play Along: *Use *Roots of Rhythm* CD Notes to support this section.

Note to teachers: if instruments are not readily available, consider having students make their own (a general activity for making drums can be found in the Roots of Rhythm: Introduction section, and a specific activity for making bongos is described below) or encourage them to improvise - using everyday items such as buckets, containers, phone books, desk tops, etc., as instruments. Rhythms can also be created with body percussion including hand clapping, foot tapping, finger snapping, etc.

Listen to Tracks 11-12 of the Roots of Rhythm Companion CD to hear the sound of the bongos. Now it’s time to play the bongos. You can also use conga drums or other percussion instruments to play along with music on the Roots of Rhythm Companion CD. Or, if you don’t have these instruments, make your own substitutes (see activity below for making homemade bongos). In one type of Cuban rumba, performers use a wooden box to beat the rhythms. You could find several sizes of cardboard boxes to get the various sounds of the ensembles. Also, you can use a tin can with ridges and scrape it with a pencil to make the sound of the guiro.

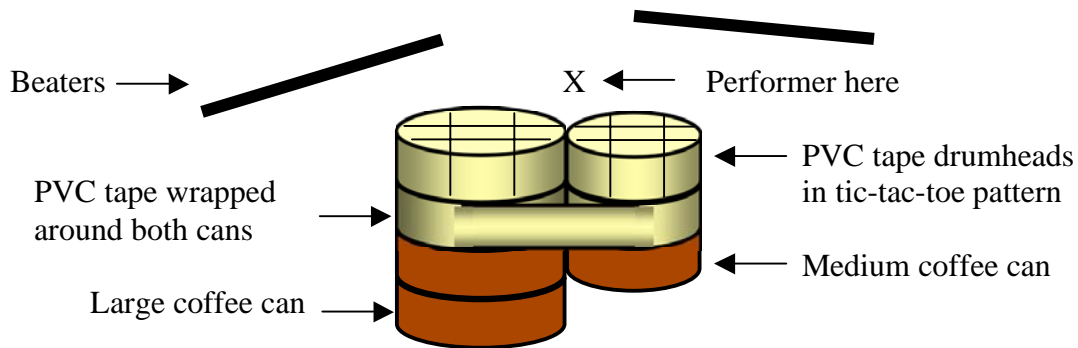
Listen to Tracks 13-24 of the Roots of Rhythm Companion CD and play along with the rhythms. To begin, just try to have fun!

Now read the box notation in the Resources section that shows each of the various percussion parts of the ensemble and begin again with the clave beat.

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- ⌚ You could begin by clapping the rhythm of the clave part and having another person clap the guiro rhythm.
- ⌚ Add the steady *martillo* beat of the bongos. Notice how the bongos have a fast, steady part in the rhythm of rumba *guaguanco*.
- ⌚ Move down the various rhythms of the *tumbadora*, but start with the conga, then play the tumba beat. Notice how these form a question or call.
- ⌚ Play the *quinto* part and see how it forms the answer to the question or a response.
- ⌚ If you have strong rhythmic ability, try the *palitos* rhythm on the side of a drum, or any wooden surface (that won't scratch).
- ⌚ Try the solo variations on the bongos at the bottom of the Resources section.

→ **Making your own bongos:** Make your own set of bongos with two coffee cans of different sizes taped together. The large number 10 can and a medium can work very well. You can either use the rubber lids that come with the can, or stretch PVC packaging tape across the top in a tic-tac-toe pattern for drumheads as described in the introduction to these lessons. In either case you should take off the bottom metal end—be sure to hammer flat any sharp edges left after removing the lid. You can hit the drums with your fingers or with 10-inch long dowels (1/4 inch diameter) as beaters. New pencils can be used for beaters as well.



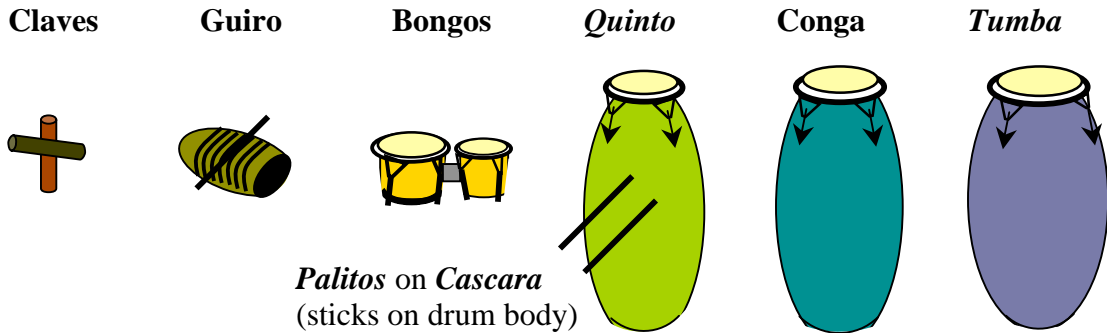
Bongos and Performer:



Photograph by Craig Woodson.

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Resources: The Rumba *Guaguanco* Ensemble and Rhythm



Rumba *Guaguanco*

Count	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Clave	R			R			<i>R</i>	<i>R</i>			R		R			
Palitos	R		L	R		L		L	R		L		R	L		L
Guiro	R		R		R				R				R			
Bongos	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L
Quinto									R		L		R	L		
Conga	R			R												
Tumba							L								L	

Please note:

1. This is shown for a right-handed percussionist.
2. The clave rhythm for rumba *guaguanco* is slightly different from the normal clave beat. It has hit #7 on hit #8 (shown here in italics); it is ok to use the normal clave pattern without hit #8. This version, known as 3/2 clave, is common in Puerto Rico.
3. The dotted vertical lines show how the clave part lines up with the *quinto*, conga, and *tumba* parts.
4. R or L means play the low or open tone on the drum; R or L means play a high tone.
5. A **bold** letter means to accent or hit that beat harder.
6. The *quinto* part is the lead or solo player, and that person's part can vary. The conga and *tumba* support the *quinto* player by keeping a steady pattern. Notice that the *quinto* rhythm fills in an empty place in the pattern of the conga and *tumba* parts.
7. The conga or middle drum is also called the *segunda* or *tres golpes*.

The bongos keep a steady rhythm throughout as a support rhythm but can also play solo variations. For example,

Bongos' *Martillo* Rhythm - Basic Rhythm and Solo Variations

Basic rhythm	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L
Solo #1	R	L	R	L	R		R		R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L
Solo #2	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L		
Solo #3	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L