

ES LA LLAVE

(CLAVE IS THE KEY)

MARK NAGY

Historically, jazz has been a reflection of contemporary society. I played saxophone in big bands and small groups because I grew up in the straight-ahead jazz tradition: playing the music of Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, and John Coltrane was how I learned to play jazz. Now more than ever, the influence of Latin culture is rapidly expanding; so jazz players should consider assimilating aspects of Latin music into their vocabulary.

RICHIE PILLOT

I've been fortunate to meet and play with Richie Pillot, a Chicago bass player I might consider the "Art Blakey of Afro-Cuban music." Richie will assemble bands of younger players and teach them the ropes of playing Latin music by constantly playing gigs, sometimes two or three a day. These are freewheeling affairs reminiscent of the Fania All Stars—or at times the recordings of the legendary Cuban bassist Cachao. Richie has high standards for himself and for those around him; and if he isn't happy about something, he lets you know!

Since Richie's bands rarely rehearse, everything is created on the gig—one of his greatest strengths being the ability to spontaneously create arrangements of tunes on the bandstand. He is Ellingtonian in that the band is his instrument. At times he will sing parts he wants the horn players to play. These layered, contrapuntal sections are called moñas and are similar to shout sections in a big-band arrangement. The challenge is to create a moña that is melodically interesting, fits the chords, and—most importantly—fits into clave.

CLAVE

All of the various Afro-Cuban styles (such as Mambo, Salsa, Cha-Cha, and Guajira) come from the Son Montuno music of Cuba. Music of this descent is the focal point of this article; and "clave" (meaning "key") is the underlying rhythmical base of this music: a two-bar phrase that is repeated over and over. There are two basic types: 2:3 and 3:2 (**Example 1** on page 48).

Once the clave begins, it never changes. Of the two clave patterns, 2:3 is the more common to the jazz player—for example, Dizzy Gillespie's *Woody 'n You*, Joe Henderson's *Caribbean Fire Dance*, and Kenny Dorham's *Blue Bossa* are all in 2:3 clave. But it is important to be able to play in 3:2 as well.

Determining what clave a song is in can be a challenge because in clave, beat four is often a strong beat—sometimes so strong it gives the illusion of being beat one. The best way to find the clave is by either clapping it or snapping your fingers in the 2:3 clave after beat one of the beginning of a phrase. Does the music seem to fit into that clave? If not, try the other clave pattern (3:2). Listening to the bass pattern can be revealing: as in other styles of jazz, the bassist anchors the rhythm section both rhythmically and harmonically. A third option is to listen to the "cascara" pattern played by the timbales or drums, as it will fit better into either 2:3 or 3:2.



JANET MERIC MACKIE

"Havana" in performance: Richie Pillot (bass/leader), Junito Alvarez (piano), Mike McManis (flugelhorn), Mark Nagy (saxophone). Not pictured: Ogie Merced (congas), Joe Frau (timbales).

Example 1

2-3 Clave

3-2 Clave

Example 2

2-3 Clave

C G min7 C G min7

Piano

Bass

Congas

Clave

3-2 Clave

C G min7 C G min7

Piano

Bass

Congas

Clave

Example 3

A min7

Piano

All the music needs to fit into these patterns: the melodies, moñas, rhythm section's parts, and each instrument's specific role in layering the interlocking rhythms that all fit into clave. In addition, each different style of Afro-Cuban music suggests that the rhythm section players play a specific rhythmic pattern. **Example 2** demonstrates patterns the bass, piano, and congas might typically play in a Salsa-style tune (one in each clave).

Unlike in many other forms of jazz, the Afro-Cuban jazz pianist is constantly playing a figure known as a montuno: an ongoing pattern that never stops (such as in **Ex. 2**). In essence, the piano is an extension of the percussion section. The bassist's rhythm is called tumbao: instead of offering the "walking" lines of quarter notes as the basic unit such as in a swing-style tune, the bass line is syncopated and does not emphasize many downbeats. The conga player achieves accents by using various parts of the hands. Layered on top of all of this will be the horns, either playing the melody of the tune, soloing, or playing moñas.

TUNE STYLES

In straight-ahead jazz, players will often say, "Let's play something Latin," meaning something not swung but in straight eighth notes. However, there is a wide variety of styles in Latin music; and each has its own characteristics, rhythmic patterns, even its own dance. Three common styles are the Cha-Cha, Son (Salsa), and Merengue.

Cha-Cha

Cha-Chas are usually played in a medium tempo. The guiro (a gourd with grooves cut in it) is scraped with a stick, playing the rhythm of **Example 3**, with the piano player offering the rhythm from the Tito Puente composition *Oye Como Va* or the alternate option shown below it. Another popular cha-cha is *Morning* by Clare Fischer.

Merengue

The Merengue comes from the Dominican Republic and is usually played fast, almost always in 3:2 clave. Unlike in traditional Salsa bands (where the horn sections are comprised exclusively of brass instruments), it is very common to find saxophones in a Merengue ensemble. Many of the moñas or montunos start on the "and" of the beat one. As in Salsa, there are half notes give it a "2" feel similar to a Polka, with the time coming from the bass and the güira (similar to the ridged guiro but metal, and played in the same rhythm as the Cha-Cha's guiro). Two frequently played traditional merengues are *Sancocho Prieto* and *Compadre Pedro Juan*.

Salsa

The term Salsa itself came into being in the 1970s in New York as a means of marketing the music known as Son Montuno. (Some musicians do not like the Salsa term, arguing that "salsa" is a sauce meant to be eaten and not played!) Prominent musicians of this style include Hector LaVoe, Celia Cruz, and Willie Colon. The songs in this style are more complex in structure, many through-composed (non-strophic) and having more melodically complex moña sections (called Mambos) that are longer and contrapuntal, with the horn entrances usually layered so as to offer the effect of a canon. The bass will play a tumbao pattern, and the piano will play a montuno. *Mi Gente* by Hector LaVoe and *Bilongo* by Rodriguez Fiffe are good examples of this style.

Mambo

The Mambo style was developed in New York City in the 1940s. The melodies are often simple and riff-like at bright tempos, many times created on the spot, usually modal in nature, often over a single dominant chord or over I-IV-V chord-progression vamps. Similarly as in Salsa, the bass will play a tumbao-type pattern; and the piano will play a Montuno. Tunes like *Manteca* by Dizzy Gillespie or *Picadillo* by Tito Puente are typical Mambo tunes. Bands led by Tito Rodriguez, Machito, and Tito Puente helped create this sound. The term describing this style shouldn't be confused with the Mambo sections found in Salsa tunes.

Bolero

Boleros are slow ballads. Although they are often played as instrumentals, they were originally written for the voice. Benny Moré's *Como Fue* and Cesar Portillo de la Luz's *Delirio* are great examples of Boleros.

The above list is not all-inclusive but is based on the types of music I primarily play. There are many other styles, such as Bomba, Plena, Songo, and Danzón; and the geographic region in which you live may dictate which styles you encounter. For example, if you were living in Puerto Rico, you would be playing Plasens and Bombas.

There are of course exceptions to such general guidelines as I have presented above, since Latin jazz is a unique hybrid of various styles. Jazz, Rock, Funk, as well as Latin American elements can be found in this melting pot, ranging from artists such as Tito Puente to Irakere to David Sanchez. Like jazz itself, there is no real definition of what Latin jazz is. Various artists have molded the music in their own way. For example, Poncho Sanchez has taken many common jazz standards and altered the melodies to fit into clave. Eddie Palmieri has combined the style of McCoy Tyner with Latin rhythms to come up with his own style. David Sanchez uses the acoustic jazz format for his ensemble. The best way to learn the music is to listen to it and study it yourself.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LATIN MUSIC & JAZZ

Since both jazz and Latin music have the same source, Africa, many jazz tunes by Monk, Bird, and Dizzy also fit into clave; and many jazz composers, such as Horace Silver, have a strong grounding in clave. Historically, jazz is the product of European harmony combined with American blues and swing. In modern jazz (bebop and beyond) the focal point is harmony; but in Latin music, the rhythm is most important. Many non-percussionists—such as horn players—who play Latin music know all of the different rhythmical patterns that the members of the rhythm section play and to a certain degree can play the various percussion instruments themselves.

To the jazz player, Afro-Cuban music may seem to lack the elastic nature that swing music has. This would be due to the specific interlocking layers of rhythms that make this music come to life: all of the parts must be strictly played in order to fit into the clave patterns. Jazz players often take many liberties with time and rhythms, frequently playing behind the beat; Latin musicians tend to play right in the center of it. The Latin player's result may sound rushed to the jazz listener but is actually right in the middle of the beat.

If the rhythms aren't accurately played, there is the danger that the parts will be out of clave. In Spanish this is known as "cruzado" (crossed). Avoid this at all costs, as it can create a very bad feeling on the bandstand. Another tip is not to rush the upbeats: make them sound relaxed and as strong as your downbeats.

One characteristic more common in Latin music (particularly Salsa) than in straight-ahead jazz is the organization of compositional material in non-strophic forms. While jazz players often play theme and variations over a cyclical form (AABA being the most common), in many Salsa songs the theme is stated at the beginning and then not restated. Such music is sectional in nature and is organized by function: tunes are organized with alternating vocal verses, vocal choruses, instrumental interludes, and instrumental solo sections. Since the underlying harmonic material often stays the same, such sections might be analyzed as strophic variation. Eddie Palmieri and El Gran Combo present many compositions of this kind. The closest example of that organization from the non-Latin jazz tradition is the march-form basis of many Dixieland tunes.

PRACTICE TECHNIQUES

As a horn player, I first concerned myself with studying moñas; and since my home city of Chicago has a large Latino population, I would often listen to a radio station devoted exclusively to this music (WLXX 1200 AM), sing along with the moña sections, and try to learn them as quickly as possible. Because the moñas often occur during the "coro" (chorus) part of the tune (while the horns are *not* playing the moña), I would try to sing

the moña during the coro with the singers to see if I could sing it in clave.

After a while, I realized that often the moñas that Richie Pillot sang on the gigs were based on traditional clichés: so I started to transcribe moñas by groups such as El Gran Combo, Fania All Stars, Tito Puente, and Eddie Palmieri into a notebook just the way jazz players transcribe bebop solos to study jazz harmony. Doing this developed my vocabulary and prompted me to hear what fits into clave. Once I figured out a moña, I would repeat it many times to internalize it, then start to vary it (usually by altering some of the pitches while keeping the rhythms the same). **Example 4** (pages 49 and 50) shows some moñas I transcribed. (I credited the source when possible; others are public domain.) They are usually played in repetition for either a predetermined length of time or until cued to end.

Once Richie realized that the horn players knew what fit into clave, he would tell us to make up our own moñas—which would prove our understanding the concept of clave. This would be parallel to asking a jazz player to make up a blues head or a rhythm-changes melody.

Some songs seem to go back and forth between the two claves (2:3 and 3:2). This is usually done via a phrase that has an odd number of measures (such as a 7 or 9-bar phrase). The classic recording "Y Su Pueblo" by El Gran Combo includes several songs that seem to alternate between the two claves, but what really is happening is that the phrases have an odd number of measures.

After some time, I didn't need to count out the clave: I could just tell which clave was being played. Listening to bass players such as Bobby Valentín, Bobby Rodríguez, Cachao, and Andy González opened my ears to hearing the tumbao and therefore the clave.

A major stepping-stone for me was starting to think in clave instead of 4/4 time, using the clave as the basic beat pattern rather than using a series of quarter notes. I noticed many Latinos would tap out clave in counting off a tune instead of tapping out quarter notes. This opened my eyes to getting

Example 4
2-3 clave C7 The first four excerpts are taken from the same recording. Each line is one moña. Charlie Palmieri—"Mambo Show"

2-3 clave C7 Charlie Palmieri—"Mambo Show"

2-3 clave C7 Charlie Palmieri—"Mambo Show"

2-3 clave C7 This is a coro (chorus) from the same recording. Charlie Palmieri—"Mambo Show"

The I-IV-V progression is very common in this music. Here are some examples using major and minor keys, plus slight variations on the chord progression.

2-3 clave DMaj7 Gmin Amin DMaj7

2-3 clave Emin Amin Emin B7

2-3 clave G C7 D7 C7 "Bang Bang" Joe Cuba

This moña has two layers. The saxes start, and the trumpets enter the second time.

2-3 clave

Trumpets *"El Tirabuzon" Tito Rodriguez*

Saxes

Chords: F, Bb7, C7, Bb7

3-2 clave Richie created this to fit the chords to "Anacona" (sung by Cheo Feliciano).

Am7(b5) D7b9+9 Gmin7 C7 *Richie Pillot*

2-3 clave This is an ending Richie made to end the song "Little Sunflower" (Freddie Hubbard)

Emin7

2-3 clave *"Bilongo" Eddie Palmieri*

Am7(b5) D7b9+9 Gmin7 C7(#9)

This is one of Richie's favorite ways to end a tune. It clearly outlines the 2-3 clave.

3-2 clave

Amin7 Bm7(b5) E7 Amin7

3-2 clave

Dmin7 G7 Emin7 A7

3-2 clave

E7 Amin7

2-3 clave

Amin7 *This is the moña and coro to this Eddie Palmieri song. "Muñeca" Eddie Palmieri*

2-3 clave

Amin7 E7

Ay mi mu ne ca, per- don- a me



Ogie Merced (congas) and Richie Pillot (bass).

away from 4/4 time, though absorbing all of this took nearly a year of saturating my ear by constantly listening to the music.

Understanding the culture is also an important step; and speaking Spanish is a definite plus: many of the vocal phrases naturally fit into clave due to the natural, syllabic accents of Spanish. And knowing the language allows you to know what the singers are singing about! I also took a class in Salsa dancing, as often Latin jazz musicians are playing music for dancing. The tumbao (bass pattern) of Salsa fits right into the dance-step patterns as well as clave. Finally, I started to learn some of the various hand-held percussion instruments: shakers, maracas, and the cabasa. This helped my general rhythm and of course added to the sound of the ensemble.

In closing, this article just scratches the surface of Afro-Cuban music. I am still a student of this music, studying and learning new things. As in learning any style of music, you must immerse yourself in the music: listening is crucial, and seeing live performances is also important. There is no substitute for actually *playing* this music with players experienced in this style. Fortunately, I have been given the opportunity to be a member of Richie Pillot's band so as to learn the music on the bandstand. Sadly, due to the decline of the apprentice system of jazz education that worked so well for many years, such opportunities are rare these days. But there is an increasing number of educational books available for study, and an exciting world of music awaits you. Listen and enjoy!

Mark Nagy has been on the music faculty of Elgin Community College since 1990. He is the saxophone instructor and the coordinator of the jazz combo program. Nagy received both his Bachelors and Masters degrees from Northern Illinois University, where he studied with Steve Duke and Ron Carter. He has participated in the Banff Centre for the Arts Jazz Workshop and has studied with Jerry Bergonzi and David Liebman. Nagy has performed with a range of artists including Anthony Braxton, Frank Mantooth, Preston Shannon, and Tito Puente, Jr. and currently resides in Chicago, where he plays with various groups including Richie Pillot's "Havana."



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