

# Survival Guide for the Drumset

## Three Afro-Cuban Grooves

By Joe McCarthy



Drumset players are faced with the daunting task of knowing many styles of music and when confronted with the generic category of “Latin,” there is often some confusion. This survival guide discussion may help you understand a few essentials. I consider the “Big 3” in mainstream Afro-Cuban Music to be **mambo**, **cha cha cha**, and **6/8 Afro-Cuban**, also known as **bembe**. For each, I have included a brief video explanation and a brief video performance of the groove.

Clave: Originating in Africa, this five-note, two-measure pattern serves as the key for all the rhythmic styles in Cuban and related salsa music. The concept of clave is an essential component of this music. [Click here](#) to see an explanation on the clave by Victor López from last month’s email.

**(Ex. 1) See a video demonstration of the clave on the drumset.**

### **Mambo**

The first groove category is **mambo**. Mambo dates back to the 1940s as an added section to a Cuban dance form known as danzón. Mambo as a genre, evolved through the 1950’s in New York City, combining North American instrumentation and harmony with rhythmic elements from Cuba. This added section in the music was simply an open vamp with instrumental improvisation. Mambo as we know it today continues to combine these same elements in addition to modern day melodic, harmonic and rhythmic improvisation. I suggest thinking of mambo not as a specific drum beat but as a variety of groove possibilities. The feel is basically in cut-time, meaning 2 beats to the bar. This means it takes two bars to complete the clave cycle, which is 4 beats in cut-time.

**(Ex. 2) See a brief video discussion on mambo.**

**(Ex. 3) See a brief video performance of a mambo groove on the drumset.**

Note: in the video performance, the 2:3 rumba clave played on left foot cowbell (indicating clave direction for tune).

### **Cha Cha Cha**

The second groove category is **cha cha cha**. This popular dance form was created by composer Enrique Jorrin and popularized in the 1950s. The name cha cha cha was inspired by the sounds of the dancers feet as they scraped the floor. As instrumental music, this style has become well-known with elements of pop and funk in contagious tunes such as “Watermelon Man” and “Oye Como Va.”

**(Ex. 4) See a video discussion of cha cha cha.**

**(Ex. 5) See a video performance of cha cha cha on the drumset.**

Note: In the video performance, the quarter note pulse in left foot cha cha cha bell is a key ingredient in this groove. The bongo bell pattern in the left hand cowbell is another important part in the bridge or repetitive montuno section.

**6/8 Afro-Cuban/Bembe**

The third and final groove category is *bembe*, but more commonly known as **6/8 Afro-Cuban**. Many of the triplet based rhythms we associate with 6/8 Afro-Cuban originated in West Africa and migrated to Cuba thru slave trades. The folkloric instrumentation for *bembe* would be the hoe blade, a metal plate on which the 6/8 bell pattern would be played, *chekeres*, which are hollowed gourds covered with beads and the possible addition of *tumbadoras* also known as the conga drums.

Polyrhythmic activity is created by use of duple and triple rhythms occurring simultaneously. This enticing rhythmic groove has influenced many of great bebop drummers such as Art Blakey and Elvin Jones. Modern drummers have capitalized on these rhythms, making 6/8 Afro-Cuban a very popular groove.

**(Ex. 6) See a video discussion on the 6/8 Afro-Cuban groove.**

**(Ex. 7) See a video performance of 6/8 Afro-Cuban groove on the drumset.**

Note: in the video performance the 6/8 clave is played by the left foot and the use of duple and triple phrasing on the toms.

Listen and study this amazing music! The information provided here is only a snippet of Latin essentials. There are a variety of Latin percussion instruments plus piano and bass rhythmical patterns that are very important to understanding and playing Latin grooves. I encourage you use the Web to seek additional information.

One of the best ways to really absorb this material is to listen and watch. Below, I include a list of suggested listening.

1. Tito Puente

*Goza Mi Timbal* (Concord Picante), *Mambo Diablo* (Concord Picante)

2. Ray Barretto

*Indestructible* (Fania), *Contact* (Blue Note)

3. Celia Cruz and Tito Puente

*Cuba Y Puerto Rico Son* (Fania)

4. Jerry Gonzalez and the Fort Apache Band

*Rumba Para Monk* – (Sunnyside), *Ya Yo Me Cure* – (Pangaea), *Obatala* (Enja)

5. Dizzy Gillespie

*Afro-Cuban Jazz Moods with Machito* (Pablo/Fantasy), *Manteca* (Quintessence)

6. Cal Tjader

*Concert by the Sea* (Fantasy), *Soul Sauce* (Verve)

For comments or questions, please contact me through my website, [www.joemcdrum.com](http://www.joemcdrum.com).

See more in Joe's new DVD, [Joe McCarthy's Afro-Cuban Big Band Play-Along Series](#).