

Section 9 ✦ AFRO-CUBAN JAZZ

THE EVOLUTION OF THE STYLE

If there were ever a “match made in heaven,” it would certainly have to be the union of North American jazz and Afro-Cuban music. They are, in fact, more like cousins, and their grandmother is Africa. The primary difference between the genres dates back to the era of slavery, when Africans in the US—with the exception of New Orleans—were stripped of their drums, while slaves in Cuba (and other countries like Brazil, Haiti and Trinidad) were “allowed” to play them, albeit under harsh circumstances. What evolved over time was a more monorhythmic feeling in American jazz (centered around swing feel), versus a more polyrhythmic one in Cuban music (centered around African-derived patterns such as the *clave*.)

Before the terms “Latin jazz” or “Afro-Cuban jazz” emerged, musicians had been exploring the possibilities of combining the two musical traditions. Dating back to the era of Ragtime, composers such as Scott Joplin incorporated a so-called “Spanish tinge” into their piano rags. We now know, of course, that this was really a “Cuban tinge,” which featured a highly syncopated counterpoint between the hands. In the 1920s, North American listeners and dancers were swaying to the “tropical” sound of Cuban music, and jazz musicians—such as Louis Armstrong—were quick to notice the infatuation.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, New York City became the center of creativity surrounding the blending of jazz and Cuban music, notably through the contributions of Cuban brothers-in-law Mario Bauza and Frank Grillo “Machito.” Their extraordinary combination of Cuban dance rhythms and jazz harmony created the beginning of what we now know today as Afro-Cuban Jazz. Coming from the jazz side of the equation, Dizzy Gillespie was the main proponent of adding a Cuban rhythmic underpinning to what was still unmistakably jazz. By the 1950s, Latin big bands were all the rage, as Machito and his Afro-Cubans, and Puerto Ricans Tito Rodriguez and Tito Puente took New York dancehalls by storm with their torrid performances of *mambos*, *cha-cha-chá's*, *guarachas* and *boleros* (all Cuban dance rhythms).

In the '60s a cooler sound developed as bands downsized, leading to the West Coast's contribution to the genre, with such greats as vibraphonist Cal Tjader and Cuban percussionists Mongo Santamaria, Armando Peraza and Francisco Aguabella. Eventually the term “Latin Jazz” emerged, as more artists explored the rich possibilities of the music, and the audience demographic changed from dance-loving to enthusiastic listeners. Most Latin jazz repertoire tended to be instrumental songs, instead of vocals like its cousin Salsa music, which was better suited to the primarily dance-oriented (and Spanish-speaking) public.

By the 1980s, Latin jazz became a viable commercial form, and many artists found themselves straddling the line between Salsa and Latin jazz. Musicians such as Tito Puente, Ray Barretto and Eddie Palmieri wore two hats in the industry, and as time went on often found more lucrative work in Latin jazz. Today, Latin jazz encompasses many Caribbean and South American rhythms in addition to Cuban ones, including Puerto Rican *bomba* and *plena*, Columbian *cumbia* and numerous rhythmic styles from Brazil (often treated as a separate category from the rest of Latin jazz). Unlike the bebop era, professional jazz musicians today are expected to have the basics of Afro-Cuban jazz under their belts, since many contemporary jazz compositions call for distinct Latin rhythms to be played as the rhythmic foundation of the tune.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE MUSIC

What follows is a short overview of the structure of Afro-Cuban jazz. For a more in-depth look at how this music is created, please see www.shermusic.com for information about our world-class publications “The Salsa Guidebook,” “The True Cuban Bass,” “The Latin Bass Book” and “101 Montunos,” as well as a smoking Afro-Cuban Play-along CD and book entitled “Muy Caliente.”

1. The Rhythm Section - The core Cuban rhythm section includes conga drums, timbales and bongos (the bongo player also plays a cowbell during the main refrain portion of a song, called the *montuno*), along with a variety of hand percussion instruments such as the maracas, claves, guiro and the chékere. In addition to these traditional instruments (or sometimes instead of them), most Latin jazz groups add the trap set for a

fuller and more contemporary sound, and may omit either the timbales and/or the bongos, but must have the congas at the very least. Add to this configuration the bass and piano, and you have the necessary ingredients to play any number of rhythms.

2. The *Clave* - The folkloric and popular Cuban rhythms in Latin jazz contain an essential ingredient: the *clave*. Simultaneously an instrument (known as *claves*), a rhythmical pattern (there are several different *clave* patterns) and a musical guide, the *clave* provides the framework from which all instruments function, and it also affects the shape of the melody. One cannot play this music without a thorough understanding of the *clave* and its relationship to the music! Again, please see Rebeca Mauleón's "The Salsa Guidebook" for a complete discussion of how the *clave* works.

3. The "Feel" - While no one can teach you how to feel music, it is clear that every musical genre has a particular interpretation that must be **felt** by the performer in order for it to sound authentic. In Cuban music, the main pulse or feeling of the rhythm is on beats 1 and 3 (in 4/4 meter). In 6/8 meter, the pulse is felt on the 1 and 4, by dividing the six eighth-notes into two triplets per bar. For many jazz players, it is often challenging to adjust to a downbeat feel (as opposed to the emphasis on 2 & 4 in a swing groove). But given the extremely polyrhythmic and syncopated environment of Afro-Cuban jazz, it ends up being your anchor.

4. The Styles - Any good Latin jazz player must know at least a dozen different rhythmic styles, but the most popular styles incorporated into the genre are the *cha-cha-chá*, the *guajira*, the *mambo* (there are several interpretations), and the Afro-Cuban 6/8 (sometimes called *güiro* or *bembe*). Other rhythms to become familiar with are the *son*, *son-montuno*, *guanguancó*, *conga*, *mozambique*, *bolero*, *guaracha*, *bomba*, *plena*, *merengue*, *bachata*, *cumbia*, *loropo*, *festejo*, and *calypso*—just to name a few!

5. The Role of the Piano and Bass - You can't play Latin jazz without all of the players in the rhythm section contributing their specific parts. Unlike the traditional walking bass in jazz music, the bass in Cuban music plays a repetitive, syncopated pattern called the *tumbao*, which emphasizes the "and" of beat two and the downbeat of beat 4 every measure. While the bass is expected to hold down this rhythm (of which there are many variations, of course), innovations in Latin jazz playing have included techniques from funk as well, with the bass players adding slaps and other percussive elements.

The pianist in a Latin jazz ensemble is free to "comp" through chord changes, as in jazz, but also needs to be able to play within an ostinato context by creating the essential repetitive *montuno* patterns associated with each of the rhythmic styles. There are different montunos for different rhythms, and in traditional Cuban styles most tend to arpeggiate around fairly basic chords. In Latin jazz, however, it is assumed the player will expand the harmony and the voicings, giving the *montunos* a more modern sound.

6. Structure and Form - In traditional Cuban music, the structure of the songs leads up to the most dynamically exciting and improvisational section—the refrain, also called the *montuno*. It is here that the repetitive, call-and-response singing takes place, as well as instrumental solos—this is the part where people dance! While Latin jazz tends not to have this vocal element, there is often still something like a *montuno* section, where the rhythm section plays a highly repetitive groove for the players to improvise on. Another very common component of Latin jazz is the arranging of jazz standards or bebop tunes to have a Latin rhythmic basis. This often involves the transformation of the melody to "fit" it into the *clave* pattern, and then to decide which rhythm or style suits the melody best. The most important change, however, is to convert the rhythmic feel from swing eighths to straight eighths—Cuban rhythms do not use swing feel!

Regardless of your particular instrument, the rhythm is the core of Afro-Cuban jazz and it is essential to learn the drumming and dance styles that form the basis of this extraordinarily rich tradition.