



Interact & Learn

Ethnic Percussion Instruction

Foundations of Afro-Cuban Music: Introduction to Rumba Guaguanco

Rumba celebrates life through singing, dancing and drumming. It is a "festival of sound and movement" created through the unison of different cultures, traditions and art forms. It is a mirror that reflects the social, political, religious, and economic conditions surrounding those who create, play, and dance rumba. Rumba evolved from many different musical influences, emerging as a mixture of Afro-Cuban traditions and a diverse, rapidly changing, and extremely expressive culture. It has, and continues to have, a dramatic impact on music today, and is especially recognizable in the extremely popular offshoot known as *salsa*.

There are three main types of rumba that dominate today - *yambu*, *guaguanco*, and *columbia*. Each descended from the ancestral music and dance brought to Cuba from Africa. While each form of rumba carries certain uniquely defining characteristics, they all share a common foundation in format:

- Specific drumming patterns and instrumentation
- Special songs and song forms
- A great deal of improvisation

Rumba Yambu is a couples dance and is by far the slowest of the three. A dance of pure seduction, there is no *vacunao* in Rumba Yambu. Rumba Columbia is the fastest of the three types and is typically danced by male soloists who display their style, creativity, and rhythmic prowess in competition with the other dancers.

Rumba Guaguanco is also danced by couples and is characterized by its extremely risqué sensual content. Sometimes its movements are compared to those of a rooster courting a hen. The man relentlessly pursues the woman, strutting around with his chest poked out as if he were puffing out feathers. The woman pretends she is disinterested at first, but is eventually attracted to the man and permits him to get close. In essence, he attempts to consummate the courtship by thrusting his hand, foot, or pelvis towards the woman in the gesture known as the *vacunao*. The woman attempts to resist the *vacunao* by covering her pelvic area while maintaining the rhythm and flow of the dance. If he succeeds without being blocked, *he* is the better dancer. If she succeeds in eluding him, *she* is the better dancer!

Rumba is played on a variety of instruments that create a mosaic landscape of rhythm and sound. Initially, these instruments were very rudimentary, with such items as boxes, crates, or upside-down drawers used to make drumming sounds. In fact, some of the oldest and most revered rumbas are called *box* or *cajon* rumbas. In contemporary rumbas, congas are more popular, but the *cajon* is still used. Sticks and shakers are also used to complete the rumba ensemble. All these instruments are held together by the most fundamental rule of Cuban music and dance - *clave*.

The *clave* rhythm, played with two wooden sticks, is the pulse of rumba. It sets the tempo, mood, and even the type of rumba to be danced. It is the metronome by which all the other rumba rhythms are metered.

Before we get into the "meat and potatoes" of *guaguanco*, let's quickly review the notation I use to illustrate rhythmic patterns and, while we're at it, reacquaint ourselves with two of the rhythmic patterns that are the foundation of rumba - *clave* and *palitos*.

Reading the Rhythmic Notation: There are several steps you must follow when learning each of the rhythmic parts presented in the remaining section of this lesson. These simple steps will allow you to quickly and easily move from reading a rhythmic part in the matrix to actually playing the part correctly.

Step One: Use your voice to form a "click track" that represents the rhythmic pattern you will be learning. Say "tick" (or "tock," or whatever word you're comfortable with) for each box in the matrix. Follow the boxes from left to right with your finger as you say each "tick."



Rhythmic Matrix	1	e	+	a	2	e	+	a	3	e	+	a	4	e	+	a
"Click Track"	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#
	Follow each box from left to right with your finger as you make a tick or tock sound to form a vocal click track.															

Step Two: Modify your click track to correspond to the rhythmic part presented. As your finger moves across the line, verbally emphasize the boxes with the tone/stroke symbols in them.

Rhythmic Matrix	1	e	+	a	2	e	+	a	3	e	+	a	4	e	+	a
Tone/Stroke	T		T	B	T		T	S	O		T	T	T		T	T
"Click Track"	#		#	#	#		#	#	#		#	#	#		#	#
	Emphasize only these points in your vocal click track.															

Step Three: Start replacing the tick sounds you're emphasizing in the click track with your own vocalized interpretations of drum sounds (sound vocabulary). You should now be getting a sense of how the rhythm flows and sounds when it is actually played. Remember, *if you can't say it, you can't play it!*

Rhythmic Matrix	1	e	+	a	2	e	+	a	3	e	+	a	4	e	+	a
Tone/Stroke	T		T	B	T		T	S	O		T	T	T		T	T
Sound Vocabulary	ti		ti	hm	ti		ti	at	oun		ti	ti	ti		ti	ti
	Replace the click track "tick" sounds with the sounds from your "drum sound vocabulary" to create a vocal sense of the entire rhythm.															

Step Four: Finally, start converting the sound of the rhythm into its actual mechanics by playing the tones and strokes represented in the matrix on your conga. As you begin using the correct hand position, the rhythm will come alive. Once you get the hang of it, this will be your best method for acquiring all new rhythmic information in the remainder of this lesson.

Rhythmic Matrix	1	e	+	a	2	e	+	a	3	e	+	a	4	e	+	a
Tone/Stroke	T		T	B	T		T	S	O		T	T	T		T	T
Hand Position	L		R	L	R		L	R	L		R	L	R		L	R

The Drum Strokes: The individual drum strokes or tones to be played in a particular rhythm are represented in the matrix with the following symbols:

- **B** - Bass tone
- **M** - Muted or press tone
- **O** - Open tone
- **S** - Slap tone
- **T** - Touch stroke (more time-keeping than anything else)
- **H/P** - Heel/Tip stroke; the "H" indicates the heel portion and the "P" indicates the tip portion of the stroke
- **U** - Tilt shekere up
- **D** - Tilt shekere down

Bombo	B			O		[B]		[B]		[B]		[B]				
Hand Position	L			R		L		L		L		L				
Tumba	B			B	[B]		O	B	B			B	B		O	B
Hand Position	R			L	R		R	L	R			L	R		R	L
Segundo	T		T	B	T		T	S	O		T	T	T		T	T
Hand Position	L		R	L	R		L	R	L		R	L	R		L	R

The Lead Drum - Quinto: The role of the quinto drum is to mark and accentuate the male dancer's steps and movements through highly improvised playing. When there is no dancing, the quinto player tries to weave phrases in and around the singer's voice, embellishing it with rhythm. These improvisations get more and more energetic and aggressive during the course of the rumba and reach a peak during the danced portions. The quinto player's challenge is to stretch the rhythm within its boundaries without destroying the flow of the music.

Quinto Basic Ride: Use the matrix below to learn the basic ride for the quinto. As you progress, eliminate the touch strokes that are used in the basic ride just to maintain a consistent pace.

	1	e	+	a	2	e	+	a	3	e	+	a	4	e	+	a
Clave	X			X				X		X		X	X			
Basic Ride	T	M	T	T	T	T	T	M	T	T	T	M	T	T	T	T
Hand Position	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R

Modified Quinto Pattern: The simple quinto pattern shown below expands on the quinto basic ride by replacing the muted tones shown in the previous matrix with the appropriate quinto drum strokes. The touch strokes have also been eliminated. Notice that this pattern spans two clave phrases, not just one. It begins with the "question" (or "call") portion, followed by the "answer" (or "response") portion.

	1	e	+	a	2	e	+	a	3	e	+	a	4	e	+	a
Clave	X			X				X		X		X	X			
Question		O						S				O				
Answer		S						O				S				

[Arturo Rodriguez](#) is a percussionist, author and clinician. He is the author of *Rumba Guaguanco Conversations*, *Bembe Conversations*, and *Traditional Afro-Cuban Concepts in Contemporary Music* (Mel Bay Publications), as well as a series of ethnic percussion "mini-courses" available through his company, [Interact and Learn](#). He regularly conducts lessons, workshops, and clinics in the Pacific Northwest, is an annual presenter at the World Rhythm Festival in Seattle, Washington, and holds classes each semester for the University of Washington's ASUW Experimental College.