

Rhythmic Styles and Structures

THE RHYTHMS OF SALSA

Throughout the development of salsa, the *son* and *rumba* have served as vehicles through which many rhythmic styles have been created, combining with several religious styles of drumming and rhythms.

The Four Cornerstones of Afro-Cuban Rhythm

There are four Afro-Cuban forms of secular music which serve as precursors to today's popular rhythmic styles. These are: *son*, *rumba*, *danzón* and *canción*.

Son serves as the root of numerous contemporary forms, and can be described as the popular dance music of the peasant or working-class. It combines Spanish lyricism and string instruments with African-derived instruments and African rhythms and harmonies. This form began to take shape during the latter half of the 19th Century in the *Oriente* province of Cuba, as slavery neared its end, and the mixing of Black and Spanish cultures accelerated. An early form of the *son* - called *changüí* - serves as a precursor to contemporary *son*, and is characterized by the unique combination of African and European instrumentation. Through the *son*, numerous styles were incorporated into mainstream popular Cuban music, giving birth to such hybrids as: *afro-son*, *guajira-son*, *rumba-son*, *son-montuno* and *son-pregón*, to name a few. What distinguishes these various styles ranges from styles of instrumentation to specific lyric or dance styles, rhythmic phrases and patterns, or tempo. Much of the credit for the creation of these hybrids must be given to Cuban composer/bassist Ignacio Piñeiro, who is perhaps the most important pioneer of the Cuban *son*.

The lyric form of the *son* typically contains the *décima* - a ten-line, octosyllabic verse - which may be alternated with a refrain. Following this structure is the *estribillo* (refrain), which is then repeated in call-and-response fashion with a lead vocal improvisation (*coro-pregón*), in a section known as the *montuno*. The *son* is characterized by a layering of three basic, independent rhythmic figures. Traditionally, the instrumentation consists of a combination of African-derived instruments, such as *bongos*, *maracas*, *güiro* and *claves* (percussion); the *marímbula* and/or the *botija* (to provide the bassline), and Spanish-derived string instruments - in particular the guitar - and the signature instrument of the *son*, the Cuban *tres*. The contrabass became the standard replacement for the *marímbula* and *botija* around 1920.

The *son* is characterized by the constant juxtaposition of three independent rhythmic patterns all working together in a highly dynamic and syncopated mechanism. Generally speaking, the three principal parts are (bottom to top): 1) the syncopated (anticipated) bassline, or *tumbao*; 2) the rhythm guitar, the bongos - the bongo part is referred to as *martillo* - and the maracas; and 3) the *clave*. Each polyrhythmic part maintains a specific relationship with the other, and with the *clave*. The following transcription demonstrates the general structure of the *son*. Note that it is written in 2/4 meter, the traditional notation. (fig. 5.0):

5.0 Son Structure

The musical notation consists of three staves in 2/4 time. The top staff, labeled 'clave', shows a rhythmic pattern of two eighth notes followed by a quarter rest, then a quarter note, and a final quarter rest. The middle staff, labeled 'g/b/m', shows a continuous eighth-note pattern. The bottom staff, labeled 'bass', shows a syncopated bassline with eighth and quarter notes.



Yambú dancers, Conjunto Folklórico Nacional, Havana, 1990. Courtesy Nancy Berglass.