

the
Conga Drummer's
G U I D E B O O K

by
Michael Spiro

with Josh Ryan

Publisher and Editor - Chuck Sher
Graphic Design - Attila Nagy
Cover Photo - Scott Chernis

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ISBN 1-883217-43-1

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Preface: Why I've Written This Book

I've spent the last 30 years trying to learn how to play the conga drum. Some days I think I've had some success at this endeavor, and other days I feel pretty frustrated. But we know this to be true of all artistic paths. We soon realize that you never "get there" as a musician, and that it is truly a life-long study. So then we can hopefully calm down a little and start to peck away each day at the process, as we try to improve and gain further insight into the act of making music. I consider myself a journeyman musician in that sense—I'm not a genius, or some "super talented" drummer, just a guy who has studied hard, practiced diligently, traveled widely to learn from some great masters, and tried to digest and figure out what I've heard and been exposed to. For genius, you need to go to Changuito, Cha-Cha, Jesus Alfonso, Giovanni Hidalgo, and so forth. But I take great pride in being a good craftsman, and in the skills I have acquired over all these years. I feel competent to cover the gig in a variety of settings and contexts, and perhaps because of that, many people over the years have asked me "When are you going to write your book?" Up to now my answer has always been, "When I learn how to play---there's not enough time in the day to practice and write!"

But for some reason, this year I finally decided to sit down and try to put my thoughts about drumming to paper. Now music is an emotional, creative experience, not an intellectual pursuit. However I do think I have some insights that can be valuable, particularly to people like myself who were born in North America, but nonetheless have chosen to study the music of the African diaspora in the Western Hemisphere. It has always been interesting to me that sometimes the person most capable of analyzing and explaining a musical tradition is the person from outside the tradition, not the "maestros" themselves. Cuban or Brazilian drummers don't have to analyze what is going on musically—they were born into the tradition, and learned it as a child right along with the language of their culture. But the outsider has to actually sit down and try to figure out what is going on—where is the beat, how does that phrase work, where is "the one," etc. etc.

Please do not misunderstand me—I am not suggesting that my teachers Regino Jimenez and Jorge Alabe cannot teach their traditions with brilliance and insight. But because they never really had to analyze such things as phrasing within clave, playing with a certain feel, and so forth, they sometimes can only wonder themselves why North Americans usually play "with an accent." I am always reminded of the evening several years ago when my advanced students had a workshop at my house with the great Pancho Quinto, and asked him how he learned to play his rumba so brilliantly. They expected of course a long discourse on technique, concept, phrasing and so forth. Instead, his only response was—"You have to play from your heart!" I still chuckle to myself when I think of that moment, as it so poignantly represented the difficulties we as North Americans have in trying to learn, let alone master, the musics of Cuba, Brazil, Haiti, and so on.

In any case, I would like to think that after all my years of studying, playing, and hanging out with great players and masters, I have figured out a few things to share with my fellow students.

This book contains a little bit of everything, in that it consists of some technical exercises, some patterns, some concepts, and some philosophy. As such, it could almost be considered a journal, rather than a method book, and it is indeed my hope that it will inform drummers and musicians in general, not just conga players. That being said, you should be aware that the chapters are not necessarily ordered from beginning to advanced, and although you may find certain sections very simple and elementary, others may be difficult and complex. So you may decide that only certain chapters are of value to you.

Finally, I readily admit that some of the concepts and explanations in this book are extremely technical, even "intellectual" in nature. It is not easy to "explain" music with words, and you may have to read a section more than once to follow my thoughts. Nevertheless, it is what I humbly offer to others who are also on this wonderful path, trying to figure out "what in the world is going on." I sure hope it helps!

Michael Spiro
April, 2005

Getting Started

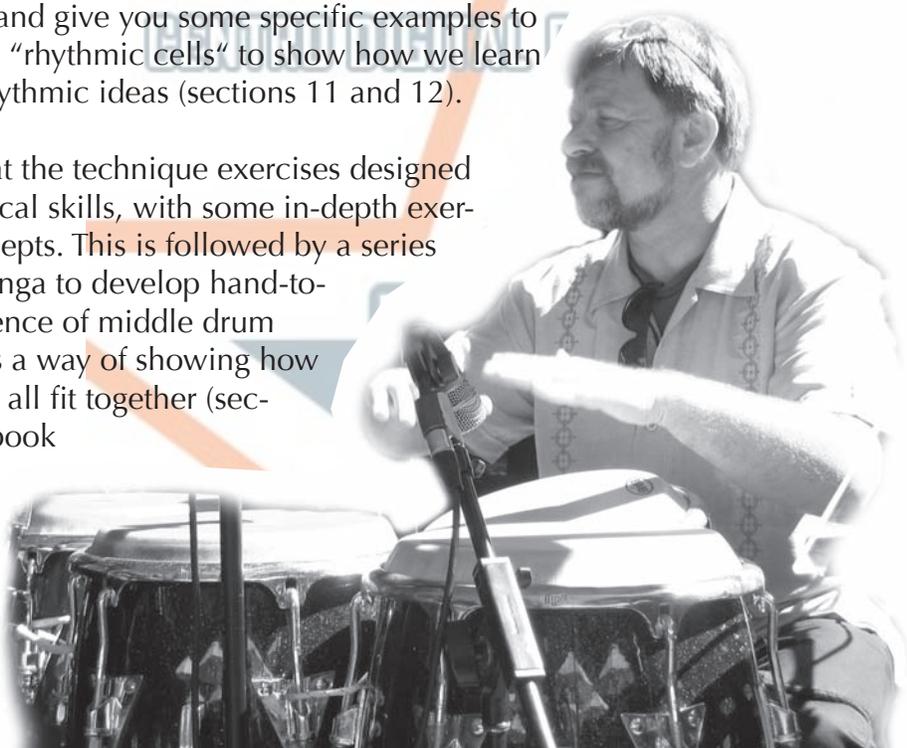
The purpose of this book is to teach you **how** to play Afro-centric music, in addition to giving you some specifics about what to play. There are many method books that can show you the particular parts to rhythms from all over the Americas. But my experience is that if we don't learn the concepts behind the music, we will never be able to play what we "know" with a good feel, or with "swing" if you will. We pretty much end up playing by rote what we learned from a book or a video, but once we've played that specific material, we really aren't a better player than when we started. The goal of this text is to help you learn how to swing when you play this music, and to learn how to **feel** it "correctly," so that you can improve your expression in addition to your knowledge. This will not only make you sound better overall, but make it much easier for you to learn new rhythms in the future. Please don't misunderstand me—method books are wonderful, and there are indeed many exercises in this book which are designed to improve your technical playing and skills. But the overall goal here is to improve your understanding as much as your physical capability.

As such, the book is laid out so that I first make sure you understand the concept and function of clave, since it is the foundation of everything that we do. Sections 6 and 7 take you through phrasing ideas—how we understand and construct musical phrases in this music. Then we'll apply those ideas to some specific examples in section 8. In section 9, I talk about ways to understand the Afro-centric concepts of subdivision, and the way of playing the subdivisions so that they swing differently than in Western music. And since so much of Afro-centric music is based on a triplet feel, section 10 explores in depth much of the music in 12/8 time.

I then show you how our choices and changes of melodic strokes can dramatically affect how the music sounds and feels, and give you some specific examples to work from, using some basic "rhythmic cells" to show how we learn to create and develop our rhythmic ideas (sections 11 and 12).

In sections 13-18 we arrive at the technique exercises designed to improve your actual physical skills, with some in-depth exercises, explanations and concepts. This is followed by a series of samba parts put on the conga to develop hand-to-hand technique, and a sequence of middle drum parts to rumba guaguanco as a way of showing how the techniques and concepts all fit together (section 19). Finally, I close the book with a small section exploring the use of flams as a way to open your mind to new ways of creating ideas (section 20).

Photo by Remi Spiro.



Clave: The Key to Afro-Centric Music

Although this is not a text specifically about Cuban music, you cannot write about conga drumming without talking about the Cuban concept of clave. And even though at this point most drummers have at least some awareness of its importance, it can't hurt to review. In *Timbafunk* (Warner Bros, 1999) which I co-authored with fellow Talking Drums members Jesus Diaz and David Garibaldi, we wrote:

“The clave comes to the Americas (including the United States) from Africa. It is the ‘key’ that determines how the complex rhythms and syncopations of African-based music are to be assembled, arranged, performed, and even improvised. Learning to hear clave takes many patient hours and can be a confusing concept to those who didn’t grow up with it, but it is **not** a mystery.” (page 66)

DEFINITIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

Of course, clave is the name of an instrument. More importantly however, it is a rhythm which can be played with sticks, bells, and/or handclaps. There are two claves, “Son” and “Rumba.”

EXAMPLE 1

Son clave

side: 3 2

Rumba clave

side: 3 2

Why are there two different claves? Because traditionally son clave was the choice for popular Latin dance music, and rumba clave was played in the Afro-Cuban folkloric styles. As you can see, they are very similar, but they do indeed sound and feel very different. Moving the third note a half-beat later makes rumba clave more syncopated, and thus it feels “funkier” (though more difficult for most of us to play!). Since the folkloric styles are rooted in the African music brought to Cuba during the slave trade of the 19th century, the rumba clave fits them better, as the music is much more syncopated than traditional Son and Salsa. These days however, there has been so much interaction between the popular and folkloric styles that there are times where the choice of clave changes even within a single piece of music.

In either case, in order to communicate with each other when writing, arranging and playing music, Cuban musicians have actually “named” the two bars—the bar with three notes in it is called the “three side,” and the bar with two notes in it is the “two side.”

Though it may seem obvious, be clear that the definition is based on how the notes are