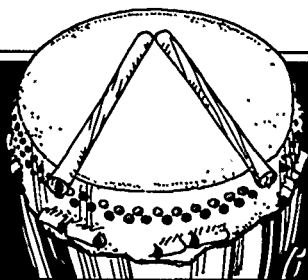


Ethnic Percussion

Norbert Goldberg, editor



The Bongos

by Norbert Goldberg

The typical Latin percussion section is made up of three instruments, the congas, bongos, and timbales. Each of these plays a specific and distinct role in creating the rhythmic texture which is associated with Latin music. The unfamiliar listener might have difficulty in differentiating one instrument from the other, perceiving the overall sound as an entity or conglomeration. As musicians and especially as percussionists, we tend to examine each instrument and listen to its individual characteristics. Yet, that is not an easy task in Latin music, particularly in the percussion, where parts are tightly interwoven and the sounds not easily distinguishable. The bongos in particular, play a subtle yet important role in the percussion section, and in Latin music as a whole. By examining their function and playing technique, we can learn more about this instrument and gain further insight into Latin rhythms.

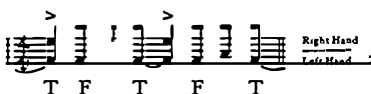
Many people think of the bongos as an instrument that can be played by virtually anyone with a good sense of rhythm. Even as percussionists we have usually been called to play them with sticks or hands in a manner that requires no more technique than playing a tom-tom. In Latin music, however, the *bongosero* must be a highly skilled musician thoroughly familiar with the music and his instrument's capabilities. This is especially true in light of the fact that he has the most rhythmic freedom in the percussion section, providing an improvised counterpoint of syncopated accents and flourishes within the music's framework.

The bongos are held between the legs, slightly above the knees. The drums are tilted downwards with the smaller drum on the left. Generally, the fingertips of the forefinger and middle finger are used to strike the drums near the edge. The hands are thrown in a relaxed manner; the arms remain on or close to the thighs.

The basic timekeeping pattern of the bongos is called the *martillo*, translated as

hammer. It is comprised of five different sounds in an eighth note figure. The left hand remains on the small drum and fills in the rhythm of the right by alternating the thumb and fingers with a sideways rocking motion. The right hand accents the first and third beat on the high drum and corresponds with the left thumb remaining on the head, thereby producing a muffled, dry sound. Open sounds are played on the two and four, on the high and low drum respectively.

T = Thumb
F = Fingers Martillo Low Drum



Note: leave thumb on drum for duration of note.

The martillo serves as a vehicle for the more elaborate accents and embellishments that are a trademark of the bongos. For these, the *bongosero* draws from a variety of sounds and effects which are part of his vocabulary. Interestingly, male and female characteristics are attributed to the bongos. The high drum, where most of the accents are played, is the *macho*, or male, and the low drum, the *hembra*, or female. For the accents, the left hand strikes the edge of the tightly tuned high drum creating a popping sound that can cut through with piercing accuracy. Since there are two drums, a dialogue can be implied, whereby a riff played on one drum is repeated or elaborated on the other.

The correlation between the bongos' accents and figures and the melodic line is very important. In order to be most effective the accents and figures must enhance the melody, not obscure it. Equally important, if not more so, is their adherence to the rhythmic key of the song, the *clave*. Since the *clave* is a two-bar phrase, most figures will begin on the first bar and stay within that structure.

At certain points within the song the bongo player switches to a large cowbell

and plays a rhythm that emphasizes the pulse and outlines the *clave*. One section is called *montuno* and is characterized by a repeated choral refrain alternating with solo vocal improvisation. Another, called *mambo*, has repeated brass figures, which can provide a backdrop for an instrumental solo. The cowbell is held in the palm of the hand with the mouth facing upward and is struck with a short, thick beater. In the following example, notice the connection of the cowbell pattern to the *clave*.

Cowbell Pattern



(Reverse for 3-2 clave)

The following is a transcription of a typical bongo part, including the cowbell section. Ideally it should be followed with the music so as to better understand the placement of the accents within the melody. However, much can be learned by analyzing the thematic development and the rhythmic figures alone.

BONGOS: PHIL NEWSUM
CLAVE [2 + 3]

MI GUAGUANCO

from "HEAVY SMOKIN'" Album

CHART BY
DAVE YEE

The musical score consists of ten staves. The first nine staves are for the BONGOS, starting with a 'PLAY 4' instruction. The tenth staff is for the COWBELI, starting with a 'PLAY 16' instruction. The score includes various rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes. The COWBELI part features a series of 'x' marks representing strikes. The BONGOS part includes a 'PLAY 16' instruction and a '4' time signature.

MAIN ARTIST/GROUP:
LARRY HARLOW BAND

RECORD LABEL: FANIA #331

Special thanks are owed to Luis Bauzó of *Boy's Harbor* and Dave Yee, for his transcription.



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