

# **A Newbie's Introduction to Conga Drums**

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## **A labor of love!**

The following book has been a labor of love. Its purpose is to help conga drum beginners get started drumming rather than to make money by sales of this book. Therefore, fair use is permitted for conga players to download a free copy for student or research uses. However, commercial use requires permission of author. Commercial applications ARE encouraged! The author can be contacted at the email address listed on the cover page or at the snail-mail address below.

While the purpose of this little work was not as a money making project, this book can be considered as "shareware". If you find this work to be of some value, a donation of a few bucks stuffed in an envelope and mailed to :

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will insure my continued interest in these projects and will help provide motivation to continue the series. A djembe book has already been started. I hope that not only beginning hand-drummers, but also teachers and hand-drummers at all levels might find something of value within this little book.

Additional copies of this book in the form of a .pdf file can be downloaded from my website: [www.iwaynet.net/~bjacoby](http://www.iwaynet.net/~bjacoby). To download simply click on the file name: conganet.pdf found under the titles on the first page and proceed as usual.

Enjoy!

# A Newbie's Introduction to Conga Drums

## PREFACE

The following is a collection of information and miscellaneous lore that the author has collected from a variety of teachers and sources including "being shown a thing or two" by a couple of authentic Cuban players. However, not being Latino nor raised in the traditions, no claim is made for the authenticity of the information. This is especially true for folkloric traditions since the author's interests tend toward modern Latin dance music.

## DEDICATION AND DUTY

The author wishes to dedicate this little work to master drummer and teacher Tony West without whom none of this would have been possible. As my teacher and a drum teacher to our community Tony chose to pass on freely the knowledge and skills that others had passed on to him. Music is not a static thing. As you read these pages it will become apparent that music and drumming grows and advances with each generation of drummers. But there are also traditions worth preserving that should be passed on unchanged.

Many reading this may be at present just starting into drumming and music. But as you learn and advance, one day the time will come when it will be your duty to pass on freely to other beginners the very things which have been passed on to you. Do not forget those of us who shared with you so that you might share with them. Remember what you owe to those who brought you to where you are, and pay it back not to them, but rather pay it forward into the next generation. So be it.

## THE DRUMS.

The even rhythm of the Cuban tumbao along with a singing open tone to many nearly defines what are commonly known in English as "conga" drums. In Spanish the name is pronounced KOHN-ga. A conga is a group dance of African roots popular in many Latin American countries. The rhythm for the dance is also called conga and is commonly played and danced during Carnival (Spanish, *Carnaval*). We will discuss patterns later.

The drums played with the dance are commonly referred to as "conga" drums but the actual name for the drums in Spanish is "tumbadora" (toom-bah-DOR-ah). In English we usually just use the term "conga drums". The drums are constructed in various sizes.

In English, conga drum sizes are usually referred to as "tumba" (TOOM-bah) for the largest, "conga" for the middle size and "quinto" (KEEN-toe) for the smallest. You sometimes find an even smaller solo drum referred to as a "requinto" and the smallest conga of all is called a "Ricardo" conga which is about ashiko size and played to the player's side suspended from a shoulder strap. It was popularized in the band of Desi Arnaz in the 50s from which it more or less gets its name. In Cuban tradition, drums are often named for the patterns they commonly play. Thus, a tumba is often referred to as a "tumbao" (from which the name tumba comes) or in a rumba setting, the same drum might be called a "salidor".

While the original African drums from which modern conga drums are descended were rope-tuned, modern conga drums are virtually all tuned with metal hardware. An iron or steel rim tensioned with a set of bolts is the standard configuration. Rims come in a number of styles. The earliest Cuban congas used a flat metal hoop with hooks over top of the rim connected to bolts to tension the drumhead. Since these hooks were often hard on the hands, later drums riveted or welded the bolt loops below the rim. Modern top-of-the-line drums use a smooth rounded hoop sometimes called a "comfort" or "easy play" rim. When congas are played correctly, the hand really does not strike the metal rim. Slaps etc., are performed with the hand striking the rounded edge of the head, but it is a common fault for hoop-style rims to be too high on the drum. These drums will hurt your hands. If your drum hoop is riding too high on the drum, you will need to get help to

dampen and stretch the head such that the hoop is pulled lower into the correct position. "Comfort" rims solve this problem. Modern drums are sold with hoop and "comfort" rims.

The body or shells of modern conga drums are usually made of wood or fiberglass. While there is at least one company carving conga drums out of solid logs, most wooden congas are built with a stave construction. Wood congas have a wonderful mellow tone that most players prefer. Fiberglass congas are said to be "louder", but generally, it's not so much that they are louder, but rather that they have a "brighter" sound. Rock players often prefer that sound because it "cuts through the mix" better. Also wood drums tend to crack or be damaged easily. Fiberglass congas are nearly indestructible and therefore the first choice of road players or situations where the drums might be subjected to a lot of abuse. A clever solution to this compromise was provided by the California maker of Gon Bops congas. They coated the outside of standard wood congas with a layer of fiberglass to provide both the tone of wood and the durability fiberglass.

Modern conga drum heads are now available in both traditional animal skin and plastic. The usual animal skin used is cowhide. Imported drums are often found with Asian water buffalo hides and the best heads are said to be mule skin, but it is expensive and hard to find. Animal skin drumheads are raw hide and are NOT tanned like ordinary leather. For this reason they are hard and brittle and must be dampened to soften them whenever they need to be shaped or fitted. Modern plastic heads are shaped by machine and need only to be installed, but they are only made in a limited number of sizes and may not come in a size to fit your drum.

Plastic heads usually sound better than the worst hide heads but never as good as the best animal-skin heads. The principal advantage of plastic heads is that the drum tuning does not change with temperature or weather. Once while playing outdoors in the sun with a plastic head on the conga drum and a traditional hide head on the tumba drum, over the course of an hour the pitch of the hide head on the tumba rose four full notes until it matched the conga! The plastic conga head had not changed in pitch. "What's that sound? Why it's my drums tuning themselves!" Therefore, plastic is usually a good choice for outdoor playing, while natural heads typically give a superior sound for studio or other controlled indoor situations.

## **GETTING STARTED.**

You've just purchased your first conga drum(s) and you are really excited about it! And that's OK because playing conga drums IS exciting! There are two ways to play conga drums. One is from a seated position and the other is standing. It is typical for a percussionist who plays a number of other drums and instruments to have the drums on stands so that they can be played in a standing position. This allows the player more freedom to move about from instrument to instrument. Musicians, who on a given gig (playing job) will only be playing congas, often choose to play seated. The standard arrangement is to have the conga sized drum between your legs with the tumba to your right and the quinto to your left side. Left-handed players sometimes reverse these positions. Since the quinto is a high pitched, loud, solo drum, sometimes players put the quinto in the center when they are doing a piece emphasizing solo work rather than rhythmic support. It can help your tone if the quinto and tumba drums are placed on low stands that elevate them an inch or so off the floor. LP sells rubber conga feet that work for this purpose. You don't want feet on the center drum, which is between your legs, because you want to be able to get the three basic bass tones from it by tilting and lifting.

Generally speaking, when playing, the center conga drum resides in a slightly tilted position. This gives a nice bass tone. The player can tilt the drum to the left or right or forward or backward. Many players prefer to sit with the drum tilted toward their right side, but each player has their own preference. I prefer to tilt slightly forward and to my right side because I find that this keeps my wrists straighter as I play the drum. Another good way is to tilt the drum forward or slightly forward and to the side with a 4ft cloth-covered elastic bungee cord of the type used to tie luggage around your waist and hooked to the drum's tuning bolts. This helps stabilize a tilted drum in addition to the

stability provided by your legs, especially when reaching to play notes on the other two drums.

Posture is extremely important when playing hand-drums! DO NOT SLOUCH! Sit tall on the edge of your seat and be sure to DROP YOUR SHOULDERS! This will insure a good tone and easier playing. While one can play a drum like a djembe seated on an ordinary chair, I find that, for me, a conga really needs to be played seated slightly higher. Of course it depends upon your body size, but one woman conga player I know always sits on two stackable chairs stacked up. My advice is to spend a bit more money and buy a cheap drum throne. These seats are designed to be relatively comfortable (important for long playing sessions!) and can easily be adjusted to the height YOU find most comfortable. Another advantage of a drum throne is that without a backrest it keeps you from leaning back in your chair. You should NEVER play that way! The Conga player should never slump when playing, but rather sit tall and at the ready so as to allow the energies of the Earth to flow up into your body and then out your arms into the drums! Now that you are properly seated in front of your drum(s) you are ready to start playing the various drum sounds.

To get proper sounds out of your drums you must first RELAX. You must relax your mind as well as you body! Most beginners when attempting to play a loud bass note will tense the whole body doing it. This is not only wastes energy and is tiring, but also slows you down. Practice relaxing your whole body while seated with good posture in front of your drums. Now try to play a bass note as loudly as you can BUT without tensing your body at all! I know we just told you to sit tall at the ready and not to slump and here we tell you to relax! But strangely, BOTH are true and must happen at once. Like a martial artist the drummer must be ready at any time to strike a full power blow from a state of apparent relaxed readiness. This is a VERY important exercise for the hand-drummer!

### **THE VARIOUS DRUM SOUNDS.**

The expressiveness of hand-drums comes from the ability to get a wide variety of sounds according to the manner in which the hands strike the head. The following is no substitute for being shown how to get the various sounds from someone who knows how, but may give the beginner a hint on to how to proceed. However, every person is different and the true test of any drum "note" is the sound you get out of the drum. If the note sounds great, you are doing it "right" no matter what anyone says. If you hear some other player getting a great tone that you don't, perhaps you'd better ask how he/she is doing it! The ability to call up the various drum sounds (notes) at will in a pattern is called "tone separation".

**Important note to beginners:** While a beginner has no way of knowing which conga sounds are the most common, they should understand that the open tone, bass note and the closed conga slap constitute the great bulk of conga playing. Also of great importance is the Cuban heel-toe playing. The other notes tend to be simply accents or variations which are used from time to time, but are not of as great fundamental importance. Begin to play the conga drums by concentrating on bass, open tone, closed slap and heel-toe. You must work to reach the point where any of the three basic tones can be inserted into any place in a rhythm at will and your heel-toe sound is fast, even and controlled. You want to be able to easily insert heel-toe moves into any blank places in any rhythm. All the rest is just icing on the cake and is included here simply to provide a reference.

**Bass Note:** The bass note is the lowest pitched sound you can get from any given drum. The basic move is simulated by having the hand and arm held out and then allowing the hand to fall onto the drumhead. It is the palm of the hand that produces the most bass so that is most important. Some people teach that the whole hand should fall onto the head but a Cuban player told me that he prefers to slightly flex the hand backwards ("as if controlling a, how you say, marionette"). Actually BOTH techniques are "correct", but we have divided them with two names:

Bass for the "palm" stoke and "palm" for the whole hand stoke. Yes, we know that "palm" seems to be named backwards since it uses the whole hand while a "bass" note uses mainly the palm of the hand, but this is the traditional name for the stoke. In the "bass" stroke only the palm tends to produce a nice round low note with the fingers perhaps touching but not actually hitting the drumhead. One tends to flex the hand backward to avoid the sharper sounds from the fingers. In any case, a conga head is quite strong and thick so that the bass note continues to vibrate even though the hand stays on the head after the strike. This is unlike a thin-headed djembe, for example, where the hand must immediately be lifted or the note is damped out. Since the hand in conga playing is not immediately lifted except in the case of open tones, it is commonly said that one plays "into" a conga drum head. Playing "into" the conga head is very important in bass tones. To obtain strong vibrant bass tones, the hand doesn't just "fall" on to the drumhead as is the basic idea for any drum, but for a conga the hand is literally "forced" into the head. As the student gets more experience, hopefully it will become apparent what is meant here. Getting great bass notes from a conga drum is tricky and takes considerable practice!

**"Palm" Note:** In observing Latin conga players, or in reading instruction books on conga playing, the student may encounter a variation of the bass note we (and some other books) call a "palm". Some books refer to this note as a "bass note" which is true to a degree but it is not the same note we have called the bass note above. It is, in fact, a variation of a bass note designed to give a sharper more slap-like sound. In the Palm, one flexes the fingers slightly forward and pulls the thumb in so that it's tip actually touches the first finger. This makes the hand like a dome with the knuckles sticking up. Your thumb, the finger tips and all the edges of the hand touch the drumhead. You play this note by thinking of "digging" your hand into the drumhead. This note uses more wrist action than the bass note above. The addition of fingers to the bass note above gives a bass note with sharper, "slappier" edge to it. The more wrist action you use the more of the "slap" or "touch" sound you get with the bass note. By controlling your wrist and flex of your fingers you can change the sound from a complete bass, all the way to nothing but a fingers "touch". This gives great expressive potential. The "palm" is a common note when emphasis is needed. One common use is for the note following the open tone used to kick off a tumbao. The palm gives greater force than a simple "bass", "heel" or "touch" note. The student should be aware that some players always use a "palm" note instead of a "bass" but still call it a "bass note". In our view both "palm" and "bass" are variations of a single note. You should practice controlling the sound of your "bass notes" by practicing varying the sound all the way from the pure deep tone of "bass" up through the sharper "palm" and finally all the way to "touch" which is not a bass note at all!

**Tilting and Lifting:** It is most important for the player to understand that the shell of the conga drum forms a low frequency resonant chamber. In physics this particular device is known as a Helmholtz resonator. [Although the principle was actually discovered and applied in the construction of djembe drums in the Mali Empire of Africa long before Herr Doktor Helmholtz came on the scene] Because of this structure, the hole in the bottom of the conga drum, which is an essential part of the resonator, must not be obstructed or the drum will not produce a full rich bass tone. Conga players often recognize three separate bass tones. The first is where the drum is flat on the floor and the hole actually is obstructed. This note tends to sound flat and weak without deep bass. The second is where the drum is tilted slightly either to a side or forward or backward which opens up the bottom hole of the drum slightly. Since the hole is open but partially blocked, this note is deeper in pitch but somewhat softer than the third note where the hole is unobstructed. The second mode is the standard conga bass note when playing seated. For the third bass note the player uses his/her legs to lift the drum completely off the floor providing a totally open resonator hole. This produces the loudest bass note. This is the bass note the drum sounds when conga stands are used. We should also mention that the conga shell also forms a high frequency echo

chamber, which modifies the character of open tones, slaps and other notes, but is not much of an issue with bass tones. The shell acoustic properties do however, affect the general sound of the drum such as providing the different sound between wood and fiberglass shells.

It might be mentioned that lifting modern conga drums with your legs can be something of a trick. The problem is that Americans love to make instruments all glossy and shiny! If you examine older authentic Cuban congas you will observe that not only are they a somewhat smaller diameter, but also are crappy looking and rough on the outside side as well. However, these features do make them much easier to lift with the legs than say heavy, glossy, fiberglass modern congas. Wearing shorts so the bare legs can grab the drum can help in drum lifting.

**Open Tone:** The open tone is the characteristic song of the conga. It is the open notes of the conga that most tend to "cut through the mix" and add the conga flavor to the music. An open tone is produced by keeping the fingers close together and bringing the hand down such that the crease where the fingers join the hand comes down on the bearing edge (bend) of the drumhead. The fat pads on the bottoms of the first and second phalanges (segments) of the fingers strike the head just inside the rim producing a loud clear melodic tone from the drum. Since this is the note that "cuts through" it needs to be practiced until it is loud and strong. However, the hand must be quickly removed from the head to let the note "sing" otherwise the note becomes a "muff" which is different. Typically you play an open note by letting the fingers bounce off the drumhead using the edge of the drum on the palm as a kind of fulcrum. To get the hand position, it helps to think of making a military salute and then bringing your "salute" down and strike the drumhead as described.

But in the same manner in which we discussed subtle variations in tone for the bass note by varying the hand position, similar variations in open tones are produced by how far the fingers extend over the rim of the drum. Many Cuban players teach that rather than just the fingers extending over the rim as we have suggested, one should bring the hand down whereby the crease at the top of the palm or the pads at the base of the fingers strike the rim. The fingers are still maintained tightly together as in a salute, but tend to bounce off the head somewhat in the manner of an open slap. The difference between these two notes is subtle but real. Moving the hand further in toward the center of the drumhead creates an open tone that is more toward a slap and thus is richer in higher harmonics. Some players prefer this richer sound. This author, however, prefers the rounder more pure tone of where just the fingers extend over the rim. This open tone can often be played louder than the Cuban hand position as well. But both forms are "correct" and the Cuban version has a speed advantage in that the hand position changes less going from open to slap notes.

But as with the various variations of bass tones, the student needs to experiment with and master ALL of the sounds you obtain with open-style strokes starting with the hand back from the drum and just using the fingertips to get the rim shot sound. Then gradually move the hand in toward the center of the drum as you play open tones. As you do that you will hear the sound of the open tone change and an understanding of the roll of hand position can be explored. Use the position that produced the open tone you find the "best" for your general playing. But eventually, you should be able to play open tones in any of the hand positions to have those variations in tone at your command.

**Conga Tuning:** Usually a conga is tuned according to the open tone. When playing two drums (conga and tumba) a typical tuning would be an interval of a 4th (as in "here comes the bride"). And the conga is often tuned to a "C" and the tumba to a "G". However this tuning may vary to fit the keys typical for the music being played. Often it works best to tune your drums not to specific musical notes, but to tune them such that they play at the "sweet spot" tuning for the particular drums. Each drum will usually have a certain tuning spot where it seems to come alive.

This tuning is very individual for each drum and will depend not only on drum construction details, but the head used and even the weather. Tuning to the "sweet spot" usually produces the best sound out of the given drums. Such tuning is often best in situations where one doesn't have to worry about dissonance with other instruments or other drums. Also some dual conga players prefer an interval of a 3rd rather than a 4th. Be sure to tilt the conga off the floor when tuning the open note or the note may be found tuned sharp when you play later with the drum tilted. While the open tone does change slightly as the bottom opening is obstructed or the drum is lifted, it does not change radically in pitch like the bass tone. This is why the open tone is used for tuning. I have found that a cheap Key of C "blues" harmonica purchased for a few dollars which is kept in your conga bag pouch makes a great aid to keep your congas tuned to C and G for a general tuning starting point for the beginner. A pitch pipe would be even better, but costs more. Generally speaking guitar style electronic tuners do not work for tuning drums.

**Pitch Bending:** When playing tumbao "melodically" or perhaps just as a show-off solo trick, the pitch of the open tone can be "bent". This is done by playing the open note with one hand and using the elbow of the other arm to raise the pitch of the note by pressing on the drum head. You press with the hard bone at the end of the elbow to keep from damping out the open tone and you place your elbow just inside the rim of the drumhead. You do not place it in the center of the drumhead as is done when pitch bending certain other types of drums. A "bent" tone is not a commonly used tone in patterns.

**Muff Tone:** A "muff" or muffled tone describes a drum note where the hand is pressed into the head after the initial note to damp it out quickly. In conga playing this is typically an open tone in which continued finger pressure damps it out quickly. The key is to regulate the damping of the note to just the right amount. You should always hear the pitch of the open tone but it should damp out quickly. If there is no pitch to the note you have damped it too much. If it rings nearly as long as a normal open tone, you haven't damped it enough. While muff notes are common, they are much less common than the standard bass, open and slap notes.

A common beginner mistake when playing muffs with alternating hands is to not lift the first muff before sounding the second muff with the other hand. This turns a rhythm such as Muff(R)-Muff(L) etc. into Muff(R)-Touch(L) which is different. You must hear that quickly decayed remnant of the open tone in the second muff to have proper tone separation. As usual, the Great Goal is to make ANY given note sound exactly the same no matter which hand is playing it! A listener with eyes closed should not be able to tell which of your hands is playing a given note.

**"Closed" Conga Slap:** The usual conga slap note is done with the fingers slightly curved and the idea is that the palm comes into the edge of the drumhead and the fingertips "slap" down against the head. There is a slight "grabbing" action to this as well as a certain wrist motion. In conga slaps (unlike "open" djembe slaps where the fingers bounce back off the head) the fingers stay "stopped" against the drum head in a style analogous to the bass note. Except with the slap only the fingertips remain touching the head. One teacher has described the wrist action as "slapping your little sister's arm when she gets into your toys" The sound should be a single bright "crack" with no ring. It takes considerable practice to get nice, loud, clear, consistent slap tones.

**"Open" and Muted Slaps:** Open or djembe-style slaps are not common on congas though certain players can be seen using a slap that is slightly more open than that above. Usually they keep the hand quite low to the drum. Open slaps on a conga tend to create a lot of the characteristic open tone pitch in the sound. For this reason open slaps on a conga are usually played muted to kill the open tone ring. In playing this note the one hand is simply laid on the drumhead and an open or closed slap is played as usual with the other hand. The hand damps the



open slap into a more traditional conga slap sound. Beginners often find it easier to get a nice sound with a muted slap first. The advantage of using open slaps with a mute is that executing fast double stroke open slaps is much easier than doing closed slaps, while the mute still insures a traditional conga slap sound. Obviously the "heel-toe" hand can easily play the muting role.

**"Pop" Note:** The "pop" note is a kind of variation on a slap. The basic idea is to sort of "grab" the edge of the conga head with the hand. The hand is quite cupped in doing this and produces a kind of "pop" sound which is sort of hollow and much less loud and sharp than a normal slap tone. A common way pops are used is to play rapid alternations of open tones and pops with a single hand. Open-pop-open-pop-etc. Obviously, one should practice this alternation until it sounds the same no matter which hand is used to perform it. In doing this, your hand will be rapidly moving from a flat, fingers-together position for the open tone to the cupped grab where the fingertips create the "pop" position. Your hand position with respect to the edge of the drumhead should not alter radically when doing this pop-open exercise. Practice that.

**"Touch" Note:** A "touch" is simply where the fingertips are brought down against the head to make a sound. Unlike a slap where the tips are slammed against the head to make a sharp sound, here the fingertips are pressed flatter, with the pressure going further back from the tips. Usually the fingers are together as in an open tone. A "touch" should never produce any open-like tone. If you hear an open tone pitch, the note you are playing is a "muff" rather than a "touch". A "touch" is also the "toe" half of the Heel-Toe technique. Whether or not the "heel" of the hand is on the drumhead when a finger "touch" is done will also modify the sound of a "toe" stroke. When a louder "touch" note is desired it is sometimes played by bunching the thumb and four fingers together and then bringing them straight down tips first into the head. Cuban players often do a "touch" with the whole hand quite flat so that it appears to the observer as a bass note, but the palm does not strike the drum, or does so lightly, so the note is actually a "touch" sound rather than a bass note. At other times these players will play a "heel" (see below) where even though the hand appears flat the base of the palm strikes first giving a bass-like tone. One has to listen to determine which note is being played as both moves can appear quite identical to the eye. As we indicated under the "palm" note, the wrist and fingers can control the range of sounds in this stroke from a simple "touch" all the way to a full "bass" sound. The location of the "touch" on the drumhead will help determine the exact sound of the given note.

Some conga books refer to light timing taps as "touch notes". This book uses the more common name of "ghost notes" for light timing touches. Here "touch" refer to strongly played notes usually called "fingers" in books calling ghost timing notes "touches".

**Heel-Toe:** "Heel-toe" is a Cuban playing technique essential to the rhythmic patterns known collectively as "tumbao". In Spanish the technique is often called *"mano secreta"* which means "Secret hand" in English. The basic idea is to use a single hand to produce rapid successive notes. The technique produces rapid patterns that in a sense can simulate the rapid beats of the snare drum of the drum set player.

You should know that just like "bass" and "palm" represent variations of tone for that note, heel-toe is also played with at least three different techniques so that the tone can be varied. The first technique uses the heel of the hand and the tips of the fingers held close together. The first motion of the heel-toe is the "heel". This is a note that simulates a bass tone though is not as loud or deep as a true "bass". Here the hand and wrist is flexed such as when throwing out a rug or sheet to shake it out. In doing the motion, the heel of the hand, consisting of the fat pad at the base of the thumb, (known in palmistry as the "mount of venus") and the pad directly across from that, are forced into the drum head giving a bass-like note. For speed some players just use the base of the thumb pad alone with a twisting motion to the hand to do heel-toe rather than the whole base of

the palm.

The second motion is the "toe" in which the fingertips come down in the "touch" note as described above which then lifts the "heel" off the head. There may be a slight pulling backward to accomplish this smoothly. Usually the fingertips are together to give a sharper sound.

Once the "heel" is raised, it can again be forced into the head and the cycle repeated. H-T-H-T-H-T etc. The "heel-toe" name refers to the similarity to tapping one's foot by first stomping the heel into the floor and then tapping the toe which raises the heel. For playing tumbao Heel-Toe is typically played with the player's weak hand, but nevertheless needs to be practiced with both hands. There are two ways to practice. One would be: Heel (strong hand), Toe (strong hand), Heel (weak hand), Toe (weak hand), repeat. The other would be: Heel (Strong hand), Heel (weak hand), Toe (strong hand), Toe (weak hand), repeat. Practice both ways with a metronome starting at a slow tempo and then gradually raising it. Also practice starting with the weak hand.

It should be mentioned that Cuban players often do not perform "heel" with just the heel of the palm, but rather with the whole palm as Miguel "Anga" Dias states in his video (which is largely about playing with 4 and 5 congas). Dias feels that "heel" playing is "wrong". We, however, see these various ways of playing as simply useful variations in sound.

In his case using the whole palm gives stronger note, which tends to be deep and loud as it is actually a true "bass" stroke. [See the section on "bass" and "palm" notes above.] Using the whole palm creates a louder bass sound than just the heel. Since in a "bass" note, the fingers are flexed backward, one can thus, flex the fingers forward after the bass stroke to produce the "toe" touch sound. Usually more effort is put into this kind of heel-toe stroke to produce louder notes.

Lastly we wish to mention a third, very fast, but very quiet style of heel-toe playing. This is the style of heel-toe used when playing a djembe drum. In this style you play very much like the normal heel-toe method where the heel of the hand is used, but the hands are held very loosely and the fingers are loose and apart rather than together. One then does a fast heel-toe as if one were flopping a rag on the drumhead, only your hands are that rag! This works well for quiet fast riffs inserted in rhythms.

Diaz, however, makes the excellent point that heel-toe [in any style!] must be performed with a looseness in the hand rather than a "forced effort". This point can't be emphasized enough! However, one does play "into" the head with more force when using the "palm" style of heel-toe than with the other two, but nevertheless as a goal one should always strive for relaxation even while producing strong loud notes!

But the "heel-toe" differences we are talking about here are all a matter of advanced fine points in style which should be of little concern to the beginner. As with "bass" and "palm" notes, the player should eventually reach the point where the style of heel-toe can be controlled from a full palm, up through heel-toe, and finally to the loose djembe style simply by varying the flex of the hand and how tight together the fingers are held. But a student should always begin by imitating the style used by his/her teacher! Once you've got ONE style down, you can then practice modifications for your own style of playing to change your tone, etc. If you try to develop your own style when you are still learning basics you will probably just teach yourself bad habits that you will need to "un-learn" later!

**Rim Shots and Harmonics:** Other notes commonly used for solos are "rim shots and head harmonics". For a "harmonic" a finger of one hand is lightly pressed on the head at its center while the tips of the fingers of the other hand come down on the rim of the drum in a manner typical of a bongo-playing "rim shot". The finger damps the normal pitches of the head while the rim shot excites higher-order harmonics in the drumhead which are not damped by the finger, giving a pitch considerably higher than the normal open tone. Doing the same thing again, but lifting the center finger gives a similar note but this time with more of the same pitch as normal open tones present. This note without the center damping finger is called a "rim shot" and is performed by striking the

drum rim with just the tip of the first or second finger. Think of this as a kind of "miniature" open tone, but here just one finger is used and only the first phalange (segment of the finger) extends onto the head and the first finger joint hits at the bend in the head. The stroke is such that the finger slides off the head as it finishes and is like a "glancing" blow even when done straight at the head. Harmonic notes and conga rim shots tend to be rather thin sounding. For this reason they are not notes used in bread and butter rhythms.

**Head "Bowling":** This rather odd sound is also sometimes called a "moose call" in reference to the odd animal-like quality of the sound. This sound from a conga drum, while not especially significant musically, is often seen in "flash and trash" solos. And by "flash and trash" I mean drum solos designed to bring the audience enthusiastically to their feet by show and chops rather than musical content. ["chops" is a musician term originally applied to horn players meaning the possession of playing ability in terms of speed, command of techniques and skill. Usually ultra-fast playing is implied.] "Flash and trash" solos are often characterized by such showmanship as exaggerated arm motions such as raising the hands so high as to be over the player's head after each stroke. Head "bowling" is typically done by wetting the first finger and then placing the thumb and first finger together and running the fleshy pad of the finger diagonally across the drum head in such a manner that a tone is produced. It is similar to the manner in which a violin string produces a tone when rubbed with a bow. It takes some practice, but the sound is always a big hit with the crowd. It is usually easier for the beginner to get the "moose call" going by giving the drum a light open tone tap with the other hand as you start to bow the head.

**Ghost Notes:** "Ghost" notes are very light taps which are not really to be heard but often "played" by the conguero to keep the rhythm of his/her hands going. Typically tumbao does not have ghost notes because of its nature of every beat being played. However, an exception to this rule does happen when the double open note at the end of the tumbao phrase is played as a single note such that the usual second open tone is reduced to a ghost note. The term for ghost notes in Spanish is *Notas "fantasmas"*. "Ghost" notes played on the metal rim of the conga for "rests" can be a big help when learning a new rhythm. This insures that the drummer "plays the spaces" so that the rhythm does not become rushed. Some books use the term "touch" for ghost notes, but we use that terminology for a different drum stroke.

**Cascara:** "Cascara" (KAHS-kah-rah) is Spanish for "shell" and in Latin music refers to a rhythm played on the shell of the timbales (Spanish teem-BAH-less). Such rhythms are also commonly played on the conga shell. In Folkloric rumba the rhythms known as palitos (little sticks) are traditionally played on a piece of mounted bamboo, but it is also common for them to be played on the sides of conga drums in certain situations. Usually a timbale stick or a portion of one is used and the conga is struck either on the side of the shell or on the tuning bolts. The two sounds are slightly different but some players prefer not to hit an expensive drum shell. Some common cascara rhythms are given below. The Xs refer to shell strokes. Here italic letters indicate accented beats.

2:3 clave

X		X		X	X		X	X		X	X		X		X
---	--	---	--	---	---	--	---	---	--	---	---	--	---	--	---

3:2clave

X		X	X		X		X	X		X		X	X		X
---	--	---	---	--	---	--	---	---	--	---	--	---	---	--	---

X		X	X	X		X	X	X		X		X		X	X
---	--	---	---	---	--	---	---	---	--	---	--	---	--	---	---

The author strongly suggests that the player investigate the fiber-composite timbale sticks manufactured by Mainline. They produce unsurpassed cascara sounds on conga shells.

**Stick Sounds:** Typically Conga drums are never played with two drumsticks in the manner of drumset drums. However, in certain African musical styles a single stick is used. (Usually in the strong hand.) For example, this is typical of Senegalese playing. There are three fundamental notes produced by stick playing. The first is a normal drum stroke to the head where the stick is held loosely and allowed to bounce off the head. In the second note, the stick is gripped tightly and is brought down at a high angle into the head and is pressed into the head so as to give a more muted higher pitched note. And finally, there is a "choke tone" where the drum is struck in the usual bouncing note, but with the weak hand laying on the drumhead in the manner of the muted slap. This gives a very damped sharp sound. Usually a timbale stick or a shortened timbale stick is used for stick strokes. The "wrong" end of a common drumstick will also work in a pinch. In Haitian playing sometimes a stick is used to play on the metal rim of the conga drum. These sticks referred to as a bagét, are curved like the sticks used to play an African talking drum.

## **PRACTICING YOUR DRUMS**

When a person begins to try to play a musical instrument of any kind, the one thing that is certain to be required is practice. There are a number of reasons why practice is essential. One is that the student must first learn how to make the various moves required by the instrument. In the case of hand-drums this usually involves learning how to clearly produce the various sounds described above on the drum. With the help of a teacher, practicing the various strokes on the drums with a careful ear to the sounds produced, leads the student to the point where the various drum sounds can be produced at will. This is termed "tone separation". The various drum notes should each sound exactly the same every time you play one, no matter which hand was used to make the sound. This is extremely important practice for the beginning hand-drummer.

But hand-drum playing also involves stringing the various drum notes into patterns or rhythms. These rhythms are the essence of hand-drum playing. Studies with dancers have shown that when learning a new body motion about 800-1000 repetitions are required for the brain to become "hardwired" such that the moves can be performed without concentrating. This same level of practice is going to be required to become comfortable with drumming rhythms. These facts give the newbie a hint of the level of work required to become a decent drummer.

If one had to repeat every rhythmic pattern you ever played 1000 times to get comfortable with it, the work required to become a master drummer might be insurmountable. But luckily complex rhythmic patterns can be broken down into simpler more basic rhythmic patterns. We all know that complex language starts with basic sounds represented by the alphabet. These basic sounds can then be combined into words which are combined into sentences which are combined into paragraphs which are strung together to produce a great complex novel. Likewise, there are basic sounds in drumming which can be strung together to eventually create a complex musical piece. These sounds are called rudiments.

Rudiments for an old instrument like the snare drum, which has been studied and played for centuries, are highly refined today. There are whole organizations that do nothing but argue about and codify snare drum rudiments. Rudiments for hand-drums, on the other hand, appear to be a totally unexplored area. There is some direct transfer of snare drum rudiments to hand-drums, but obviously the action of hands on a drumhead are quite different from sticks on a drumhead. For one thing, multiple bounces with the hands range from very difficult to impossible to achieve. But nevertheless, the *concept* of hand-drum rudiments appears to be valid.

With these ideas in mind, this author has produced two hand-drum practice books designed to help the beginner develop hand-drumming skills through practice. The first is called "*Hand-drum Rudiments*" which is an attempt to adapt snare drum rudiments to the hand-drums. As noted this is new ground, but we do feel that at least a start has been made in the right direction of defining a set

of basic patterns for hand-drums from which all patterns can be constructed. The second book is called "*The 'Stoned' Hand-drum*" which is an adaptation for hand-drums of the classic snare drum practice book by George Lawrence Stone. The Stone book is a classic practice volume based upon the same ideas as the classic Hanon exercises for piano. The difference between rudiments and the Stone patterns is that rudiments are basic moves and rhythms while the Stone patterns place a note on every beat so that all the effort is physical and not mental. Both approaches to drum practice have proven highly successful over the years and we see great promise in attempting to apply these techniques to hand-drumming.

We feel that both these books can provide an excellent basis for hand-drum practice for the beginner. The books can be downloaded for personal use without charge from the website given in the front of this book. We strongly suggest that the beginning conguero download and use all three of our hand-drum books to get started down the road to hand-drum mastery.

There is a third part of hand-drum mastery that needs to be "practiced". That is musical knowledge. Knowing the rhythms and being able to play perfect patterns is not enough. Hand-drum playing is music and music is art. Art means that the artist must find ways to transfer emotion from the artist to his/her audience. The student therefore, needs to constantly be learning about the instrument, the music and the cultures behind the music. "Practice" in musical knowledge means taking time to listen to lots of CDs, to attend concerts and hear other players, and to play yourself in groups with other musicians. All of these things are part of what is called in music "paying your dues". The implication here is that one will never be great until one has studied and tried to imitate the great players who came before. Always keep your ears open! Take time to "practice" your musical knowledge by exploring the culture and traditions behind the music. Take time to listen to and if possible play with other drummers and musicians. There is **much** that goes into being a master drummer that cannot be put into a book!

And lastly there is physical endurance. Traditional drum circles often tax one's drumming endurance. In Africa these can last for days! Even American "fun" drum circles can last for hours on end. In drumming, repeating a pattern for 5 minutes is a LONG time! But in hand drumming, a given rhythm can go on for an hour. And even worse, as the drumming builds in intensity as a given rhythm is repeated over and over, it is very common for the tempo to gradually build until a blazing tempo is reached! From this it should be obvious that hand-drumming is very physical and requires a lot of brute-force physical stamina and endurance. Not just drumming endurance, but the kind of over-all physical development that one gets from working out the whole body. Thus when playing hand-drums, one should treat the event as if one were engaging in some kind of strenuous sport or physical activity. You should stretch and warm up first and cool down slowly afterward. Get your mind on your whole body and you'll be a much better drummer! Because the Stone exercises are repetitive and have a stroke on every note in the patterns, they don't require a lot of thought and are excellent for long sessions to build stamina. If you think I'm exaggerating, let me assure you that master drummers can actually get blood in their urine after a long, hard session from the sheer exertion involved. Hand-drumming can be serious business!

Lastly, let me get you started with one simple exercise you can do on your conga drum not only to warm up but to help build the physicality you'll need as well. The exercise is simply a loud bass note with the palm (Do not tense your body! Stay relaxed!) followed by a lifting of that hand rotating at the heel of the palm so it opens up crocodile fashion and then bringing the hand down to make a "touch" sound with the fingers. Repeat with the other hand and continue alternating the hands. You may notice that this exercise seems a lot like the Cuban "heel-toe" move. But it is **NOT** done like that move! The Heel-toe has a looser feel to it. No. This move has the purpose of simply being physical exercise to strengthen those weak muscles that flex your wrists to give you the power and strength needed to easily make those hand-drum moves. It's basically like going to the spa for drumming. Now, download those two practice books and get going!

To summarize, the beginner needs to first practice each of the various drum sounds until

each can be correctly played on demand. This is called tone separation. Next the beginner needs to learn some basic strokes that can be put together like an alphabet to create complex rhythms. The hand-drum rudiments are excellent for this. Next one needs to build a repertoire of drumming patterns which are practiced enough that they are actually "hardwired" into your brain. My book of Stone-like exercises is designed to be just such a series of useful patterns. Having reached this point the drummer then needs to concentrate on endurance and stamina. It is a whole body thing, but using the Stone-like patterns for long periods also will build hand-drumming stamina. And finally a drummer needs to always and forever be learning and acquiring musical knowledge. In the case of hand-drumming, one should also be trying to learn about and understand the nuances of the various cultures from which various forms of hand-drumming have sprung.

I know this sounds like a lot and I know you are wondering how long it will take until it is "over" and you can just play. Bad news. It's NEVER "over" once you start down the music road, you'll be practicing and learning the whole rest of your life. And yeah, some of it is boring, but believe me the good times MORE than make up for the bad times. Yes, it IS worth it!

Keep practicing and good luck!

## Playing Conga Rhythms

### BOX NOTATION

We will be using what has become more or less a standard "tablature" notation for hand-drums. A measure or two of the rhythmic pattern is divided into boxes where each box represents an eighth note. (Where a single "measure" is counted "one and two and three and four and"... ) Here our boxes will be two measures long or eight quarter notes. You would count these two measure phrases by counting to four twice. Within each box a letter will be used indicating the particular "note" to be played according to the key:

B = Bass Note

P = Palm Note (Bass Note plus "fingers" added)

O = Open Tone

o = Bent Open Tone

M = Muff Note (Open tone muffled by keeping fingers pressed on drumhead after stroke)

S = Closed Conga Slap Note (Open Slap for Djembe drum)

\$ = Muted Slap (Open or Closed Slap with other hand on head)

p = "Pop"

K = Bass Flam

L = Slap Flam

N = Tone Flam

R = Rim Shot

H = "Heel" of a heel-toe-move

T = "Toe" of a heel-toe move or a "Touch" when the note is alone or starts the heel-toe move.

(Some people use "F" for "T", calling our "Touch" a "Fingers" stroke)

X = Stick on the side of the drum shell

G = Ghost Note

Some box notations make a distinction between a "touch" [T] where the fingers do not force the heel of the hand up off the drum and a "fingers" which we have called "toe" [T] where the heel of the hand is forced up. We have simply lumped these together allowing the player to determine the height of the heel in any given move. Also, when more emphasis is desired for a given "touch" [T] note, a "palm" note can be used. Normally we indicate this as [P]. The player must determine the amount of "fingers" sound to incorporate into the given note in context.

An empty box means that the beat is not played with any note. It is what in music terminology is called a "rest". Your strong hand is indicated by **bold** type in the box. Bold can be interpreted as "R" for right hand for right-handed players. Left-handed persons interpret the **bold** as an "L". Boxes without **bold** type are played with the weak hand. The advantage of the box notation despite its limitations is that the player is not required to read standard music notation.

### TUMBAO

Tumbao is an even pattern of 1/8th notes played in a band on the bass and conga drum. Unlike some hand-drum traditions where a given name refers to a certain rhythm (usually associated with a certain dance or music), tumbao is a collection of different patterns all of a certain type. Typically, every 1/8 note is played in tumbao and there are usually no pauses as in other common rhythms. The arrangement of slaps, open notes, bass notes provide the rhythmic identity to a given tumbao while "touch" and heel-toe fill in the other beats producing the even sound. The pattern of open tones in particular tends to give identity to each different tumbao.

When a conga player [known in Spanish as a "*conguero*" (kohn-GAY-roh)] was added to dance orchestras in the 40s and 50s, they played tumbao on a single conga drum. Supposedly the first modern orchestra using a conga and bongos (about 1940) was a Cuban band leader named

Arsenio Rodriguez. Of course the folk use of the Conga drums extends clear back to Africa. These original African drums were slightly smaller and rope tuned. The metal conga tuning hardware is a modern "improvement". The single drum tumbao was later expanded to 2 drums. Typically, what were played as bass notes on the single drum were moved to a lower pitched open note on a second conga drum. Then, congueros went to 3 drums to allow more melodic phrasing from the open tones. Today even 5 congas are seen (For example, Raul Rekow of Santana plays 5 congas with the open tones tuned to an opening phrase of a popular Latin tune he likes).

Tumbao is relatively modern springing from the time when congas were introduced into the orchestras in Cuba. In the United States the tumbao would be called the "groove". A "groove" is a term musicians use to refer to a repeated rhythmic figure that drives a song. The name comes from the days of old 78 RPM phonographs. At times the old records would become damaged and repeat a given groove over and over each time the record would go around. Hence the term came to describe similar repeated phrases in music.

**Single Drum Tumbao:** A common traditional single drum tumbao is given below in box notation. To modern players the pattern is rather old and boring, but nevertheless it is rather ubiquitous in conga playing. You hear it often in modern pop and rock (non-latin) music as percussionists have become more of a fixture in pop bands. Patterns for traditional tumbaos are for a single drum since early players used a single conga.

*Note: **Bold** type indicates that the note is played with the strong hand, while normal type indicates the note is played with the weak hand. We have added L (left) and R (right) hand notation below the diagrams for the convenience of right handed players.*

Basic tumbao. 3-2 or 2-3 clave. Also is called *Marcha*.

(Marcha means the basic groove pattern without embellishment)

H	T	<b>S</b>	T	H	T	O	O	H	T	<b>S</b>	T	H	T	O	O
L	L	R	L	L	L	R	R	L	L	R	L	L	L	R	R

Note the left hand "touch" after the slaps. Below is a variation of the basic tumbao with double strong hand slaps. Here the "touch" in the weak hand is replaced by a slap in the strong hand.

H	T	<b>S</b>	<b>S</b>	H	T	O	O	H	T	<b>S</b>	<b>S</b>	H	T	O	O
L	L	R	R	L	L	R	R	L	L	R	R	L	L	R	R

When starting a tumbao the first note should always be a strong open tone on the high drum to help anchor and lock the rhythm.

O	T	<b>S</b>	T	H	T	O	O	H	T	<b>S</b>	T	H	T	O	O
R	L	R	L	L	L	R	R	L	L	R	L	L	L	R	R

O	P	<b>S</b>	<b>S</b>	H	T	O	O	H	T	<b>S</b>	<b>S</b>	H	T	O	O
R	L	R	R	L	L	R	R	L	L	R	R	L	L	R	R

While occasionally a tumbao starts with a "pickup" note such as a slap on beat "4", usually the pattern will start with the open note on "1" as shown. After the first measure the open note is replaced with the usual "heel" note. But even with a pickup note, the "heel" on note "1" is always replaced by an "open" for the starting measure. A bass or "palm" note can be used instead of the touch after the beginning open tone for even further emphasis to kick off the tune.



Below are several variations of the basic single drum tumbao used in 2-3 Clave

H	T	S	T	H	T	S	O	H	T	S	T	H	T	O	S
L	L	R	L	L	L	R	R	L	L	R	L	L	L	R	R

H	T	S	T	H	T	H	O	H	T	S	T	H	O	H	O
L	L	R	L	L	L	L	R	L	L	R	L	L	R	L	R

H	T	S	T	H	T	O	S	H	T	S	T	H	T	O	O
L	L	R	L	L	L	R	R	L	L	R	L	L	L	R	R

Note that the variations revolve around the open tones at the end of each measure. Bass or "palm" notes can also be used as variation substitutes for "heel" as in the partial example below. A "heel" is obviously a bass-like sound and the substitution makes just makes it stronger.

H	T	S	T	H	T	B	O	H	T	S	T	B	O	B	O
L	L	R	L	L	L	R	R	L	L	R	L	L	R	L	R

A further modification using bass notes in 3-2 clave for a single drum is given below.

H	T	S	B	B	T	O	O	H	T	S	T	H	T	O	O
L	L	R	R	R	L	R	R	L	L	R	L	L	L	R	R

This is what is known as a Mambo or what is called today a "Salsa" tumbao. "Salsa" (SAHL-sah) is the Spanish word for sauce (usually a "hot" sauce) and the name came from a dance style in New York clubs which is basically the same as the older "mambo" although "salsa" does add some other dance styles into the pure mambo style. Thus, comes the name "sauce" implying a mix of ingredients. The word "Mambo" (MAHM-boh) refers to a repeating instrumental section of a song known as *montuno* and refers to the dance done in that section. It does not refer to a specific type of rhythm or song form. But, popularly it is used to refer to the kind of music one does the "mambo" dance to. It is alleged that the modern "mambo" dance from which salsa springs also originated in New York City when traditional rumba bands became influenced by the swing craze of the 40s.

**Two Conga Tumbao:** The single conga tumbao was expanded to two congas by such pioneers as Carlos "patato" Valdez, Mongo Saintamaria, Ray Romero and a number of others. The above mambo tumbao is easily transferred to double congas by simply changing the bass notes to open tones played on a second lower-tuned tumba.

#### Standard 3-2 clave Mambo 2-drum Tumbao

Conga

H	T	S			T	O	O	H	T	S	T	H	T	O	O
---	---	---	--	--	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Tumba

L	L	R	R	R	L	R	R	L	L	R	L	L	L	R	R
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

In 2-3 clave the measures are reversed to keep the low drum played in the "3" portion of the clave. This form of Mambo tumbao is also played for cha cha cha and son montuno.

Standard 2-3 clave Mambo 2-drum Tumbao

Conga	H	T	S	T	H	T	O	O	H	T	S	O	O	T	O	O
Tumba	L	L	R	L	L	L	R	R	L	L	R	R	R	L	R	R

Or the first measure can just be repeated

Conga	H	T	S	O	O	T	O	O	H	T	S	O	O	T	O	O
Tumba	L	L	R	R	R	L	R	R	L	L	R	R	R	L	R	R

(Do not forget to replace the first "heel" with an Open tone on the high conga when starting!) A "modern" version sometimes alternates between the bass notes of the older single drum tumbao and the low opens of the above pattern. This gives a bit more interest to the patterns.

It is probably clear, that players might wish to have more expression available than a standard tumbao that goes on forever. They might, for example, wish to step up the intensity of the tumbao for certain sections of a song. There are a number of variations to the mambo tumbao that can accomplish this. For an increased intensity the "toe" after the first "heel" can be changed to a slap as seen below:

Conga	H	S	S	O	O	T	O	O	H	S	S	O	O	T	O	O
Tumba	L	L	R	R	R	L	R	R	L	L	R	R	R	L	R	R

With the more intense variations one typically starts and stops the tune with the basic tumbao. The increased tumbao is then used if required in an inner section of the song.

Another Mambo tumbao variation would be:

Conga	H	T	S	T	S	O	O	H	T	S	T	S	O	O	O	O
Tumba	L	L	R	L	L	L	R	R	L	L	R	L	L	L	R	R

A still more intense mambo tumbao variation is given below:

Conga	O	O	O	S	S	O	O	S	O	O	O	S	S	O	O	S
Tumba	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L

While a discussion of clave (Spanish: KLAH-vay) is rather beyond what we are trying to do here we will mention in passing that in playing two congas, clave is usually defined by playing the low drum on the "3" side of clave. However, some of the intensification patterns are exceptions.

**Cha Cha Cha:** Another dance that is very popular in this country in the club scene and even in international ballroom dancing as well as the Latino dance scene is the Cuban dance

known in English as the Cha Cha. The name of the dance in Spanish is the Cha Cha Cha. The name is said to come from the noise the slippers the Cuban dancers used to wear made on the dance floor when doing the dance. The music is characterized by quarter notes played on a cowbell (120 bpm) and it is important to remember that the "cha cha cha" comes on the beats "4 and 1" and not elsewhere as you may have heard American bands try to play it.

A common one-drum tumbao for Cha cha is shown below:

Conga

H	T	S	O	H	T	O	O	H	T	S	O	H	T	O	O
L	L	R	R	L	L	R	R	L	L	R	R	L	L	R	R

As mentioned above, the 2-3 basic mambo tumbao is also often played for cha cha.

Standard 2-3 clave Mambo 2-drum tumbao played for Cha Cha.

Conga

H	T	S	T	H	T	O	O	H	T	S	O	O	T	O	O
L	L	R	L	L	L	R	R	L	L	R	R	R	L	R	R

Tumba

Carlos "patato" Valdez who pioneered two congas in an orchestra also was one of the first to use three congas in a more melodic tumbao. A discussion of three or more conga tumbao is beyond what we are attempting to do here.

**Rumba:** Another dance-form popular in American and European circles is known as Rumba. (ROOM-bah in Spanish) This is a bit confusing since folkloric rumba consists of three major forms of drumming singing and dancing (Guaguanco [gwa-wahn-KOH], Yambu [yahm-BOO], and Columbia [koh-LOOM-bee-yah]) not at all related to what would be called rumba in a nightclub or in ballroom dancing. That dance which has origins in the Latin dance craze of the 30s, which we will call American rumba, is related more to the lush Latin musical form with romantic lyrics known as bolero (boh-LEH-roh in Spanish). The bolero dance allegedly originated from a Spanish folk courting dance where the couple to be would pass their hands over each other's bodies without ever actually touching. (Properly chaperoned by the village old women to make sure no actual touching occurred!) The modern bolero dance still retains much of the romantic feel and movements of the original. American rumba is an off-shoot of bolero and also retains some of the slow romantic feel of bolero though American/international rumba is slightly faster than bolero. Thus, a rumba tumbao is really just a bolero tumbao played a bit faster. However, it should never be played so fast as to lose the romantic feel.

A standard bolero tumbao would be:

Conga

H	T	S	T	H	O	O	H	T	S	T	H	O	O		
L	L	R	L	L	R	L	R	L	L	R	L	L	R	L	R

Tumba

I'm told that in the old days, congueros played the three open tones all with the strong hand, but one of the well known master conga players changed the traditional "sticking" to the above version, which is easier and more efficient to play. This version is now considered standard by modern players.

To illustrate the differences between a Tumbao pattern and the more traditional African

based conga rhythms we will also give a Tumbao-like pattern below:

Tumbao-like traditional rumba rhythm

Conga



Now Compare that rhythm to a more African-like basic rumba low drum rhythm.

Basic rumba low drum rhythm

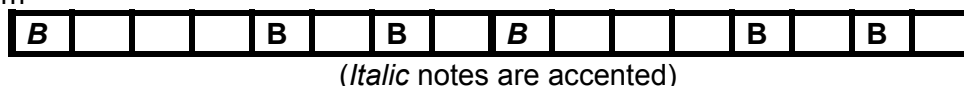
Conga



Finally compare to the underlying slow-quick-quick rhythm which defines American rumba dance movements.

Basic Rumba dance rhythm (as might be played on a drum set bass drum)

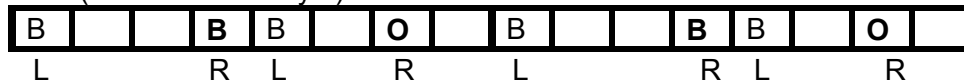
Bass Drum



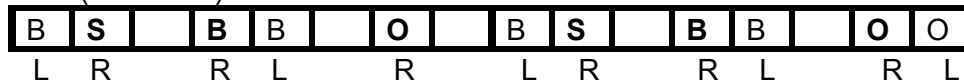
**Folkloric Rumba:** Of the three most popular forms of folkloric rumba, Guaguanco is the most popular and influential in Latin music. Therefore, we will cover that form here. We should mention that Rumba Columbia has a 6/8 rhythm and is sung in African and Spanish phrases. Rumba Yambu is sung in Spanish but it is traditionally played on wooden boxes known as **cajones** [kah-HO-ness]. Guaguanco is played on conga drums and while a 4/4 rhythm, is played in such a way that a 6/8 feel is suggested. This topic is somewhat advanced beyond the beginner level, but is included here as a reference point for the student who is ready to advance into the study of Latin rhythms.

Conga drums in Guaguanco are named according to function. And the rhythm the drum plays is often given the same name. The low drum played by one drummer is called the Salidor [Sahl-ee-DOR]. The Salidor pattern is usually played on the tumba. The basic patterns are similar to some given in the previous rumba section.

Salidor pattern (basic Havana style)



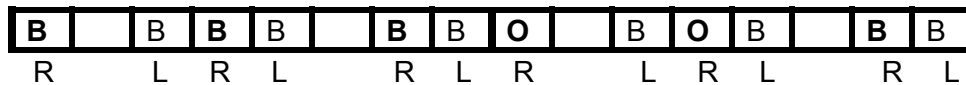
Salidor pattern (Folklorico)



Note that the bass notes start in the **weak** hand on "one".

The middle drum and the part it plays are named tres golpes [trayss GOHL-pays] which means "three blows" or "three slaps" coming from the triplet feel to the patterns. In some styles of Rumba Guaguanco this pattern is called "Tres Dos".

Tres Golpes (basic Havana style)

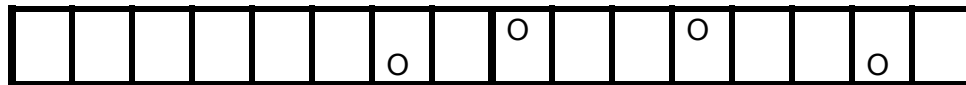


Tres Golpes (Folklorico)



Note that while the two patterns are played by separate players on separate drums they combine to give rise to a characteristic pattern of open tones that identifies a guaguanco influence. That two-drum open tone pattern is given below:

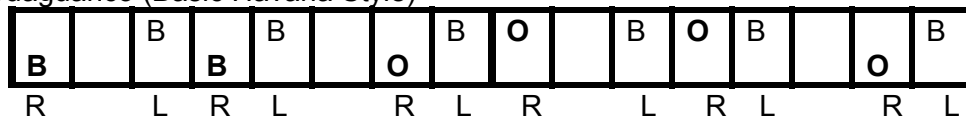
Conga



Tumba

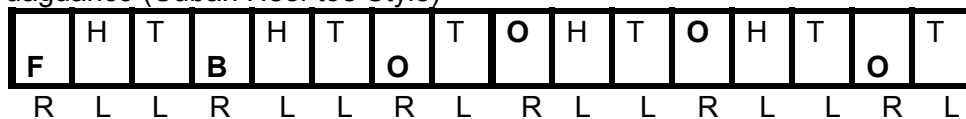
But in modern non-folkloric usage, a single player using two drums simulates the sound of the folkloric Rumba Guaguanco. Such an approximation of basic Havana style with a single player would be:

Rumba Guaguanco (Basic Havana Style)



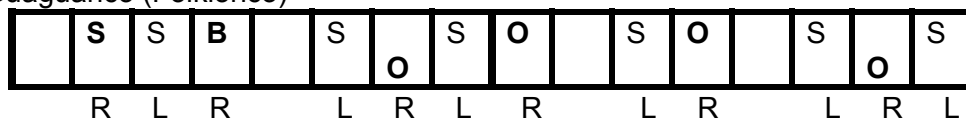
Note the retention of the characteristic lo-hi-hi-lo open tone pattern. Another Havana style that uses heel-toe playing is seen below:

Rumba Guaguanco (Cuban Heel-toe Style)



A similar single drummer approximation to the folkloric style would be:

Rumba Guaguanco (Folklorico)



The third or high drum is called the quinto [KEEN-toh] and is basically a solo drum which accompanies and interacts with the dancers (who are improvising). Obviously this is where the name quinto used in English to designate the smaller sized conga drum comes from. The constant solo riff patterns are called repique.

Before leaving this subject, we would like to mention that folkloric Rumba Guaguanco is

normally played with instruments that consist of the three sizes of conga drums as well as claves [KLAH-vayss] and palito [pah-LEE-toh]. Claves are two largish sticks which are knocked together to produce the underlying fundamental rhythmic pattern upon which all latin music is built.

That pattern is called the "clave" [Klah-vay] which means "key" in Spanish. In Guaguanco a rumba clave is usually used. That pattern is given below. Note that in the first measure the third note has moved from "4" in a standard Son clave to the "and" of "4". The beginner doesn't need to be concerned about clave but is included here for reference.



The Palito is a stick pattern (palito means "little sticks") which is played along with the clave:



As we have noted previously in this book, in non-folkloric situations the palito pattern can be played as cascara on the side of the conga drum.

Even though the above discussion of Rumba Guananco is well beyond the beginner level, it barely scratches the surface of Afro-Latin music and rhythms. It should be obvious that the world of hand-drumming is a vast subject area in which one can spend a lifetime and still never learn it all!

### HOW MANY RHYTHMS?

This is a sort of fun question. Consider playing a snare drum of a drum set. If we divide a measure of 4/4 music into 1/8<sup>th</sup> notes, in our box notation we will have 8 boxes to fill. Since generally a snare drum has a single sound (we will ignore rim shots) the first box can either be a note or a silence which is two choices. The next box has the same two choices which multiplies the first two choices by two. The next box multiplies by two again and eventually we find that the total number of possible single measure snare drum rhythms that exist are  $2^8 = 256$ . In other words if you learned all 256 possible rhythms there would be no 4/4 pattern (that used nothing faster than eighth notes) you couldn't play on that drum since you learned all possible patterns.

But a hand-drum such as a conga has more than one sound and furthermore hand-drum patterns tend to be two measures long. Therefore if we take the conga to produce three different notes (bass, open, slap) plus not playing the note at all, we have 4 choices for each of 16 boxes. In this case we have 4 to the power 16 or  $4^{16} = 4,294,967,305$ . In other words, there are over 4 billion two-measure 4/4 rhythms possible on the conga drum! Obviously this allows plenty of room for artistic expression and demonstrates the creative potential inherent in hand-drums.

We are not saying that a drum set doesn't also have this same potential, but it is clear that the drum set player must play multiple drums or cymbals to achieve the same level of artistic possibilities. The hand-drummer achieves it with a single drum! Playing multiple hand-drums provides even greater rhythmic diversity.

In the next section we will explore a few of those other hand-drum possibilities

## A FEW BASIC CONGA RHYTHMS

### CALYPSO (Trinidad-Tobago)

Basic Calypso Rhythm

Conga



Tumba 

						o							o	
--	--	--	--	--	--	---	--	--	--	--	--	--	---	--

  
 R                    L R                    R                    R                    L R                    R

Calypso Variation

Conga 

o	o		s	o	o			o	o		s	o	o			o
---	---	--	---	---	---	--	--	---	---	--	---	---	---	--	--	---

  
 Tumba R L                    L R L R                    R                    R L                    L R L R

**REGGAE (Jamaica)**

Conga 

		s	s			o	o			s	s				o	o
--	--	---	---	--	--	---	---	--	--	---	---	--	--	--	---	---

  
 Tumba                    R L                    R L                    R L                    R L

**FUNK (USA)**

Single drum patterns

Conga 

o		o		s			s		o	o		s				
---	--	---	--	---	--	--	---	--	---	---	--	---	--	--	--	--

  
 R                    R                    R                    L                    L R                    R

Variations

Conga 

o	o	o		s			s		s	o		s				
---	---	---	--	---	--	--	---	--	---	---	--	---	--	--	--	--

  
 R L R                    R                    L                    L R                    R

o	o			s			s		o	o		s				
---	---	--	--	---	--	--	---	--	---	---	--	---	--	--	--	--

  
 R L                    R                    L                    L R                    R

b		o		s		o	o		s		s	s				
---	--	---	--	---	--	---	---	--	---	--	---	---	--	--	--	--

  
 R                    R                    R L                    L                    L R

b		o		s		o	o		s		s	s		o	o	
---	--	---	--	---	--	---	---	--	---	--	---	---	--	---	---	--

  
 R                    R                    R L                    L                    L R                    R L

Two drum pattern

Conga 

				o	o		s		s				s	o	s
--	--	--	--	---	---	--	---	--	---	--	--	--	---	---	---

  
 Tumba R                    R                    R L                    L                    L R                    R                    L R L

**SAMBA (Brazil)**

Conga drums in Brazil are called "atabaque" named after the conga-like drums of the northern style of Candomble. The original atabaque come in three sizes and are linked to the African Yoruba tradition. Atabaque are often still rope tuned today and are somewhat less "fat" in the body than Cuban congas, but today modern Cuban-style congas and bongos are common for all Samba as well as Baiao and Brazilian jazz and funk. And remember that the

language in Brazil is Portuguese rather than Spanish.

The basic samba rhythm is commonly described as "one, uh two" or "boom chicka boom" where the "a" of chicka corresponds to the "uh" of "one, uh two". (The "chick" simulates the high-hat sound of a drumset player in Samba dance band. Such drumset patterns are beyond our scope here.) Samba is an Afro-Brazilian form which commonly appears in a number of situations. One as we have indicated is in dance and pop music. Another is in the *Escola de Samba* which translates "school of Samba" which are more like clubs which parade and compete during Carnival in Brazil. Obviously conga drums are not a very handy marching instrument for parades, but the Samba parades do have a tremendous influence on popular samba orchestras in which congas do play a significant role.



The driving force of the Samba comes from the low drum pattern. In marching samba the low drive comes from bass drums known as surdo [pronounced SOOR-doo] played with one mallet and the hand (often wearing a glove to damp the drum). Normally a surdo plays the simple marching 1, 2, 1, 2 beat. When many surdos are present more complex patterns appear. When congas imitates a marching conga (say in a drum circle) variations of the above pattern are typically used such as:



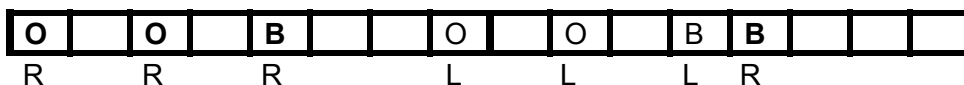
Or



Where often one half of the drum circle plays the upper pattern while the other half plays the lower pattern. A different and common samba conga pattern based on the above is:



A conga low part example with a more interesting rhythm than the basic above is shown below.



Variations on the low drum pattern



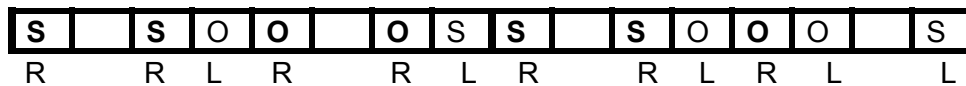
Two other common conga samba patterns are shown below which though shown with



slaps and open tones (implying other drums are carrying the samba bass rhythm) bass and open notes can be substituted to give the patterns more low end drive if needed.



A common variation of that pattern is:



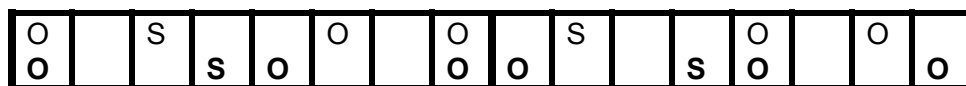
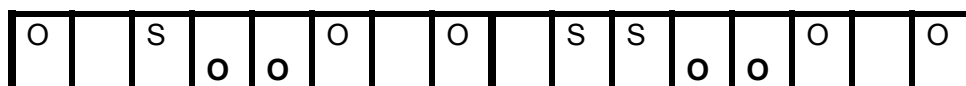
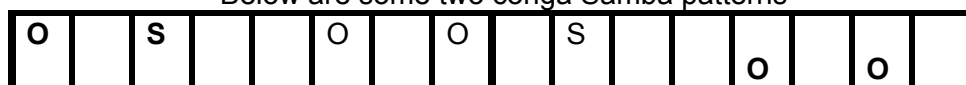
The flavor of the samba comes from the high drum parts. A samba high part with common variations is shown below. Notice that the essence of the samba feel is a pattern that begins with strokes on the counts 1, and , 2, and, but then shifts an eighth note to have strokes falling in between those main beats *with the main beats absent*. So the samba flavor comes out of this shifting of the rhythmic pattern forward and back by an eighth note. Notice in the patterns below how in the first measure the strokes are on the beats of the "ands" between the beats while in the second measure the strokes have shifted forward an eighth note and now fall between the previous main beats. Then the whole thing repeats shifting back to the first measure and so on.



Variations on the high drum pattern



Below are some two conga Samba patterns



Samba rhythms can get exceedingly complex.

Needless to say, the various music styles and patterns we have presented so far have barely scratched the surface of musical styles and rhythms for conga drums. We have hardly mentioned traditional African rhythms or folkloric Afro-Cuban patterns at all! However, we hope that this has perhaps piqued your interest and hopefully will inspire further investigations.

## **CARE AND FEEDING OF YOUR CONGA DRUMS**

Conga drums are quite strong and stable and do not normally require a lot of maintenance. Conga heads are usually made of Mylar (plastic), cowhide or water buffalo hide and are quite thick and strong. Mule hide is said to be the best natural material for conga heads, and is also quite thick and strong. For this reason and the relatively low head tension used to tune the drums, conga drums, unlike bongos, do not usually need to be de-tuned after use unless you plan to put them in long-term storage. However, if you have tuned the heads up a lot due to damp weather, you should probably de-tune them afterwards so they won't be damaged if the weather suddenly turns hot and dry. Conga heads are raw hide and typically do not need to be treated with any oils or preservatives. It is a common beginner mistake to think that conga heads should be oiled. It is the player's HANDS that are oiled. To treat heads, only the excess oil that might reside on your hands after treating your hands should be used on the drumheads by rubbing your hands over the surfaces. Usually lanolin is used on the hands when the heads are treated this way.

Artificial conga heads such as those made by Evans or the "Mondo" or "NuSkyn" heads made by Remo are plastic and do not pull oil from your hands. They are the opposite of hide heads in that oil and crud from your hands tends to be deposited and build up on these heads. Maintenance of these heads requires a periodic cleaning with a rag soaked with isopropyl alcohol or ethyl alcohol. The latter is easily available as 151 proof vodka! But remember that no alcohol of any kind should be used on hide heads as it will dry and possibly crack them.

To clean and preserve the rest of the drum, typical wood and metal polish products work well. To restore used drums, automotive chrome cleaner works well to remove rust and corrosion from metal parts. Dow "scrubbing bubbles" bathroom cleaner is excellent for removing gunk and fingerprints of all kinds from the shell, especially that funky dive bar smell. But you do not want to get water on any exposed unvarnished wood. However, for usual after-gig maintenance, I just wipe down the metal and shell with a Silicone Gun and Reel cloth obtainable at any sporting goods store. Just keep one in the pouch of your conga bag. The silicone removes fingerprints and protects metal parts against the corrosive acid in sweat.

## **WHERE DO I GO FROM HERE?**

OK. You've bought your conga drums, you've learned how to play all of the various drum sounds at will (tone separation) and you practiced the rhythms given here and those in the other books you've bought until you are pretty fast. At this point it's pretty easy to start to think that you are pretty hot stuff. Rein in that ego!

Let me give you some good advice. No matter how fast you think you are, there will always be somebody out there who is faster. No matter how much you think you know about music and drumming there will always be more to learn! Always keep your eyes and ears open and never stop learning. Never stop practicing. There is no other drummer out there exactly like you. There may be faster players. There may be players who know more patterns. But none of them will have a vision of drumming exactly like yours. That is your strength.

Another important thing you must start to realize at this level is that box notation we have given looks like programming notes for a drum machine. Indeed one COULD program a drum machine with these rhythms. But that is NOT how they are to be played! Such playing is sterile and lacking in impact. Find recordings of authentic players producing these exact same patterns. The "real" patterns move and flow. They have accents and emotion. They are played

(as Latinos like to say) from the "heart". THAT kind of playing is where you are trying to go from here!

Tablature time divisions are not hard rules but just guidelines. The notes must move about in their spaces. In jazz playing this is called "swing". The notes fall slightly ahead, behind or on the beats in a way that gives a certain "feel" to the rhythm. It's that certain "feel" that gets the listener's toe tapping when a drum machine rendition won't. To master this takes your ears. The whole idea of music is the transfer of emotion from one person to another by means of sounds. Where you are going with your drumming is to attain the place where your expression is transmitted to the listeners/dancers with such force and strength that they cannot help but respond to it. Finding that place can take a lifetime. Some drummers never find it. Even the masters who attain it regularly, always keep trying to improve that communication. It is an ultimate perfection that can never be achieved, but yet we all are driven to keep trying to find it.

Let me assure you that we all are in the same boat here. Each of us is driven to keep drumming and perfecting and communicating. That is really the essence of this strange practice of making noises on animal skins and hollow logs which in some mysterious way causes other humans to have emotional experiences. Such is the mystery of art!

### **ON BEING "INFLUENCED"...**

If you are new to the world of artists and musicians, you may not be aware of the tradition of "theft" among them. While stealing equipment is considered in bad taste (though it does happen, so beware!) stealing ideas is not. In fact the whole of art and music history depends upon such "borrowing". Usually in polite company we discretely cover up the truth by euphemistically saying we are "influenced" by this or that artist when in actuality fact we mean we simply stole his/her ideas! This tradition was humorously expressed in Gregory Hine's movie "Tap" when the old man tap dancer angrily asserts "He stole my step!" Let me assure you that any dancer worth his/her salt WILL steal your step in a heartbeat even with their BACK to you! The same goes for any drummer and your licks! You need to cultivate the same thieving ways.

And here's why. All of art is based on "influence". When the spirit descends upon you and imparts a really wonderful pattern, it isn't your property! Ideally you are but the communication channel from some "higher source" to the earth. We won't speculate as to what exactly that "higher source" is, but when you perform the lick, your listeners may enjoy it, but other drummers will immediately sense the power in what you are doing. Because of this they will also try to get in on the action and therefore try to imitate what you've done. Other drummers hear their copies and in turn try to copy them. As this goes on, eventually, if the original idea has sufficient force, "your" idea can expand to become a whole MOVEMENT or "SCHOOL".

So when you read of the impressionists or bebop or salsa, you need to understand that these whole movements began with an idea which others appreciated and copied and varied until the whole concept behind the idea was totally explored. Obviously when you copy another drummer, you bring your own life experiences into the mix so the copy is never quite perfect. So when you add your variations to another's ideas and other drummers add their variations to the ideas they get from you, this is the glue that holds areas of music together and makes it a cohesive whole. Even the United States Congress recognizes these facts and for that reason does not permit the copyright of drum rhythms as is done with songs and melodies.

So go out there and steal that lick, make it your own, add your own experiences to it and let the next guy steal it from you. The growth of drumming depends upon it!

### **SHOULD YOU SHAKE A CONGUERO'S HAND?**

Lastly, never forget that a hand-drummer's hands are part of his instrument. They

determine your sound and you must protect and preserve them the same as your drums. The drumheads pull oil from your hands, which must be replaced. Each player seems to have a favorite hand oil. African shea butter, cocoa butter, lanolin, castor oil, olive oil and peanut oil are all commonly used. My personal preference is a mixture of equal parts of shea butter, castor oil, and lanolin.

Because of very dry air, such as found indoors in winter, your hands may have a tendency to split. It's as if your fingerprints split between the ridges causing a fissure creating enough pain to really be annoying. To treat these sores and get them to heal as quickly as possible, I recommend first rubbing powdered alum into the split (alum is the material in styptic pencils used to stop the bleeding from shaving nicks). Next soak a bit of camphorated oil into the pad of a Band-aid and wrap it over the split. Usually this heals the splits in a day or two.

We also saw an INTERNET post reporting excellent results in applying Melaleuca which is also known as Tea Tree Oil to finger splits and covering with a bandaid. You might check the web site [www.melaleuca.com](http://www.melaleuca.com) for more information. Often Tea Tree Oil can be found at health food stores.

And finally we must mention that there is this tradition that urinating on your hands will make the skin tough and give you great tone. We haven't tried it ourselves, but we leave it to you to decide if you should shake the hand of any *conguero* you know!

**KEEP DRUMMING!**