

# HOW TO HEAR THE CLAVE IN SALSA

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If your experience is anything like mine, you may have struggled to hear clave direction when playing or listening to salsa (and its precursors, son, guajira and mambo). Sure there are differences, but rhythmically these styles are largely the same, they're just played at different tempos and with different instrumentation. I'm aware that it's a gross simplification, but so I don't have to write a book, I'll just use the word "salsa" from here on as shorthand.

It took me the best part of a year practising and performing on pretty much a weekly basis with bands that played Cuban music to get totally comfortable hearing and feeling clave. They were very patient with me, but I got a lot of dirty looks (and remarks) along the way from percussionists when I screwed up, and I screwed up often. Hopefully, this article will provide you with some shortcuts so you can get things together quicker than I did.

Here's the secret about clave – if you want it in a nutshell:

## **YOU'RE WASTING YOUR TIME LISTENING FOR SOMETHING THAT ISN'T ACTUALLY THERE**

Yup, all that stuff you may have read and been taught about clave is all very well and good, but the problem for a learner is that for experienced salsa musicians these days, clave is so ingrained and obvious that it's almost regarded as obtuse to actually play it...

The clave rhythm is the backbone of Cuban popular music (and many other Caribbean traditions besides). But in all but the most traditional styles, clave isn't played at all. So it's very difficult to pick up on exactly how the musicians are orientating themselves around this non-existent (perhaps better to say *implied*) rhythmic centre.

Think of clave as the subconscious of Cuban music. It's there in essence, underpinning all of the instrumental patterns. The musicians feel it totally instinctively and could tap it out for you at any point if you asked them to, but it's very rarely actually played. Your goal is to subsume it into your subconscious in the same way – so that you don't have to think about it, you just feel it.

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A little digression: I nearly said "the musicians and the dancers feel it". But I'm afraid it still amazes me that a lot of dancers who have obviously devoted hours upon months upon years learning to dance this style can be so ignorant of the fundamental structure of the music. The number of times I've watched from the stage as real hotshot dancers take centre of the dancefloor, set themselves and start their fabulous routines on totally the wrong beat...

The Spanish word for being the wrong side of clave is *cruzado* (which means "crossed"), although there are much ruder, more contemptuous terms for the same condition (I've been called most of them). This means being a whole bar out. But I've often seen dancers, and very accomplished ones, go one worse and start not only on the wrong bar, but on the wrong beat, sometimes even the wrong half-beat. Don't know what you'd call that – if we're being polite, maybe *supercruzado*?

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Okay, back to the elusive Mr Clave. So how do you chase the invisible man? You track his footprints and watch how the foliage around him moves. In short, you look for the effect he has on the environment around him.

This is the best way to learn to listen for clave – something that isn't there. Even though it may not be present, clave casts a clear shadow on the rhythms played by most of the instruments in a salsa band.

This article will give you clear things to listen for in certain instrumental patterns so you'll find it much easier to hear and feel clave. By the time you're used to hearing these figures and aligning yourself accordingly, you'll have absorbed clave in practice, in action.

You'll have learned it backwards. Before long, you won't even be capable of doing it wrong. Before we start, there's one more point to make.

### **WHADDAYA MEAN YOU'RE JUST A PIANO PLAYER? (OR BASS/DRUMS/ETC)**

Cuban music is all about a number of people getting together, each playing something simple and distinct, to create a whole that is communal, greater than the sum of the individual parts. True Gestalt, if you will. One guy playing "ga-ga-oom" wouldn't turn you on much. One guy going "ti-ti-ta-dee-ta-dee-ta-dee" wouldn't do it either. Nor would someone going "wait ... boom wait bu-boom". But put them all together, with the groove locked up tight, and you have magic. Cuban music is about celebrating the communal experience.

If you want to play Cuban music properly, stop defining yourself by your instrument. Sure, you'll always specialise, but everyone will pick up a guiro or bongos and get involved. In fact, salsa musicians will sometimes sit down at the bar at the end of the night with a box of matches, a couple of biros and some (usually full) glasses, and create music.

You need to know the music from every instrumental perspective. If you play piano or sax, learn the basics of bongo and campana or guiro. If you're a drummer (or timbalero) or bass player, learn a basic piano montuno or two, and a bass tumbao. Get familiar, get at least competent with everything, every "desk".

Oh, and you'll usually have to sing the choruses as well. Don't sing? Don't speak Spanish? Tough, everyone gets involved on choruses – that's what makes them choruses. Well, sometimes the bass player is excused, because the offbeat nature of salsa bass makes it very tricky to sing and play at the same time. Having said that, there are guys out there that play bass and sing, even lead vocals – when you see someone doing this, you're watching the best of the best. Go and say hi. Go and say wow.

While we're on the subject: it can be wonderfully liberating to play an instrument that you don't regard as your specialism. All bets are off, you can concentrate on the basics and just enjoy yourself. I'm a piano player, but I've had a great time in the past joining in on bongos, guiro, bass – I've even played some very rudimentary timbales on occasion.

There's one instrument that is truly a specialism, in my experience – the congas. Conga drummers are dedicated experts who can produce an astounding range of different tones from the two drum heads. Ask these guys for a lesson, sure, but don't jump on stage and expect to just join in unless you really know what you're doing.

### **WHAT IS CLAVE?**

Cuban music, with its rhythmic roots in West Africa, is based on a two pulse for dancing – one-two one-two. Overlaying this on 4/ 4 time, the strong pulse occurs on beats one and three of two consecutive bars. In addition, there is a repeating pattern of emphasis that gives each of these two bars a contrasting rhythmic character – the clave.

In the true tradition of all good music, this pattern elegantly balances tension and release, complexity and simplicity, excitement and rest, puzzle and solution, tease and kiss, punchline

and joke. This structure is designed for one purpose and one purpose only – to compel people to dance.

There are many different types of pattern that are called clave (some are fitted to 6/8 time, rather than 4/4). But the two claves that dominate modern popular Cuban music are called *son clave* and *rumba clave*:

Son clave (2/3)



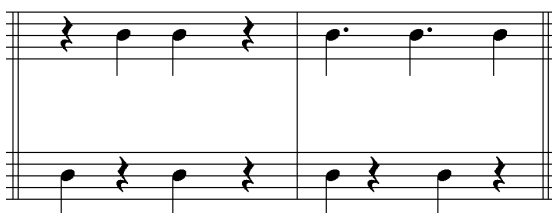
Rumba clave (2/3)



The majority of salsa is based on son clave, more modern styles such as songo and mozambique are based on rumba clave. We'll focus solely on son clave in this article.

Here is son clave again, shown with the pulse (your first exercise should be to tap clave in one hand with pulse in the other):

Son clave (2/3)



One side of the pattern has three "hits", the other side has two – as a result, they are referred to as the 3-side and 2-side of clave respectively. The 3-side is characterised by tension, syncopation, excitement, activity. The 2-side is characterised by release, downbeats, resolution, rest.

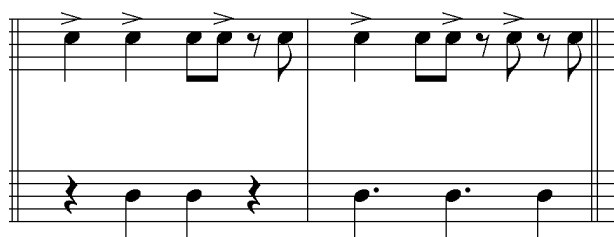
Clave is thought of being in either 3/2 or 2/3 direction – which means that any given section (introduction, verse, horn mambo, chorus, solo) starts on either the 3 or the 2-side of clave.

How does clave direction change? Well, it's a two-bar cell that repeats over and over, and once it starts it doesn't change. Clave direction is perceived to have changed when an arrangement uses an odd-bar break between sections. For instance, you may start in 3/2 direction for the verse and then there'll be a three, five or seven-bar arranged interlude, after which the chorus will be in 2/3 direction. The structure of the music has shifted but the clave has stayed constant. This sort of odd-bar switch can happen a number of times within a single song.

To put it another way, once you start the clave, it continues without interruption in the same direction – perceived changes in clave direction happen as a result of odd-bar interludes. Well, almost. In very recent times, some bands have jumped or switched the clave. This is the very rare exception to the rule. First, learn the rule.

## SO IF YOU DON'T LISTEN FOR CLAVE WHAT DO YOU LISTEN FOR?

### Cascara (2/3)



This pattern is mainly played on the sides of the timbales (the two metal drums – the word cascara means shell), but it can also be played on various bells, woodblock or cymbal.

The most easily distinctive clave characteristic of this pattern is the strong accent on the *two* of the 2-side – this beat is played on the 3-side, but lightly and is immediately followed by a strong hit on *and-of two*. Note also that the 3-side is much more actively syncopated than the 2-side. There are any number of minor variations, but all of them include this strong *two* hit.

### Timbal Bell Pattern (2/3)



This pattern is mainly played on the bell mounted with the timbales, but also on the cymbal or handheld campana (bell).

It has the same strong *two* on the 2-side as cascara, and again the 3-side is much more active. Again, there are variations, but the strong *two* is always present.

## EXERCISE

**Practice tapping these patterns in one hand while tapping clave in the other. For an extra challenge, do the same thing while tapping pulse (one and three) with your foot.**

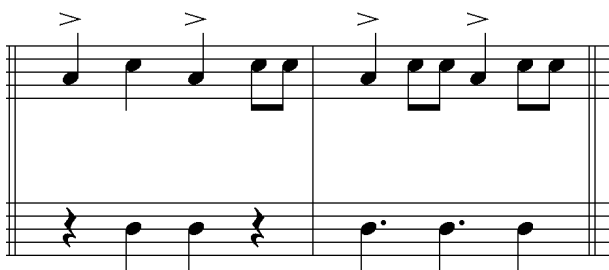
**This will take a little while to get together, but once you're comfortable with it, your sense of clave will automatically be 200% better. Of course, this kind of independence exercise is what drummers and percussionists do all day, every day.**

Here's some good news. Once you have the above two patterns down, you'll have everything you need.

But your understanding of the music will deepen and your clave sense will become more sophisticated if you take things further and listen for more detail. Some instruments play very freely (bongos), or clave-neutral patterns (maracas, guiro, bass). But the following patterns

are clearly based on clave, and are well worth learning. Practise tapping or singing them against clave (and then add the pulse).

### Bongo Bell Pattern (2/3)

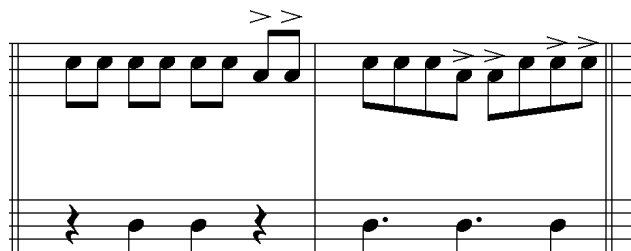


The bongo player (bongocero) plays drums during the verse and shifts to bell during the choruses and solos. This is the pattern played on the bongo bell.

The accented hits are played near the mouth of the bell with the hand holding the bell relaxed to let it resonate. The other hits are played on the body of the bell, with the other hand muffling the bell to produce a higher, less sustained tone. You might vocalise it like this: “DONG dit DONG di-di | DONG di-di DONG di-di”.

This pattern is designed to reinforce the pulse of the music (*one* and *three*), but it also contains a clave characteristic in that the 3-side is more active. This becomes even clearer if you think of the two eighth notes on the fourth beat of the first bar as anticipating and belonging to the second bar. It's also important to notice that the *two* and *three* on the 2-side (“dit-dong”) coincide exactly with the clave.

### Tumbao (2/3)



Tumbao is the pattern played by the conga drummer. The conguero in a salsa band is a genuine artist with the prodigious technique necessary to produce a huge variety of different tones from the drum heads. This pattern is notated in a very simplified way, to highlight the most noticeable accented hits. It could be vocalised a bit like this: “ta-ka ta-ka ta-ka DU-DU | ta-ka ta-DU DU-ka-TA-KA”.

Actually, the main point of the tumbao pattern (in conjunction with the bass) is to accent the *four* on every bar – as you can see from the accented pairs of eighth notes. Incidentally, the bass in salsa tends to play on *two-and* and *four* of every bar. This can be confusing if you're used to hearing the bass play on the downbeat (as in jazz and pop) – so until you're used to hearing salsa bass, don't use the bassline to orient yourself rhythmically.

Anyway, sometimes, the congas will play just the first bar of the figure given, repeating over and over, as a clave-neutral pattern. There are lots of tumbao variations – but they're all characterised by strong accents on the *four* of each bar and some emphasise the *two-and* on the 3-side of clave.

## Montuno (2/3)



The montuno (sometimes also called the guajeo) is the busy arpeggiated pattern played by the piano player (or guitar or tres player). The pattern given is very simple but rhythmically very typical.

Montuno playing is stuffed full of variation and syncopation, but in its purest form it has the clear clave characteristic that there are downbeats on the 2-side only. The majority of the notes in the pattern are offbeats, apart from the first two, which hit *one* and *two* on the 2-side only.

Basically, when you hear the piano play on *one*, that's the start of the 2-side bar.

## LACKING DIRECTION?

Okay, finally, here's a cheat. An awful lot of salsa is in 2/3 direction. If you're totally lost and you have to play something, your first guess should be 2/3 (dos-tres).

## GUIDE TO PRONUNCIATION

Son	as in "gone", not "gun"
Rumba	ROOM-bah (capitals denote the stress)
Clave	CLAH-veh
Cascara	CASS-cuh-ruh, not cass-CAR-ah
Cruzado	croo-ZAH-doh
Montuno	mon-TOO-noh
Guajeo	wah-HEY-oh
Timbal	tim-BAHL
Timbales	tim-BAHL-ez
Timbalero	tim-bah-LAIR-oh
Bongocero	bongo-SAIR-oh
Conguero	con-GEH-roh
Campana	cam-PAH-nah
Tumbao	toom-BAH-o
Guajira	wah-HEAR-ah
Mozambique	moe-zam-BEAK-eh, not moe-zam-BEAK

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Best of luck with this stuff. Free to e-mail me with any (preferably constructive) comments at [jlyon@opus28.co.uk](mailto:jlyon@opus28.co.uk).

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