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THE CLAVE

'La Clave' (klah-vay) is the most crucial element in Latin Afro-Caribbean Music. The clave is an underlying ostinato rhythmic pattern on which the music is rhythmically based. This pattern is played on two wooden sticks about one inch in diameter by eight inches in length called by the same name, "claves". It is also played on a woodblock. It is believed the clave was born out of the 6/8 rhythms of the African tribes and that originally there were many claves that were used by Nigerian and Congolese slaves.

Afro-Cuban Music, Salsa, Merengue and Bossa Novas all have a clave. Much like Jazz and Rock in which two and four are the strong beats, clave is the underlying accent in these musics. They must be composed and performed with the clave in mind. Afro-Cuban composers naturally write with an internalized knowledge of the clave. A musician, singer, or writer well versed in this idiom automatically hears and feels if a melodic phrase or rhythmic pattern is "cruzado" crossed or inverted with the clave pattern.

The clave used today is either "rumba/guaguanco clave" or "son clave". This rhythmic pattern encompasses a total of four beats (two measures in 2/2 time, Illus. 1). Clave 3:2 means three accents followed by two. They can be inverted with the "two-side" of the clave at the beginning of the phrase (two accents followed by three). Percussion patterns, piano and bass tumbaos, melodies and any improvised riffs or solos must adhere to these accents.

Illustration 1

Son Clave 3:2



Rumba/Guaguanco Clave 3:2



Son Clave 2:3 (Inverted)



Rumba/Guaguanco Clave 2:3 (Inverted)



GUAGUANCO



Track 10

Clave Guaguanco 2:3

Bass Example 9

Conga

Guaguanco Clave

etc.

Bass pick-up

Gm

Gm(maj7)

Gm7

C7

Am

Am(maj7)

Am7

D7

Gm

Gm(maj7)

Gm7

C7

Am

Am(maj7)

Am7

1. - 4.

D7

5.

Am7

D7