

## AFRO-CUBAN MUSIC: THE CLAVE

### Introduction

The **clave** is the central rhythmic pulse that forms the basis for all other Afro-Cuban rhythms. A word of Spanish origin, “*clave*” translates into English quite literally as “*key*”. You may therefore think of the clave as a type of key signature - one that defines the rhythmic structure of the music, rather than the harmonic structure. Other rhythms and melodies in Afro-Cuban music are commonly derived from the clave, and make use of the clave pulse to create a tension & release effect. This gives the music a driving forward pulse, suitable for dance rhythms such as Salsa, Son and Rumba de Guaguanco.

The word *clave* also refers to the percussion instrument used to play the clave rhythm - a pair of wooden sticks (or *claves*) that create a clear, medium-high pitched clicking sound, designed to cut through a band at full volume. Modern, mass-produced claves, made of either wood or a synthetic material, typically come as a pair matched in size. Traditional Cuban claves are wooden and are often unmatched in size - the smaller clave used as the ‘striker’ and the larger clave the ‘resonator’. Today, many drummers and percussionists play mountable plastic tone blocks (such as LP Jam Blocks) in place of traditional hand-held claves. Played with a drumstick, timbale stick or foot-pedal, these synthetic blocks offer the percussionist enhanced durability and tonal projection, with the added advantage of only requiring one limb to play them.

While traditional Afro-Cuban ensembles will usually play the clave rhythm as part of the percussion groove, some more modern groups will often omit the clave rhythm but continue to use the clave pulse as a guide over which to play it's derivative rhythms. A musician playing a rhythm or phrase that compliments the clave pulse is said to be “*in*” clave, and one who's rhythms clash with the pulse is said to be “*out*” of clave.

### Origins

It is generally recognized that the clave rhythm originated in Africa from music played in spiritual and religious drumming rituals. One such form of such music, known as *Bembe*, features a 6/8 feel with a repetitive pattern played on the conga, or sometimes a hoe blade. This syncopated pattern turned into what is now known as the *Afro-Cuban 6/8 Clave*, and is still used in Afro-Cuban music today.

Modern styles of Afro-Cuban music are influenced by European classical music and make use of this same clave structure, often in a 4/4 (or 2/2) time signature. There are four variants to the modern 4/4 clave rhythm, in addition to the Afro-Cuban 6/8 Clave.

### STABBING BELL PATTERN



### AFRO-CUBAN 6/8 CLAVE



**AFRO-CUBAN 6/8 CLAVE vs 3:2 RUMBA CLAVE**

**Ex. 2a** 



**Ex. 2b** 



**Rumba Clave**

Rumba clave is more direct descendant of Afro-Cuban 6/8 Clave and gets its name from the song/dance form in which it is used, called *Rumba de Guaguanco*. Rumba clave is also used in modern salsa, as well as more progressive latin jazz, and lends a more complex, driving rhythmic feel than Son clave.

**3:2 RUMBA CLAVE**

**Ex. 3a** 

**2:3 RUMBA CLAVE**

**Ex. 3b** 

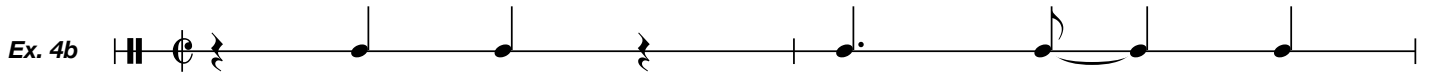
**Son Clave**

Son clave is the type of clave used in a traditional Cuban song style called *Son*. Son clave is now also used extensively in modern salsa, and has also been influential in western pop and rock.

### 3:2 SON CLAVE



### 2:3 SON CLAVE



### 3:2 vs 2:3

Each clave rhythm is said to have a structure of either 3:2 or 2:3. These numbers simply refer to the number of pulses in each bar of that particular clave. A 3:2 clave has 3 pulses in the first bar, and 2 pulses in the second bar, and vice versa for 2:3. You will notice that a 3:2 clave sounds very similar to a 2:3 clave after a few bars, because they are essentially two identical rhythms - only the starting points differ.