

Improvisations of a Quinto Player: Tone, Time, and Motive in Rumba's Lead Drum

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In Afro-Cuban ensemble drumming, recurring composite rhythms are often formed by the layering of individual ostinatos. The most variation is heard in the lead conga drum (the quinto), whose improvisatory phrasing features motivic variants, contrametric accents, and frequent departures from cyclical patterns (Peñalosa 2010). Indeed, quinto players often display astonishing rhythmic invention (Stover 2009). In this presentation, we examine quinto improvisations in three rumba recordings (Guaguancó, Yambú, and Columbia), focusing on the lead drummer's motivic manipulations. The recordings, which were made in Cuba by one of the co-authors, used contact microphones in a multi-track setup to isolate the details of each percussion part. This allowed us to zero in on the details of the quinto while assessing the interrelationships among players in the ensemble. Our analyses illustrate how the quinto's transformations of various motives enrich the already complex and loosely isochronous contrapuntal web formed by the other instruments. Taking ghost tones and timbre contrasts into account results in a detailed and integrated picture of the quinto's rhythmic phrasing.