

## SIMPLE SALSA

Give me the conga drums, big and small cow bells, guiros, claves, and a dozen experienced music teachers, or give me a dozen 6 year-olds who grew up in rocking storefront churches, and I can have them singing, dancing, and drumming salsa in less than five minutes. Give me a Guinness Book of Records challenge, and I can probably get these two groups stirring up the salsa nicely in less than three minutes. If we pass out the instruments very carefully and have everyone poised properly when the timer starts, someone young, sharp, charismatic, highly skilled in the idiom, can get some good salsa going in less than two minutes.

Yet I've listened in as professors of music education argue that multiculturalism in music-dance is difficult and dangerous because we can't fully know the "other" tradition, can't treat it with proper respect, yadda yadda. Or they say, "we can't teach one tradition well, why should we try two." But unlike the Western tradition, some of the other traditions can and should be taught or transmitted by total immersion in just a few minutes. You can be baptised a "salsero" with just a few splashes of the sauce!

It's true that Puerto Ricans and Cubans, but especially Puerto Ricans, want to hear salsa done with great precision, executed with fire and spirit, and the "slaps" on the conga, the "snap" of the upbeat on the guiro can take months to perfect and years to get the "feel" or "groove" exactly right for one's own complete satisfaction. But Simple Samba, for another example, is designed to be loose, open! Ask Airto, the samba genius, who got kicked out of NYC salsa bands for playing too sloppy, or because he got bored playing the same bell part over and over and displayed his boredom. Again, simple samba can also be taught well in a relaxed 10 or 15 minutes to skilled music teachers or to children who already have some skills and a sense of rhythm. But here in sambaland it may be the case that your first interlock of parts will have that "necessary slippage" or loose, open, feeling, and three rehearsals later the interlock will be locked too tight, the groove will stiffen up and be "not so good," or not as good as "the first time."

Five good reasons to teach simple salsa to little children.

1. it's still a dance music that cuts across many boundaries, has affinities with jazz, rock, reggae, disco, soul, funk, etc. These rhythms ARE the basis of cha cha cha, boogaloo, big golden oldie hits like "Low Rider" and "Spill the Wine," classic Santana tunes, and can be integrated with mambo, guaguanco, merengue and other Latin streams of music.
2. gives equal access to 'old world' European and African traditions. . .  
and to North & South American traditions . . .  
and these rhythms ARE the Hispanic-Caribbean tradition!
3. speaks to the two largest North American minorities, African-American and Latin-American, and lets everyone else participate in a living, broadly popular tradition;
4. requires equal facility in dancing, singing, drumming, playing instruments;
5. is a great tradition for 'making your own' songs, dances, drum improvisations.

All of these skills need to be taught by a live experienced player in person; this is just a shorthand description of what needs to be covered. Many of these skills can be heard on the CD in the back of this book.

Dance Step (to any slow tempo salsa classic song playing on CD or tape player if drummers not available)

Standing in place move your feet in 4 little steps: R L R small-kick-with-left;  
L R L small-kick-with-right...etc.

(Controversies have raged over how this step ought to be synchronized with the music but a simple way to start is to have the small kick coincide with the 4 x tone-tone of the conga pattern below.)

Songs in Coro and Sonero Form

S: Nunca contigo mi amor            C: Nunca contigo  
S: Tu para mi                            C: Yo siempre sere para ti (or vice versa)  
S: Rice n beans rice n beans        C: en la bodega  
etc. (thousands of songs)

Percussion Parts:

clave = **ba di di ba di di ba di di di ba di ba di di di** (each syllable equal time value)  
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

bell = muffled with holding hand, hit every quarternote,  
or matching guiro pattern (ONE two and THREE four and ONE. . . .)

guiro = steady 'deliberato' down stroke on 1 and 3 of each measure,  
tagged on small down stroke, then small upbeat upstroke on "two and."  
"air guiro" a way for everyone to practice the coordination without disturbing others

one hand vertical the other horizontal  
rub the horizontal hand against the vertical hand:

"up d o w n down up d o w n down up d o w n down etc.  
(notation) 8<sup>th</sup> quarter 8<sup>th</sup> 8<sup>th</sup> quarter 8<sup>th</sup> 8<sup>th</sup> etc.  
1 2 & 3 4 & etc.

conga = palm tip slap tip palm tip tone tone etc. (even 8<sup>th</sup> notes)  
L L R L L L R R

A Skill List

- 1) chant and do: "palm tip slap rest rest"  
1 & 2 3 4  
L L R
- 2) chant and do: "palm tip slap tip palm tip tone tone"  
L L R L L L R R

3) doing #2 in tight synchrony with other drummers

- 4) doing #2 with other drummers while someone plays a different rhythm part (guiro or bell or clave)
- 5) doing "air guiro" correctly (see above)
- 6) transferring this coordination to an actual guiro
- 7) playing this guiro pattern in tight coordination with other guiro players
- 8) playing the pattern with other guiro players while others play the conga part
- 9) sing the song "rice n beans rice n beans en la bodega"
- 10) sing the song in synchrony with conga players  
"rice and....." matches the two tones of the conga pattern  
"beans" is on one or first palm of the conga pattern
- 11) sing the song in synchrony with guiro players
- 12) sing the song while playing the conga part at the same time
- 13) sing the song while playing the guiro part at the same time
- 14) learning to hold the clave pattern as a hand clap
- 15) learning to hold either end of the clave pattern as a call and response exercise
- 16) learning to hold actual claves or sticks correctly and do the pattern
- 17) learning to hold clave pattern and sing "rice n beans" song  
beat on "beans"....."beans"..... "la" (bodega) clap clap (2 claps occupy space before starting song again)
- 18) dancing the basic dance step, R L R kick Left on the two tones of the conga, reverse L R L kick Right on two tones of conga
- 19) sing the song while dancing
- 20) play the guiro and sing the three songs while dancing in time with other players!

#### Commentary

The skills of "simple salsa" could be taught in very different sequences e.g. starting with song, starting with dance, starting with clave, starting with conga pattern, starting with air guiro.

The list of twenty skills is just an example of what "the skills list" might be. Anyone teaching this can think of other ways to "break down" or "break out" the component skills of salsa flow and interlocking patterns. A skill is anything we can name and show/do a demonstration of – can you do air guiro? Can you shout Ah-SHAY! In the right spot after I've

done the triple clap three times? Can you do the three triple claps that will make me shout Ah-SHAY in the right place?

The skills list above is not in strict order of difficulty. For the 5 and 6 year-olds I've been working with twice a week after school the past month or so, most of them have skills 1 through 7, 9, 14, 15, 18. That is about 11 skills out of the 20 listed. They still have a lot of trouble interlocking parts, holding a part with others while some other rhythm is being held by another person or group. They have roughly the same number of skills for "simple samba" – can play the core conga part two different ways but not the third and fourth ways, can play a bell part in synch with other bell players and most of the time with other drummers. Most haven't got the shaker part in hand yet. They have eight or nine skills out of the fifteen to twenty simple samba skills I've tried to establish.

How many elementary school teachers or teacher's aides can do all twenty skills on the "simple salsa" list?

Do all of our Muse Incorporators or Leap and Learn instructors in Buffalo have at least fifteen of the twenty "simple salsa" skills? Which fifteen? Have they got a two minute or five minute or ten minute set of drills or practices they can do to bring along the salsa skills of the children in their classes? The samba skills? Bomba?

Similar lists of skills and questions can be generated for Brazilian samba, Iroquois social dances, Irish clogging, Senegalese dances/drum patterns style by style, South African gumboot dancing, Polish-American polka and oberek, Balkan line dancing, Balinese gamalan, Chinese Tai Chi, Cambodian Ramvana, etc. etc. etc. etc. and Basic Skills, Intermediate, Advanced can be defined for the styles of all cultures in the world.

## Bibliography

“Paideia con Salsa” article ( as starting point for MUSE, Incorporated) See Appendix B.

Look for books and articles by Frances Aparicio, Rafael Figueroa, Peter Manuel, Roberta Singer, John Storm Roberts and Robert F. Thompson to find out more about "salsa," "mambo" and related genres.

Pat Campbell:

For the kids who grow up in rocking storefront churches, it's a breeze to facilitate their continued musicking in schools and other contexts. But for those who do not grow up that way, the challenge belongs to music teachers to “go figure” how to make up for lost time, give them the musical experiences they never had, move them along into their personal and social grooves. It then takes a serious immersion process, with loads of listening, dancing, doing. But it can be done, to bring musically less experienced children up to snuff with those coming from families where music is naturally made.

As to the multiculturalists who assert that music should not be taught if it is not known, I would argue that the way to knowing it is in doing it. As we entered into the magic of performing salsa ourselves, we can back it up with other bits: reading, viewing, conversing with culture-bearers, and more doing. Teaching salsa is no more and no less than playing salsa, where the teacher is hardly distinguished from the other players, because s/he is as likely as they to be

singing, playing, dancing along with the sound. There's no need for much in the way of chat time, nor labels (i.e., terminology) or notes. It's mostly in the doing of it that salsa becomes known, and most certainly loved.

\* No book really delivers on salsa, when what one really wants to do is hear it and see it! But a look and listen to The Rhythm of Latin Music, in Performance in World Music Series (Charley Gerard and Marty Sheller, Gilsum, NH: White Cliffs Media, 1988) and Pablo Nunez' "Chino" on The Rhythmic Construction of a Salsa Tune, Vol. 1 (Burbank CA: Warner Brothers Publishers, 2002) can help bring the flavor forward.