

To Dance to the Clave, or not? That's the Question...

Salsa Music has been around for quite some time and gives a distinct feeling to its listeners. That is why Salsa has touched the lives of dancers worldwide since its rise in the seventies. Salsa music integrates a variety of influences and consists of a mixture of various instruments. Since each song is unique, every song is looked upon as an individual played by different bands using different instrumentation. To name a few, some of the instruments used are: congas, vibraphone, timbales, tympani, maracas, etc. But the point of this discussion is the clave. The clave is a crucial sound in Salsa music, without it the music has an entirely different feeling. The clave originated in Cuba, however the clave rhythms have roots in African bell and drum patterns. It's a simple instrument that creates sound by hitting two wooden pegs together, one of which produces a low-pitched sound while the other creates a higher pitch. There are also plastic claves that imitate the traditional clave.

Some Salseros preach the importance of "finding the clave," to follow the music. Naturally this is an unsatisfying statement to anyone new to the salsa scene. Many people have the ability to find the beat because they've grown up listening to the music. But when first learning to dance salsa, it can be a bit confusing with the mixture of different rhythms found in the music and may take time to hear the clave. Anyone with a background in music will tell you that a single rhythmic sound may not be consistent throughout a piece, and rules are made to be broken. A clave rhythm typically takes place over a period of 8 beats of music, or two 4/4 measures, and provides the foundation in this style of music. A single clave rhythm is not a characteristic of all Salsa music. There are clave breaks in some music where the clave pauses for 16 beats –or more- of music, like Celia Cruz, Ray Barretto, Adalberto Santiago's *Nadie Se Salva De La Rumba*. Or other songs that do not contain a clave at all but use a different instrument to tap out a clave rhythm, like the cowbell or the side of the timbales. There are a variety of clave patterns used in the music; the two major *clave* styles in Afro-Cuban music are the *son clave* and the *rumba clave*. An example of a piece with a rumba clave rhythm is Guayacan Orquesta's *Tocame La Clave*. These rhythms can be approached one of two ways; when played 3/2 (relating to the amount of notes played in each measure) is often referred to as a "*forward clave*" and in the 2/3 referred to as a "*reverse clave*". The 3/2 clave is struck on 1, 2 1/2, 4, 6, 7; an example of a 3/2 *son clave* rhythm is *El Yo-yo* by Wayne Gorbea's Salsa Picante. The 2/3 clave is struck on the 2, 3, 5, 6 1/2, 8; a 2/3 *son clave* rhythm is in *Salsa Brava* by Fruko Y Sus Tesos. *Son clave* is associated more with dance styles, while *rumba clave* is generally tied with folkloric rhythms. The nature of the music determines the clave rhythm(s) used. There is a bit of a debate as to which is more popular, a 3/2 or 2/3 rhythm. Many contemporary compositions such as recordings by Mongo Santamaria, have made use of both *clave* directions in the music. The act of switching the clave rhythm from 2/3 to 3/2 and visa versa is called the Irrational Clave Continuum (ICC), which typically applies to the *Afro-Cuban clave* rhythms but exists in other Latin music styles.

There are other named patterns for the clave, however, just because some patterns are not named, does not mean that they don't exist. Musicians believe that they can still be

creative and implement their own personality into the music. If new salsa music were recorded with a different clave rhythm, would we still consider it Latin, danceable, and Salsa? It is important to express creativity in all its forms. Dancers need to be more aware of the beats of music and musical phrasing, than of the various rhythms played within a composition. There is no need to concern ourselves with the particular rhythms as beginners, only after the fundamentals of the dance are ingrained can we really listen to the music for rhythm variations and syncopations in order to interpret the music and play with the dance. Dancing with (on) the clave means to break on count 2 as a response to the clave rhythm. Dancers shouldn't be chasing after the music. We dance on the beat of the music, as a visual and emotional extension of each musical piece.

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