Drumming the Clave

by Mark Powers www.powerspercussion.com from World Rhythm Webzine□ www.wrwz.com□ Copyright 2007□ (reprinted by permission)

"Clave" is a common rhythm that is found in many styles of African and Latin music. Even if these styles are new to you, you may already be familiar with clave due to its inclusion in several Western styles of music: New Orleans 'Second Line,' early rock and roll (the Bo Diddley beat), and funk. The clave rhythm is often played by claves (two short, thick dowels of wood-- bearing the same name as the rhythm they perform) but can actually be applied to any instrument. We're going to play clave on our drum!

To gain an understanding of the clave rhythm, let's learn to 'say' it before attempting to 'play' it. One way to count clave is to speak the following line *out loud*, accentuating the **bold** syllables with your voice.

one and two **and** three and **four** and one and **two** and **three** and four and

The highlighted (accented) notes represent clave-- more specifically, a rhythm called 3-2 Son clave. 'Son' is the name of this particular pattern (very popular in Cuban music) and '3-2' refers to the fact that there are 3 accents in the first half of the phrase, and 2 in the second half.

If we play each note of the rhythm as an open tone on our drum, the example below is how our 3-2 Son clave looks in boxed notation. Our strokes will be notated as in previous lessons. For a refresher, refer to the end of the article.

Clave example #1

О	-	ı	О	ı	ı	О	ı	ı	-	О	-	О	-	-	-
1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&

Touches (also called *toe* strokes) are produced by playing your drum lightly with your fingertips, creating a quiet tap. They are often used to help a drummer keep steady time and fill in the spaces between the louder bass, open and slap sounds. In example #2, we alternate continuously between the right and left hands, adding soft *touch* strokes between the open tones in our clave pattern.

Clave example #2

О	•	•	О	•	•	О	•	•	•	О	•	О	•	•	•
R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L
1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&

Once the combination of opens and touches is comfortable, other strokes can be applied to our clave rhythm in the same manner. Instead of open tones playing clave, we can use

slaps. And we can use opens (rather than touches) to fill in between those slaps. This slap/open combination gives us example #3-- a groovy sounding rhythm and an excellent exercise in both: a) switching quickly between different stroke types; and b) producing consistent slaps with both hands.

Clave example #3

S	О	О	S	О	О	S	О	О	О	S	О	S	О	О	О
R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L
1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&

Another option would be playing the clave pattern with open tones, filling between those notes with bass strokes.

Clave example #4

О	В	В	О	В	В	О	В	В	В	О	В	О	В	В	В
R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L	R	L
1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&

In Spanish, "clave" means "key." The repetitive clave phrase is often the key feature that holds many Latin (and African) songs and musical styles together. Use your imagination to apply other strokes to our framework above and clave can also be *your* key to developing a wide variety of fun, new rhythms! Enjoy!

Notation key:

B = Bass tone

O = Open tone

S = Slap stroke

• = Touch stroke

-= rest (moment of silence)

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