

THE HISTORY OF THE TIMBALES • VICTOR RENDON

The timbales, a Cuban instrument, developed almost parallel to the development of the Cuban *danzón*. The *danzón* can be traced to the introduction of the French *contradanza* in Haiti during the eighteenth century. The *timbales criollos* or creole *timpani* (a smaller version of the European *timpani*) was used to accompany the *contradanzas* played by an *orquesta típica* which included woodwind and brass instruments such as the clarinet, cornet, trombone, bassoon and tuba. A string section was also employed consisting of violins and contrabass. The percussion consisted of the *timpani* and a *güiro*.

Due to a slave rebellion in Haiti in 1791 many Haitians immigrated to the eastern province of Cuba called Oriente bringing with them the *contradanza*. In Cuba the *contradanza* evolved into the *danza*, *danza habanera* or *habanera*, and finally the *danzón*. All of these forms made use of the creole *timpani*. When the *danzón* appeared in the early 1900's a new kind of orchestra appeared called *charanga francesa* (French orchestra). This new combination of instruments consisted of a wooden flute, piano, contrabass, violins, *güiro* and the *pailitas* or *timbales criollos*.

It was during this era of the early *danzón* that the European *timpani* went through some changes in order to adapt to the popular music. The *timbales* came into being when the *danzón* became popular and the appeal of the dance and rhythm penetrated into the white society. It was impossible to take the very heavy and cumbersome European *timpani* to these dances. A battery of African drums could not be taken either because these instruments were unacceptable in that environment. A smaller *timpani* was thus made by taking metal cylinders and mounting skins on them with tension keys. They were then supported on a metal stand at knee level. These factors made the drums more portable and economical.

The new instrument was played sitting down with the large drum called *hembra* (which means female) to the left and the small drum, *macho* (which means male) to the right. The playing of the *timbales* did not yet make use of a cowbell. The *timbales* were played (just as the creole *timpani*) using a direct transference of the hand drumming technique called *baqueteo*. In effect, the transculturation of the European *timpani* to the smaller *timbales* was due to economical and ethnic factors. As stated by Fernando Ortiz: *Los timbales criollos parecían "hijos" de los timbales blanco y no hubo con ellos reparos de "raza."* The creole *timbales* seemed to be a descendant of the European *timpani* and with them, racial differences were not noted (translation).

In the 1930's, a mambo or *montuno* section was added to the *danzón* employing a small cowbell. The bell was mounted on a sponge ball by cutting a slit in the center of the ball. The mounting handle of the bell was then placed inside the slit of the ball. The ball would then be resting on the small drum. According to Israel "Cachao" López, he and his brother, Orestes López, were the first to use this new *montuno* section in the *danzón* when they worked with the *Orquesta Maravilla de Arcaño* in the 1930's. Consequently the *cha cha chá* and the term mambo were born from this section of the *danzón*.

In the 1940's the *timbales* were used in Latin orchestras such as the *Machito Orchestra* in New York City. These bands made use of a rhythm section which included bass, piano, bongos, *timbales*/drumset, *güiro* and *maracas*. The horn

section consisted of trumpets and saxophones. This was a direct influence of the big band era. The *timbale* player of this era actually played drumset with the *timbales* set to the right of the player. The drum set was used to play waltzes, fox-trots, etc.

It was around 1940 that a Cuban leader named Arsenio Rodríguez started incorporating a *tumbadora* (called *conga* in the U.S.), bongos, *campana* (bell), two trumpets, a piano and a *tres* (a three double string instrument derived from the Spanish guitar). Towards the late forties, Machito also added a *tumbadora* to his orchestra which led to the percussion combination of bongos, *tumbadora* and *timbales*. By then, the *timbale* set-up included a small and large bell mounted on a post between the two drums. A ride cymbal was also added which became the common set-up of today. It was during this era that Ernesto Anthony (Tito) Puente brought the *timbales* into the spotlight as a solo instrument paving the way for others.

Today the *timbales* are used in a variety of contexts that include many styles and influences. In Latin music the *charanga* bands still exist carrying on the tradition of the *charanga* style. Another type of band is the *conjunto*. A *conjunto* consists of 3 or 4 trumpets, piano, bass, bongo, congas, *güiro*, clave, *maracas* and vocals. *Timbales* are not traditionally used in the *conjunto* bands. The bongo player carries the band by playing a hand bell in the *montuno* section of a tune. Still, another type of band is the *orquesta*. Even though most orchestras do not have the same set-up as they had in the big band era, they still make use of any combination of wind instruments such as trumpets, saxes and trombones. In the *orquesta* a *timbalero* is used in conjunction with a *conga* and bongo player.

One can see that the *timbales* developed as a result of the acculturation of European and African cultures which unfortunately was a result of the slave trade in the mid-century.

Influence between Cuban and American Music

There has always been a musical influence between the United States and Cuba since before the turn of the century. Not ignoring the beginning of the century, a major pivotal point was when Cuban *conguero*, Luciano Pozo y Gonzales (Chano Pozo), was recommended by Mario Bauza to play in Dizzy Gillespie's big band in 1947. Dizzy had already been exposed to Latin music in Cab Calloway's band who recorded Latin influenced tunes such as "Congo-Conga" as early as 1938. Pozo contributed Afro-Cuban derived material to Dizzy's band with his input in compositions such as "Cubana Be-Cubana Bop," and "Manteca." Other Cuban percussionists who later played with Dizzy after Chano's death were Candido Camero and Chino Pozo (Chano's cousin). The merging of jazz with Afro-Cuban rhythms became known as *bebop* and is still with us today known as Latin-jazz.

Cuban drummers and percussionists have always been heavily influenced by American drummers from the jazz and pop fields. Cuban drummer, Guillermo Barreto was well versed in jazz. Says Ignacio Berroa, "He was one of the most incredible drummers that ever lived. When I was a kid, Tommy Dorsey went to play at the Tropicana with Buddy Rich on drums. One night Buddy got sick and Barreto played the show. Of course he didn't have the same chops but he played the show well. When Dizzy Gillespie went to Cuba, Guillermo knew every

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tune that Dizzy had recorded." The influence of the American big bands can also be seen in the orchestras of Benny Moré and Arturo "Chico" O' Farrill with the addition of a full brass section, saxophones, plus bass drum and cymbal to the timbale setup.

American drummers have also been influenced by Cuban drumming. Jazz drummer, Art Blakey developed many of his ideas from African and Afro-Cuban influences. In 1947 he spent some time in Africa and came back applying some of those sounds on the drumset particularly his 6/8 patterns. In 1948 he recorded along side with Chano Pozo on an album called *Art Blakey/James Moody: New Sounds*, shortly before Pozo's death. He later went on to record several albums with strong African and Afro-Cuban influences such as, *Orgy in Rhythm Vol. 1 & 2* (1957), *Drum Suite* (1957), *Holiday For Skins Vol. 1 & 2* (1958), and *The African Beat* (1962). These recordings feature drumset players such as Art Blakey, Art Taylor, Philly Joe Jones, Papa Jo Jones, and "Specs" Wright with percussionists like Candido Camero, Carlos "Patato" Valdés, Ray Barretto, Ubaldo Nieto, and Sabu. Blakey also played on a Kenny Dorham album titled *Afro-Cuban* with Carlos "Patato" Valdés on congas. Some of Blakey's trademarks were his mambo derived cymbal patterns with conga assimilation in the left hand between the snare drum and the toms. His famous raising of the pitch with the left elbow on the snare drum (with snares off) is also a result of hand drumming influence.

Elvin Jones also employs many Latin rhythms in his style of playing. Listening to some of his recordings, you will here African polyrhythms, 6/8, mambo, and mozambique derived sounds.

Art Blakey and Elvin Jones are just two examples of how American drummers adapted the Afro-Cuban style on the drumset. Others who contributed to the melting pot were band-leaders such as Stan Kenton, Cal Tjader, George Shearing, Alberto Socarras, Machito, Tito Puente, and Mongo Santamaria. The recordings of these artists and many others are the fore-runners of what is now called Latin-jazz.

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