

A History of the Conga Drum

By Nolan Warden

Despite its widespread use, the conga drum may be one of the most misunderstood percussion instruments. It is all-too-often disregarded as an “accessory,” not worthy of serious consideration. Even though the past decade has brought increased interest in “world” percussion, information about the history of congas remains hard to find. Before approaching that history, though, we must consider a few fundamentals. Besides, we haven’t even called this drum by its correct name yet!



Photo © CIDMUC, Havana. From book/CD entitled *From Afro-Cuban Music to Salsa* by Dr. Olavo Alén Rodríguez (PIRANHA Records, BCD-POIR1258, 1998).



The area historically known as the Congo.

area known as the Congo, it was natural for their cultures to permeate the solares of Cuba.

Bantu

Some sources speak of Bantu *ngoma* drums as being the cultural forebears of tumbadoras. However, this is not precise. First, we must consider that the area historically called “the Congo” is not just one country or group of people. In fact, it historically refers to a large area of central Africa that includes many Bantu-derived languages and ethnic groups. Therefore, when Cuban slaves originating from different areas of the Congo said *ngoma*, they could have been speaking of completely different drums.

Even today, the word *ngoma* in Africa refers to many different types of drums. When slaves from the Congo arrived in Cuba, they likely found that *ngoma* was a common word among their many dialects, though not necessarily referring to exactly the same drums. Ortiz stated that, “In Cuba, generally, all drums of Congo lineage are recognized with the generic Bantu word *ngoma*.” So, if *ngoma* is not a precise term for the Bantu drums influencing the tumbadoras, what is?

The specific drums most associated with the Bantu people in Cuba are the *Makuta* (mah-kú-tah) and the *Yuka* (yú-cah). To this day, both are still occasionally called *ngoma*. Makuta ensembles played for religious ceremonies, whereas the Yuka drums were secular. This is an important point since it means that

Makuta drums may have been reserved for use only in closed, secret ceremonies, while the Yuka drums could be heard and used by anyone in the solares. Although Yuka drumming greatly influenced rumba, it is interesting to consider that the Makuta drums (especially the larger, low-pitched ones) have a greater physical resemblance to tumbadoras.

Lucumí

The drums of the Bantu people probably had the strongest influence on the tumbadoras, but they were not alone. The second largest group of Afro-Cubans, whose drums also had an impact on the development of the tumbadoras, was the Lucumí.

The word *Lucumí* (loo-koo-mee) is used in Cuba to refer to the descendants of the Yoruba people of Nigeria. The Yoruba batá drums, and the Santería ceremonies where they are played, are commonly considered the most recognized symbol of Afro-Cuban culture. Batá drums have a strict liturgy to this day and were historically played in closed, secret ceremonies. However, there was (and still is) a less sacred Lucumí drum called bembé, which likely influenced the tumbadoras.

Although similar to batá music, and religious in nature, the bembé ceremonies were not necessarily closed to the uninitiated. They took on more of a festive atmosphere and, like the Yuka festivities, could have been frequented by anyone in the solares.

The construction of bembé drums varied, but many types were almost identical to tumbadoras. In fact, the construction that Ortiz considered the most common for bembé drums is exactly like early tumbadoras except slightly smaller. This fact is often overlooked when considering the tumbadora’s origins.

Rumba

The development of rumba is inseparable from that of the tumbadoras. It was the first music to make use of drums specifically called tumbadoras and, eventually, led to their use as a popular and serious instrument. Rumba is still popular today and is played by groups such as Los Muñequitos de Matanzas, Grupo AfroCuba, Conjunto Clave y Guaguancó, and many others, including groups in the U.S.

It is also interesting to note that before



Sketch of relatively modern Makuta drums by Fernando Ortiz. Sucesores de Fernando Ortiz



Yuka drums being played.
CIDMUC, Havana⁴

the word *rumba* became standardized, other words such as *tumba*, *tambo*, and *macumbá* were used to refer to these musical gatherings. It is possible, although impossible to verify, that the name *tumbadora* was simply applied to the drums that were played during a *tumba*.

CONSTRUCTION AND MODERNIZATION

The first, and most important, change in Afro-Cuban drum construction that led to the development of the *tumbadora* was the use of stave construction, similar to the way barrels are made. This change, according to Ortiz, was an adaptation to distinguish these drums from their African counterparts.

During Spanish colonial rule in Cuba (and during the U.S. military occupation of Cuba from 1898 to 1902) African drums were often banned. However, since these drums were no longer carved from a single piece of wood, they were not considered completely African. This change was an act of survival that allowed blacks to continue playing these drums with less persecution. The drums maintained, however, their African shape, sound, and tuning method.

The lug-tuning mechanisms of today's *tumbadoras* are a relatively modern development. Like their predecessors,

the Yuka, Makuta, and *bembé* drums, the membranes of early *congas* and *tumbadoras* (usually mule or cowhide) were attached to the body of the drum by tacks. In order to raise the pitch, a player would hold a flame near the drumhead to evaporate the retained moisture.

Lug-tuned drums became widespread during the mid-1950s, as materials became more accessible and as performers became less patient with the time required to tune with a flame. Carlos "Patato" Valdez has claimed that he introduced lug-tuning to the *tumbadoras*.⁵ This is a grand claim and, despite Patato's importance in the history of *tumbadoras*, it is highly unlikely. Armando Peraza probably got closer to the truth when he stated in an interview that this development took place in Cuba by a person named Vergara.⁶ The issue is not put to rest, though, since Candido Camero has stated that Vergara may not have been the first. He believes that the first lug-tuned *tumbadoras* were created in the city of Santiago de Cuba (Vergara was located in Havana).⁷

Ortiz did not pursue this issue much, but his work does show a set of creolized

batá drums using lug-tuning as early as 1915. Therefore, it's not a stretch to imagine that *tumbadoras* had the same type of hardware applied much earlier than the '50s. What is certain, though, is that this development significantly changed the range of available pitches for these drums, allowing pitches much higher than previously possible.

Interestingly, drum makers in the United States have had quite a hand in using new technologies to construct *tumbadoras*. The first instance was the creation of drums made of fiberglass. According to credible accounts, the first person to make a fiberglass *tumbadora* was Sal Guerrero, a bandleader and auto-body repairman living in San Francisco.⁸ Guerrero, actually of Mexican heritage, created the drums for use in his band, not only making the drum shells stronger, but also able to project their sound over a high-volume big band. It is thought that Armando Peraza was the advisor for this process and the first to play these drums, which were created in 1949.

Another innovator who is also sometimes credited with making the first fiberglass *tumbadoras* (usually by



Sketch of *bembé* drums by Fernando Ortiz
Sucesores de Fernando Ortiz

percussionists on the East Coast) is Frank Mesa. Mesa created a popular line of drums called Eco-tone. Starting in the early '50s, and becoming most popular in the '60s, Eco-tones were endorsed by many stars including Candido, Miguelito Valdés, and the percussionists for Jimi Hendrix. Eco-tones and other brands, such as Gon Bops and Valje, were well established during the '50s and early '60s, but business and political realities were beginning to change.

When Cuba's revolution of 1959 eventually led to a full U.S. embargo of the country, the markets changed dramatically for drum makers. The popularity of tumbadoras was growing while the supply of drums from Cuba halted completely. This would appear to be a positive development for the U.S. companies mentioned above, but the increased demand couldn't be met through their production methods.

Martin Cohen, founder of Latin Percussion, Inc. (LP) began to meet this demand. Citing the embargo with Cuba as one of the conditions leading to his business success, Cohen was the first drum maker to provide a mass-produced yet relatively authentic tumbadora. This heavy competition was the beginning of the end for the smaller companies, but the increased supply and lower prices allowed new markets to be formed (e.g., school bands).

Remo addressed the temperamental nature of animal-skin heads in 1995. The company's first attempt at a synthetic tumbadora head was a significant event, albeit not appreciated by all players. Certainly, with an instrument so steeped in tradition, technological advances are not always received kindly. Many people thought the synthetic Mondo head was doomed to failure since it did not sound exactly like real skins. However, freedom from the elements was an enticing advantage for many players.

Synthetic heads did not fail. Instead, they were improved upon and adopted by other manufacturers, including Evans. Today's synthetic heads sound drastically better than the first models, and their acceptance seems to be growing.

POPULARIZATION

For a long time during their develop-

ment, around the beginning of the twentieth century, tumbadoras were not well known or accepted by mainstream Cuban society. They were in a class of instruments and music considered inferior due to their inherent connection to the solares. Luckily, this began to change with the help of some brave musicians, the growth of the music industry, and the open ears and minds of music listeners.

1930s to 1940s

In the late 1930s and early '40s, tumbadoras began to find a place in popular Cuban music. The person usually credited with fully incorporating them into popular music is Arsenio Rodríguez. A famous musician, composer, and bandleader, Rodríguez was proud of his African heritage. In 1940, when he began to standardize the instrumentation of the *conjunto* ensemble, he had his brother, Israel Rodríguez, play tumbadora. Another popular group of the time, Arcaño y Sus Maravillas, asked Israel to sit in with their band and teach their percussionist how to play tumbadora.⁹ These ensembles revolution-



Desi Arnaz has some splainin' to do about that technique!

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ized the sound of Cuban music and became hits at home and in the States.

In New York City, a popular big-band called Machito and His Afro-Cubans was the first to introduce a tumbadora on stage consistently. This occurred by 1943 with Carlos Vidal, among others, playing tumbadora. Actual conga drums had been seen and heard in the U.S. before, but they had mostly been a novelty act.

The first bandleader to perform relatively authentic Cuban music in the U.S. was Don Azpiazu in 1930. Throughout that decade, his band traveled the country, becoming famous with hits such as "La Conga."¹⁰ This song was probably the first time the rhythm *la conga* had been played on U.S. soil, but it is unclear whether or not it incorporated actual conga drums.

Later, Desi Arnaz (of *I Love Lucy* fame) claimed that he was the first to introduce the conga in the U.S. It is not clear, though, if he was speaking about the dance, the drum, or both. Either way, it is difficult to seriously consider this claim since Arnaz's authenticity is questionable, to say the least. His commercial application and exploitation of the Carnival-style conga drum in Broadway musicals, and later television, is the reason he is not respected by true culture-bearers.

In any case, bandleader Machito (Frank Grillo) is credited with being the first U.S. artist to use a true tumbadora, in the sense that it was not connected with the rhythm *la conga*. Machito's musical director and brother-in-law, Mario Bauza, also had a large impact on the most famous pairing of Afro-Cuban rhythms with jazz.

In 1947, Dizzy Gillespie contacted Bauza to find someone to play what Dizzy then called "tom-toms." Bauza directed him to a new arrival in town, Chano Pozo. Chano was a famous percussionist and composer from Havana who had come to New York after realizing that his compositions were popular among groups such as Machito's Afro-Cubans.

The fusion of danceable Cuban rhythms and non-danceable American jazz created tension at first. Some of Dizzy's players complained about the situation, saying that jazz wasn't the



Chano Pozo
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place for such “jungle drums.” But the new sound of “Cubop,” later known as “Latin jazz,” was a hit with audiences. “Manteca,” one of Pozo’s most famous compositions, made popular by Gillespie, is now a standard among Cuban musicians and jazz musicians alike. Pozo is legendary among hand percussionists today. He was a powerful performer whose rough-around-the-edges lifestyle led to his tragic death in 1948.

It is important to note that, during this time period, most performers were using only one tumbadora at a time. This was the standard, since folkloric music also called for one man per drum. The musician usually credited with being the first to use more than one drum is Candido Camero (usually just called by his first name). Candido arrived in the States in 1946, playing percussion for a dance team. At that time he was playing bongó and quinto at the same time, and later, in 1952, he began to regularly use two

tumbadoras. He also considers himself to be the first person to use three tumbadoras simultaneously. This established an increased level of professionalism for these instruments by implementing a higher degree of coordination.

1950s to the Present

Tumbadoras, and Latin music in general, gained widespread popularity during the 1950s. In the U.S., a mambo “craze” swept the nation and reached its zenith with the arrival of the cha-cha-cha.¹¹ Meanwhile, an important musical development of the tumbadoras was taking place in Cuba.

In 1952, the folkloric rumba group called Guaguanco Matancero recorded a hit called “Los Muñequitos.”¹² This was significant not only to the musical development of the tumbadoras, but also to the increasing popular support for folkloric Afro-Cuban music. Finally, after years of being applied in other musical styles, the tumbadoras were gaining success with the musical style that created them. This newfound support for folkloric Afro-Cuban music also made its way to the U.S., helping to establish many percussionists.

One such percussionist, Ramón “Mongo” Santamaria, made his debut as a bandleader in 1958 with an Afro-Cuban

folkloric album called *Yambu*. Although some tumbadora players had been bandleaders before (e.g., Miguelito Valdés and Chano Pozo), Santamaria was the first to achieve long-lasting success as such. Some of his later songs, such as “Afro-Blue,” have become standards, and his recording of Herbie Hancock’s “Watermelon Man” was a tremendous hit. Santamaria also led the way in crossing tumbadoras into other popular styles of music, such as R&B. This crossover was just one of many successful appearances of tumbadoras in U.S. music culture.

It is interesting that tumbadoras, while their heritage was relatively unknown, were adopted so thoroughly in other cultures. In the early ‘50s, New York “beatnik” poets hip to bebop would stereotypically pick up a bongó or tumbadora to accompany their works, but the integration goes further. Rock music began to apply tumbadoras frequently during the ‘60s, providing a wider national recognition of the drums. Tumbadoras were used by multiple bands at Woodstock (most notably Santana) and were commonly seen in television performances. However, popular musical styles weren’t the only ones adding the sounds of tumbadoras.

Orchestral and band music has also



Mongo Santamaria
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made use of tumbadoras. Ever since the 1920s in Cuba, classically trained composers have been adding Afro-Cuban percussion to their orchestral pieces. Outside of Cuba, authentic rhythms and instruments were picked up slowly in the realm of classical music, but recently have had more impact. A significant example of this is a recent work by Osvaldo Golijov titled "La Pasión Segun San Marcos." A choral passion in the tradition of Bach, it amazed audiences by successfully integrating Afro-Cuban, Venezuelan, and Brazilian instruments and rhythms.

In the classroom, the push for "multicultural" education has led to the adoption of tumbadoras as a catch-all instrument. Being widely available and relatively inexpensive for mass-produced models, tumbadoras have become almost standard equipment for school band programs in the U.S. Such a presence has even led some schools to develop programs of study that involve tumbadoras in the curriculum.

Recognizing the importance and popularity of hand percussion, Berklee College of Music in Boston became the first degree-granting institution to allow students to study tumbadoras as a principal instrument (in addition to other required hand percussion instruments). It is also probably the first music school to incorporate tumbadoras into the curriculum at all. This began in the late 1970s with Pablo Landrum teaching them on the side and, in the mid '80s, with Joe Galeota teaching a class called "Latin Percussion." In the late '80s, Ed Uribe developed the official hand percussion curriculum that would allow students to major in hand percussion performance. Other instructors, such as Carmelo Garcia in 1990, were hired to assist Uribe with running this new program.

A year later, Berklee hired Giovanni Hidalgo, a world-famous tumbadora player who has revolutionized tumbadora technique and speed. Hidalgo's presence in the department helped spread the word about the program, bringing students from around the world.¹³ Although Berklee remains the only U.S. college where one can major in hand percussion performance, the importance of preparing students in all styles

of music has led many percussion departments to add tumbadoras to their curriculum.

North America was not the only place to accept and apply tumbadoras to its own music. In fact, the place that has integrated tumbadoras into its music with the most zeal could be said to be Africa. Cuban music gained tremendous popularity in African countries such as Mali, Senegal, Cameroon, and Congo, generating styles such as African Rumba and Soukous. Indeed, some of today's greatest African superstars, such as Youssou N'Dour and Baaba Maal, got their start by performing Cuban music for African audiences.¹⁴ Now, even in popular African styles not based on Cuban music, tumbadoras can be found on stage regularly.

CONCLUSION

Today, tumbadoras are so widely available that they often replace the drums that birthed them—the bembé, Makuta, and Yuka. Even outside of Cuba, they have found a place in the music and institutions of almost every corner of the globe. As such, they have also been taken for granted, sitting in the closets of percussion departments and being used as catch-all "ethnic" drums. I hope this ar-



Giovanni Hidalgo

Photo by Martin Cohen, courtesy of LP/congahead.com

ticle has begun to address that problem by giving the reader a deeper understanding and appreciation of these culturally fascinating, yet serious instruments.

ENDNOTES

1. Sketches by Fernando Ortiz used in this article come from *Los Instrumentos de la Música Afrocubana*. They are used by permission from his daughter, María Fernanda Ortiz, representative of Sucesores de Fernando Ortiz.
2. Fernando Ortiz, *Los Instrumentos de la Música Afrocubana*. Havana: Publicaciones de la Dirección de Cultura del Ministerio de Educación, 1952.
3. Olavo Alén Rodríguez, "A History of the Congas," *The Conga Cookbook*. New York: Cherry Lane Music, 2002. Article available online: <http://www.chucksilverman.com/congahistory.html>.
4. Reproduced from book/CD *From Afro Cuban Music to Salsa* by Dr. Olavo Alén Rodríguez. Piranha Records, BCD-PIR1258, 1998.
5. <http://www.patato.com>
6. The interview, with Luis Ernesto on SalsaWeb (http://www.salsaweb.com/music/articles/peraza_cm.htm), gives the name as Valgaras. Through other sources, including my own interviews with Candido, I have learned that the name was probably transcribed incorrectly and should be spelled Vergara or Vergaras, since it was actually two brothers.
7. Candido mentioned this during a telephone interview with the author on December 23, 2003.
8. Armando Peraza (see endnote 6). John Santos, e-mail to the author, April 12, 2003.
9. Liner notes, *Cuba: I Am Time*, CD, Blue Jackel, 1997.
10. John Storm Roberts, *The Latin Tinge: The Impact of Latin American Music on the United States*. 1979; New York: Oxford UP, 1999.
11. Cha-cha-cha is the full name for the style sometimes only referred to in the U.S. as "cha-cha."
12. The popularity of this song later led the group to change their name to Los Muñequitos de Matanzas. The group still exists today under that name and is considered by many to be the ultimate Cuban rumba group.
13. Specific dates regarding Berklee's hand percussion program come from personal communication with Mikael Ringquist (cur-

rent Hand Percussion Program Coordinator), Ed Uribe, Joe Galeota, and Dean Anderson (Percussion Department Chair).
 14. Sue Steward, *¡Musica!* London: Thames & Hudson, 1999.

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