

# Solo Ideas for Timbales, Bongos, and Congas

Victor Rendón, Wilson “Chembo” Corniel, Yasuyo Kimura

By Victor Rendón

**B**eginners on timbales sometimes sound too much like drumset players playing timbales. This is usually due to a lack of understanding of the stylistic language, touch, and a premature flash of technique in the wrong places. While I was directing the Latin Jazz Ensemble at Lehman College one day, the drumset player decided to play timbales on one tune. He hit a rimshot. Rather than producing a good ringing tone, it sounded more like a “thud.” I yelled out, “You sound

like a drummer!” He yelled back, “I am a drummer!” What I was getting at is that a player will play the way that he or she hears it in their mind. One must have a good mental image of how to approach the instrument in order to get the appropriate sounds.

Any good jazz drummer has spent countless hours listening to the timekeeping and solo ideas of such drummers as Warren “Baby” Dodds, “Papa” Jo Jones, Art Blakey, Max Roach, Elvin Jones, Tony Williams, and so on. The same holds true for Latin



VICTOR RENDÓN, WILSON “CHEMBO” CORNIEL, YASUYO KIMURA

percussion instruments. In order to truly become proficient and knowledgeable on these instruments, one must study their legacy.

A good starting point for the study of Latin percussion (bongos, congas, timbales) solos are the so called “old school” players. Their style is relatively simple and easy to understand. Yet, their approach is very melodic and has a lot of soul and swing. As the old saying goes: “No rolls, just butter” vs “All rolls, no butter.”

You can clearly hear the clave direction in many of their figures. Listening to how they phrase and structure their solos will give you the vocabulary and touch from which to build on. That is our ultimate goal. There are too many players to mention. Some of the players mentioned below are not percussion “household” names. However, they should be sought out as essential listening. Most of them were/are also proficient on all instruments.

Bongos: Antolin “Papa Kila” Suárez, Rogelio Iglesias “Yeyito,” John “Dandy” Rodriguez, William Correa aka Willie Bobo, José Mangual Sr. and Jr., Ray Romero.

Congas: Federico Aristides Soto Alejo aka Tata Güines, Cándido Camero Guerra, Ramón “Mongo” Santamaria Rodriguez, Tommy Lopez, Ray Barretto.

Timbales: Osvaldo “Chihuahua” Martinez, Papi Pagani, Raymond Muñoz Rodriguez aka Monchito, Ray Mantilla, Ray Romero, Manny Oquendo, continuing with Tito Puente, Willie Bobo, Guillermo Barreto, Nicky Marrero, Orestes Vilató, and José Luis Quintana aka Changuito, into the present.

## PHRASING

Solos should be approached from a musical standpoint. Randomly hitting notes will not give you the organization and continuity necessary for a logical musical statement. Latin-style solos are often played to a two- or four-bar montuno phrase. That makes it easier for the soloist to think in two- and four-bar phrases and build on them to develop longer solos.

One of the easiest ways to learn solos is to start with one-bar phrases. The one-bar phrases in the next section are taken from *The Art of Playing Timbales*. They were written for timbales but can be applied to other instruments as well. They work well as a repeated phrase.

All accents can be played as a rimshot along with the suggested sticking. Start by playing four measures of time at a comfortable tempo and then play the one-bar phrase four times. Return to playing time and repeat the process for each example. Memorize the examples and experiment with different sounds and stickings for each. This will help in developing stock phrases or “licks” that will serve as a base foundation that you can always fall back on if you need it.

These phrases were not arbitrarily written. They are taken from various solo transcriptions and notes of several timbaleros. Many of them are traditional “licks” that are played by many players. You’ll find many of the phrases throughout transcrip-

tions and recordings. You’ll also find that some of the phrases are rhythmically the same but voiced on different surfaces. This was purposely done so that one can start seeing how one pattern can be used in a number of ways.

Some figures may seem too easy and simple. Keep in mind that these phrases were taken from actual recordings. They were chosen for their melodic content rather than technique display. Each phrase has a melody of its own that makes it stand out. Spend some time reading the passages and singing the melodic riffs to yourself so that they eventually become ingrained in your mind.

## PLAYING SOLOS AND FIGURES IN CLAVE

Soloing in clave is important. Often, if you keep the clave in mind and you listen to the rest of the rhythm section while you are playing, the figures will come out “in clave” automatically. Clave sense is something that develops from listening and playing experience. However, there are some basic guidelines that will help you know if something is in the correct clave. Here are some examples of figures in 2-3 clave. Notice how some of the clave beats meet with the figures. There is also a natural tendency to play more downbeats on the “2” side of the clave and more upbeats on the “3” side of the clave.

### 2-3 clave

2.

3.

4.

## BONGOS

The basic pattern for the bongos is the *martillo* played in straight eighth notes. Variations or riffs called *repiques* are then played according to the “feel” of the music. These riffs are also played in clave. At PASIC, Yasuyo Kimura will present various “repique” patterns in 2-3 and 3-2 clave, demonstrating how they can be developed into longer phrases. The first example shows the *martillo* followed by four common *repiques* played by bongoceros. Examples are in 2-3 clave.

**Key:** T = tips of fingers TH = side of thumb O = open tone on the low drum

### Martillo

T T T TH T T O TH T T T TH T T O TH  
R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L

### Repique riffs in 2-3 clave

1.

2.

3.

4.

## CONGAS/TUMBADORAS

Wilson “Chembo” Corniel will discuss and demonstrate various conga solo techniques that he has learned and used throughout his experience in the New York City scene. Many of these ideas come from renowned players. “Quinto” rumba riffs will also be discussed and demonstrated as in the following.

### 3-2 Rumba Clave

1.

2.

3.

4.

All these ideas will be covered and elaborated on at the clinic. It may be helpful to bring a print copy of this article or have your copy of *Percussive Notes* open on whatever device you use for the online edition so that you can refer to the various music examples.

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*The Art of Playing Timbales* by Victor Rendón  
*The Art of Playing Tumbadoras/Congas* by Wilson “Chembo” Corniel and Victor Rendón

**Victor Rendón** is a New York City percussionist/educator/composer/arranger who has released seven CDs as a leader and has worked with Mongo Santamaria, Chico O’Farrill, Carlos “Patato” Valdés, Ray Santos, Grupo Caribe, The Latin Jazz Coalition, The “New” Xavier Cugat Orchestra, Los Más Valientes, Grupo Latin Vibe, Rudy Calzado’s Cubarama, and many others. He is author of *The Art of Playing Timbales* published by Music in Motion Films. Rendón, who holds a Bachelor of Music degree from the

University of North Texas and a master's degree in education from Hunter College (NYC), has had a lengthy career teaching instrumental music and Latin percussion in the New York City Public Schools. Victor currently performs with his group, Bronx

Conexión Latin Jazz Big Band, and is an adjunct professor at Lehman College in the Bronx, where he teaches percussion, leads the percussion ensemble, and directs the Lehman Latin Jazz Ensemble. **PN**

## WORLD

### **HÉCTOR TASCÓN AND LAURA STEPHANY COHEN** **World Performance: Afro-Colombian Marimba Music Transformed: Sounds of Chonta**

Héctor Tascón, born in Cali, Colombia, has focused his work on the study of percussion and on the traditional music of the South Pacific region of Colombia. The marimbas, currulao rhythm, traditional Colombian legends, and Afro-Colombian dances are at the center of his interests as an artist and researcher. He has won first place in several competitions, including best marimba de chonta player in the 2023 International Music Festival Petronio Álvarez, the Mono Núñez Festival, and the Filarmónica del Valle competition. Héctor has written several method books including: *A Marimbear: oio method to play the marimba de chonta*, *Qué te pasa' vo*, and *Colombia music for symphonic marimba*. Héctor is chair of percussion at the Conservatorio Antonio María Valencia.

Laura Stephany Cohen is a Latin/classical percussionist and multi-instrumentalist from Cali, Colombia. She completed her Bachelor of Music and master's degrees in percussion performance at Eastern Illinois University and the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music respectively. Stephany served as Associate Instructor while at Indiana University, where she taught private percussion lessons and assisted teaching the Afro-Cuban and Brazilian ensembles. Stephany enjoys performing in diverse Latin American, Latin jazz, and fusion groups, specializing in creating a variety of Latin multi-percussion setups for different occasions. Growing up in Cali exposed her to salsa music and the traditional rhythms of this region. As a member of the PAS World Percussion Committee, she looks to spread awareness of the cultural and historical importance Latin American traditions deserve.

### **JONATHAN SCALES** **World Daytime Showcase Concert : Jonathan Scales** **Fourchestra – Live at PASIC**

This will be a live performance by Jonathan Scales Fourchestra featuring Maison Guidry on drums, E'Lon JD on bass, and Jonathan Scales on steel pan. Jonathan Scales Fourchestra is tough to describe. Veering from in-your-face, jaw-dropping chops and passion to quiet moments when you hold your breath to take in a soundscape of solitude, the power trio of electric bass, drums, and steel pans combines elements of jazz, classical, and progressive rock, peppered with Latin rhythms and soulful outbursts of funk. From club and festival stages across North America and Europe, and tours of Africa, Southeast and Central Asia as a Cultural Ambassador for the U.S. Department of State, to their NPR Tiny Desk Concert featuring Béla Fleck, the Fourchestra's live shows make even the most jaded listeners forget where they are – even if just for a moment.

### **M'BEMBA BANGOURA** **World Clinic/Performance: Sounds and Technique of the** **Djembe in Guinea, West Africa**

Master Drummer M'bemba Bangoura (Wula Drum) will demonstrate the sounds, techniques and traditional rhythms on the djembe from his homeland of Guinea, West Africa. Excerpts will be from a variety of time signatures, tempos, and level of complexity. Bangoura will be supported by a small group of drummers to show how the djembe accompaniment parts, the dundun, and solo patterns all fit together. He will also demonstrate the virtuosity of his solos phrases, which make him a true master drummer.

M'Bemba Bangoura has traveled the world as a performer and teacher of the djembe, for which he is revered for his high level of mastery. A native of Guinea, West Africa, M'Bemba began playing the djembe at age seven. By the age of 21, he was an acclaimed drummer and was invited to play for Ballet Djoliba, the national company of Guinea. Since moving to the U.S. in 1992, M'Bemba has been an integral part of the drum and dance scene nationwide. He has taught hundreds of students, many of whom are now teachers themselves. In addition, he has personally created choreography and developed repertoire for dozens of dance companies worldwide. He has recorded four solo albums and an educational project called *Wamato: Everybody Look!* M'bemba is the artistic director of Wula Drum and continues to create repertoire for the group, teaching and performing worldwide.

### **OTHNELL MOYO** **World Clinic/Performance: Music of Zimbabwe**

Othnell Moyo will present the music of his ancestors from his native country, Zimbabwe. He is a multi instrumentalist and vocalist who is amongst the few remaining guardians of Zimbabwean Ancient musical culture and spirituality. His work follows the minority who approach the ancient musical instruments as instruments that evoke the spirits and are used for ancestral worship and Zimbabwean ancient spirituality. Since Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980, the music has slowly been reanimated and rediscovered. However, highly spiritual instruments such as the mbira have been made to fit in modern contexts

Othnell Moyo, also known as "Mangoma" (freely translated as "Drums in Shona and the one with Music in IsiNdebele") is a multi-talented, internationally touring artist and an ethnomusicological researcher and preservation activist, deeply rooted in Zimbabwean culture, who makes 75% of the instruments he plays himself. He was trained as a traditional dancer, actor, and musician and has since studied and acquired detailed knowledge of a vast range of local traditional instruments, musical styles, and rhythms as well as global and contemporary ones. He plays and performs with the diversity of his skills while advocating for the significance of education and preservation around his country's rich cultural history.

### **SALAR NADER** **SAUNGWEME (THE SOUND OF THE BEES)** **World Clinic/Performance: Current Trends in Tabla and the** **Music of Central & South Asia**

Tabla virtuoso Salar Nader is recognized as a global ambassador, weaving South Asian arts into the musical traditions of his Afghanistan heritage. A percussionist, composer, and producer, Salar has studied under Ustad Zakir Hussain since the age of seven. He has toured widely with Stanley Clarke, Kronos Quartet, Wu Man, Miles From India; Central Asian master musicians Homayoun Sakhi and Abbos Kosimovj; and legendary Indian classical musicians including Ustad Zakir Hussain, Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, Selva Ganesh, Alam Khan, Rahul Sharma and many others. Salar is committed to bringing the tabla to a wide audience. In 2019, he founded the Salar Nader Tabla Foundation, globally preserving Afghan cultural traditions through instruments and mentor scholarships, supported by Rhea Designs Inc. His discography includes *Live in San Francisco Volume I*, *The Forgotten Empress*, *In the Footsteps of Babur: Musical Encounters from the Lands of the Mughals*, and his collaborations with Grand Tapestry.