



BASS

David Santos

Latin Bass Playing

This article is my take on the basics (no pun intended) of Latin bass playing. In future columns I will discuss and elaborate on these concepts. For now let's focus on the Afro-Cuban rhythms that fall under the heading of "salsa."

"Salsa," which means sauce, combines the many different musical forms of Latin dance rhythms such as *mambo*, *rumba*, *son*, cha-cha, and all the permutations thereof. In pop music, the key element is the backbeat, or the 2 and 4. Most of the music heard on pop radio accents this backbeat with the snare drum, handclaps, fingerpops, or some other device. In salsa music, the equivalent of pop music's backbeat would be the clave. (For an explanation of the clave and examples, see "Intro to Latin Dance Styles" on page 58.)

If it's new to you, don't worry yourself sick trying

mentioned above has yielded a bass language known as *tumbao*. A *tumbao* bass line fits perfectly with the low-pitched conga drum known as the tumba. It is played as an *ostinato*, or repeating pattern, utilizing syncopation as a defining element.

It is important that you learn this "language" and understand the way the *tumbao* bass line works with the conga drums, and the way this feels when locked in with the proper clave. When you play the *tumbao* rhythm, it's almost as though you're playing in a different time signature than the band. It feels, at times, like 6/8 against the rest of the band's 4/4 time. This is partially because you are playing "off the beat" or "across the bar line." (See Fig. 1)

When playing electric bass, I like to mute with the

Fig. 1—Tumbao in C



Fig. 2



to fully understand the concept of the clave rhythm and how it fits in with the music and your bass line. For now, just learn the examples as individual rhythms by clapping them with a metronome or drum machine, and try to identify the different way each one *feels* in your body! You must learn to feel it, and then everything that happens on the bandstand will relate to the clave that is appropriate for the song that is being played.

In many bands, at least one person will be designated to play the clave rhythms on two wooden sticks known as claves. Everyone is listening to this individual as a sort of reference point. Be aware of the clave and take the stance in your psyche that you will eventually understand it and feel it, but until then just play the bass lines with confidence and enthusiasm. When you play with experienced salsa musicians, they will surely let you know if you are *crusado*, or crossed rhythmically, until one day you will be playing and suddenly realize that you're in clave and that you "get it."

The combination of all the rhythmic musical forms

of my right hand to imitate the thuddy sound associated with the Ampeg "baby bass," a popular instrument among salsa bass players. I rest my palm against the strings near the bridge and pluck the string with my thumb at the boney area just above the joint in a downward motion. I also try to stay on the fatter strings whenever possible to get a rounder, richer tone. Listen to Cachao, Andy Gonzalez, Bobby Rodriguez, Sal Cuevas and Bobby Valentine, to name a few great salsa players.

Anticipation is an important element of the Afro-Cuban bass language. When a series of chord changes presents itself in a tune, the bass usually (but not always) gets to the chord before everyone else, arriving on either the downbeat or the eighth note before the next bar (see Fig. 2). Don't be timid—go ahead and anticipate boldly the approaching chord, even if no one else does. The more confidence you exhibit, the better. Everybody should know that you mean business and have no reservations about getting there before they do.

David Santos has played Latin and every other style you can think of in bands and on the streets of New York City, Nashville and all points in between.