

Applying the Clave to Odd-Metered Phrasing

AS THE FOUNDATION FOR ALL AFRO-CUBAN MUSIC, THE CLAVE PLAYS AN INTEGRAL PART in determining how certain rhythms will be performed in a composition. This five-note pattern is thought of in two parts—the “3 side” and the “2 side”—and has two distinct types: rumba and *son*. (See Examples 1a and 1b.) Clave dictates every rhythm that accompanies it. Musicians performing Cuban-based music have a solid understanding of both *son* and rumba clave, and have internalized the pulse of each to the point of being second nature in one’s performance. It is in this familiarity that we now find new growth and creation in clave by introducing it to odd-metered phrasing.

It is important to understand that clave also denotes a feeling. The direction of the rhythm, whether one begins the phrase on the 2 side or the 3 side, is largely decided by how it feels when applied to the music. The rhythmic structure of a tune’s melody is a valued guide, but the feel is the determining factor. The groove is enhanced by choosing the correct clave direction for the music and can be lost when it is not. Imagine how uncomfortable a funk song would feel if the backbeat were on the 1 and the 3 the entire time. It would feel wrong. This same principle applies to clave. Numerous times in my career when encountering music for the first time, if the tune hasn’t been composed with clave in mind, disagreements can arise over the direction. In such cases, the best way to determine which direction is most prudent is to rehearse the music twice. Each clave direction is given a shot, and the one that feels the best is chosen. Usually it is readily apparent which direction makes the groove feel the best. Subsequently, it is important that as we recreate these rhythms in odd meter, they maintain their original feeling.

It has been my experience that my comfort level with clave in the 4/2 and 6/8 time signatures has made the transition into odd-metered time signatures much easier. Having internalized the feeling of clave, as well as the corresponding pulse, I have found little need to count as I applied and related it to odd meters. This results in a much quicker development of groove and feel in one’s playing. When taking these well-established rhythms into the new realm of odd meters, the outlet for creativity is vast. To assist in the application of these new rhythms on the drum set, we’ll outline each clave using the bass drum and snare drum while keeping a steady pulse on the hi-hat. Once you’ve achieved a familiarity with that groove, we can then add the more syncopated cascara hi-hat pattern (Example 2) to each clave. The cascara is a common pattern found in Cuban music. Note, as the clave changes, so does the corresponding cascara pattern.

Let’s first look at applying 3-2 rumba clave to a 5/2 time signature. (See Example 3a.) Instead of stretching the original five-note pattern over the bar, we add a note to the 3 side of the clave. We now have a six-note pattern, but the 2 side of our clave remains the same. As we apply our bass-snare pattern to the outline of the clave, you’ll find that we have now created a nice, funky beat. (See Example 3b.) Playing straight quarter notes on the hi-hat gives you the opportunity to internalize the structure and feel of the new clave. Once you feel competent with the measure, you can attempt permutations of the bass drum/snare drum sequence to create numerous variations to your liking. We can then add the adjusted cascara pattern to the 5/2 measure. (See Example 3c.) For even greater variation, try moving the cascara from the hi-hat to a ride cymbal, cowbell or the side of the floor tom. When added to your previous bass drum/snare drum permutations, you’ll find countless



Example 1a **Example 1b**

Example 2

Example 3a

ways to utilize the new rhythm. If you wish to use the clave in a 2-3 direction, simply start your new measure on the fourth half note. The 4 is now your new 1.

It is also very useful to translate these rhythms into triplets, also referred to as a 6/8 feel. When we compare 3-2 rumba clave in a triplet-based 4/2 time signature side-by-side with our version in a triplet-based 5/2 time signature, you’ll see that we have again added a note to the 3 side of the clave. (See