

Boemia – Heitor dos Prazeres

Ginga: a Brazilian way to groove

by Jovino Santos Neto

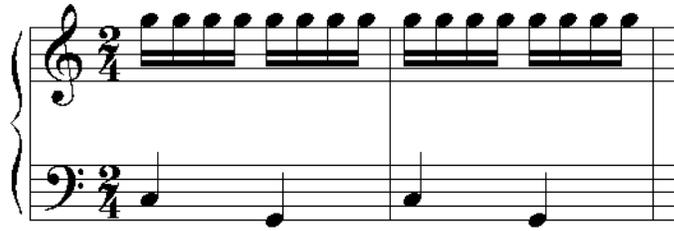
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Introduction

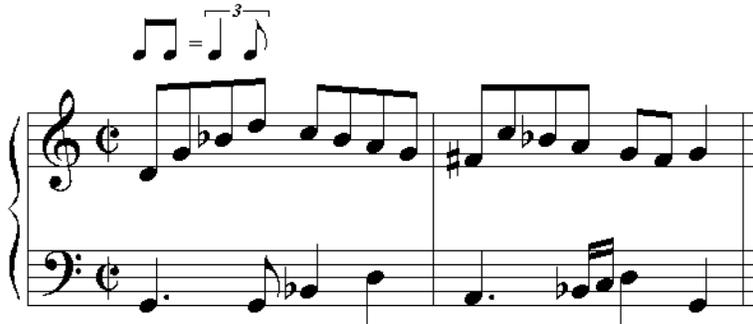
Brazilian music in all its forms has enjoyed tremendous popularity in recent years, especially among jazz musicians who appreciate its rhythmic complexity coupled with its harmonic sophistication. Almost every contemporary jazz performance features tunes with a Brazilian flavor, either a composition by a Brazilian composer or a jazz standard set to a *samba* or *bossa nova* feel. However, with notable exceptions, the musical results fail to achieve the essential characteristics that define those Brazilian styles. This is most often caused not by a lack of musical ability, but by an improper understanding of the rhythmic essence of the styles. In Brazil, this most subtle aspect of groove is often known as *ginga* (with a soft *g* as in *ginseng*). It refers to the way in which a dancer moves, to the way a beautiful woman walks and to the way that music incites motion in the listeners. The purpose of this paper is to provide rhythmic information in a practical and concise way, leading to the development of *ginga* in the performance of Brazilian-based music. We will be looking at 4 distinct grooves: *samba*, *baião*, *marcha* and *maracatu* from that perspective, hoping to create a deeper intuitive feeling for their rhythmic nature. Before delving into the grooves, however, some basic considerations are necessary. Obviously, listening to Brazilian grooves as played by Brazilian musicians from different generations is very helpful in developing a sense of the underlying rhythmic pulse for each groove, but if the basic concepts are not clear, confusion may arise. Below are a few concepts that might be useful:

Basic considerations

In most popular Brazilian musical styles (*samba*, *bossa nova*, *choro*, *baião*, *maracatu*, *frevó*), the rhythmic flow consists of evenly spaced subdivisions, usually represented as 16th notes:



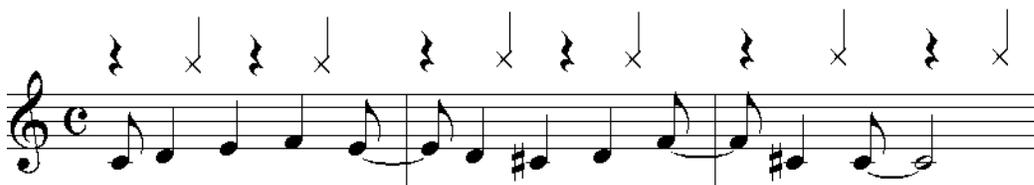
In certain other grooves such as the *xote* (schottish), the subdivisions are uneven, with a swung feel:



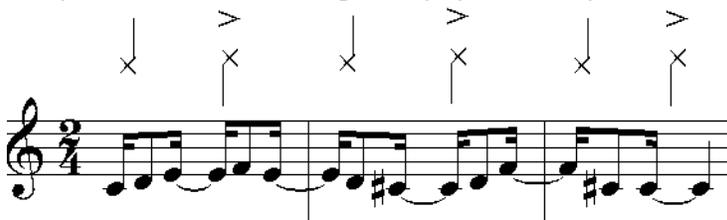
It is very important for the musician to be able to differentiate between these ways of delivering a series of notes. Jazz players, accustomed to playing swing and bebop lines, often fail to produce the necessary evenness when required, resulting in a mismatch of pulse that can compromise the integrity of the groove.

▪ **Feeling the Pulse before counting**

In feeling the rhythmic pulse of a piece and counting off a tune, there are some fundamental differences between a swing jazz approach and a Brazilian groove such as the *samba*. For instance, if you take a tune like A.C. Jobim's "Desafinado", in jazz circles it is often felt and counted off like in the example below, with the Xs indicating finger snaps:



Compare this to the following example, favored by most Brazilian musicians:



This is not a difference in notation only, but in the fundamental way that the groove is perceived internally by the players. The second approach will definitely lead to a better internal grasp of the groove and a better performance of the tune. Note the accent on beat 2 of the 2/4 measure,

corresponding to the *surdo* (bass drum) accent, which is one of the fundamental structural elements of Brazilian *samba*.

- **The Circle Dances**

Historically, many Brazilian grooves evolved from circle dances or *rodas*, in which participants (originally slaves in a farm yard) would form a circle, inviting solo musicians or dancers into the middle to perform. *Roda* participants would clap syncopated patterns while simultaneously singing and stepping from side to side. This concept is very useful as a perceptual tool to internalize grooves like *samba* and *baião*. By perceiving the rhythm as a bilateral motion, one can place the syncopation of the phrases, accents and structural elements on different parts of the body, literally *incorporating* the essence of the groove. Compare this to the incorporation of swing lines, which tend to move forward and backward. This motion is best exemplified by the concept of the walking bass line which often accompanies swing-based music. So here we have another fundamental difference: an implied *bilateral motion* in most Brazilian grooves, as opposed to a *back and forth motion* representing swing.

- **Basic rhythmic figures**

1. The Fork: One of most commonly used rhythmic figures in the music of Brazil, this 1-beat rhythmic cell has 3 notes: a 16th, an 8th and another 16th:



It is often used in phrases such as:



In Brazil, this cell is often played in a crisp, articulated way as:



Or, depending on the interpretation, as relaxed triplets:



It can be made up of repeated notes as above, or spread out in extended lines as below:



Often rests may be used to create varied syncopations:



The musical lines might touch the downbeat and use the fork as a springboard for further syncopation:



2. Dotted figures:

a) 3-3-2

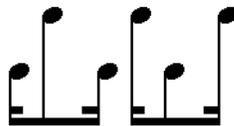


This is a 2-beat rhythmic cell that divides the 8 16th notes in 3 groups with 3, 3, and 2 notes. It is common in many other musical cultures as well, such as on the 3 side of Afro-Cuban clave (*tresillo*), Middle Eastern grooves, second-line beats, etc. In Brazil, it underlies the family of Northeastern grooves related to *baião* (*xaxado*, *coco*, *fórró*, *arrasta-pé*), representing the *zabumba* drum pattern. It is also a structural element of both *marcha-rancho* and *frevó* grooves, and it is used as a handclap pattern behind *partido alto samba* styles. When playing any of these, it is essential for the musician to learn how to keep this 3-3-2 cell pulsating in the background, so that the phrasing, accents, articulations and other subtle details will be coherent with the groove.

b) 3-2-3



This less common cell splits the 2 beats in 3 groups of 3, 2 and 3 16th notes respectively. It is used in *maxixe* and in some *xaxado* grooves. It can also be felt as 2 forks which alternate low and high sounds:



c) 3 over 2 (or over 4)



This is a common polyrhythmic pattern which can begin at any point in the measure. It groups 16th notes in 3s, taking 3 measures to return to its beginning. It can be subdivided as in:



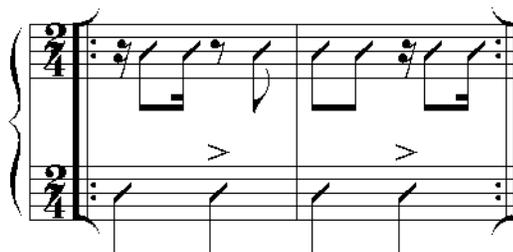
THE GROOVES

1. Samba

Considered the national rhythm of Brazil, *samba* has evolved over the centuries from a circle dance performed by African slaves in plantations (*rural samba*) to urban forms developed in the early 20th century, including *samba de roda*, *partido alto*, *samba enredo*, *samba exaltação*, *samba canção*, *bossa nova*, *samba jazz*, *samba funk*, *samba reggae* and many more. In its most basic form, it consists of 2 rhythmic layers: the lowest sounding one, represented by the *surdo* drum, which marks the beats as quarter notes, with an accent on beat 2, and a higher sounding layer, representing the *tamborim*, which can either start on the downbeat as in example *a* below or in an offbeat as in example *b*:



Example a:



Example b:

The *tamborim* patterns can be varied and switched around, especially when there are fewer players. The *surdo* patterns can also incorporate ghost notes and syncopated pick-ups. These basic rhythms can be translated to different instruments, such as guitar (thumb being the *surdo* and the other fingers the *tamborim*), piano (left hand – *surdo*, right hand – *tamborim*) or to functions within a musical ensemble (bass, drums, horn sections, etc.).

Bossa nova holds a special interest for jazz musicians, given its widespread influence in recordings and concerts. Both basic *samba* patterns above can be used in a *bossa nova* setting, the main difference being the subdued and restrained energy level, such as when singers are singing with a whispering, intimate voice, which is the main characteristic of *bossa nova*.

Samba melodies are almost always syncopated, rarely beginning or ending on the downbeat. Here are some examples – first, the opening line of the 1938 classic “Se Acaso Você Chegasse”, by Lupicínio Rodrigues and Felisberto Martins:



We can see how the melody line has the same rhythmic exuberance of a *tamborim* pattern. The fork figure is present throughout, mostly with a rest replacing the first 16th note.

Next, a phrase from Ary Barroso's "Camisa Amarela", also from the 1930s:

G7(#5) C Maj7 Bb7 Am7 Eb7 Dm7 G7 Dm7 $\frac{G7}{B}$ G7 C Maj7 $\frac{C}{B}$ Am7 G7

Here the vocal line doubles the figures that the *pandeiro* plays, stressing repeated 16th notes. These examples show the importance of understanding the basic rhythmic patterns of a style and how they are applied to melodic material. Harmonically, it is better for chords in the samba style to be played in anticipation of a 16th note before the downbeat, often following the melodies. In most swing-based jazz, chords are more likely to be delayed in relation to the downbeat.

2. Baião

Originally from the Northeastern region of Brazil, the term *baião* is derived from *baiano*, meaning a native from the state of Bahia. It encompasses a wide range of sub styles, but its main characteristic is a syncopated low drum figure (compare with the non-syncopated bass drum in *samba*). This function is traditionally represented by the mallet that plays the top skin of the *zabumba* drum. Here are some basic patterns:

When we add a higher part (usually represented by the *bacalhau*, or bamboo stick that hits the lower head of the *zabumba*), some great combinations become possible, such as:

In *baião* music it is common to find vamps built over a single chord (usually a dominant 7th) or over a simple chord progression, such as C6 – G7, C7 – F7 or Cm7 – F7. *Baião* melodies often are built on the mixolydian mode with either the just 4th or the augmented 4th. They usually have repeated notes, and accents on the 4th 8th note of alternate measures, as in the example below, taken from "Baião", by Luiz Gonzaga and Humberto Teixeira:

G7 C7

This other example, by the same composers, is a line from "Que Nem Giló":

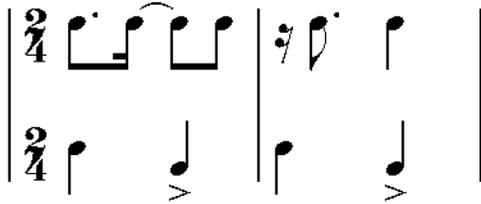
G#m7(b5) C#7 F#m7(b5) B7 Em7 Bb7 A7 D6

3. Marcha/Frevo

In *marcha* and *frevo* styles, a combination of dotted patterns and quarter notes creates the groove:



When placed over a quarter note *surdo* pattern, the result is the complete groove:



This groove is the structural basis for 2 different *marcha* patterns: The *marcha-rancho*, usually slower (70-90 bpm), played in a minor key and the *frevo* from Pernambuco, which at faster tempos (120-180 bpm) adds syncopated lines and unexpected breaks, creating one of the most danceable Brazilian Carnival grooves. There is also the Carnival *marchinha* from Rio, which used to be the predominant rhythm in Carnival songs until samba songs started to compete with it for the dancers' attention. Below are two examples, one of a *marcha-rancho*, one of a *frevo*. First, the opening line of the *marcha-rancho* "As Pastorinhas", composed by Noel Rosa and Braguinha:



Second, an example from the classic "Vassourinha", a *frevo de rua* by Mathias da Rocha and Joana Batista Rocha:



There are many varieties of *frevo*, including *frevo de rua* (street *frevo*), *frevo canção* (song *frevo*) and others. As noted above, they are mostly characterized by fast tempos, syncopated phrases and often feature saxophones, trumpets, trombones and tubas playing complex arrangements accompanied by *surdos*, *pandeiros* and shakers. The bands parade up and down the streets, drawing dancers who follow them during Carnival in Recife (Pernambuco state).

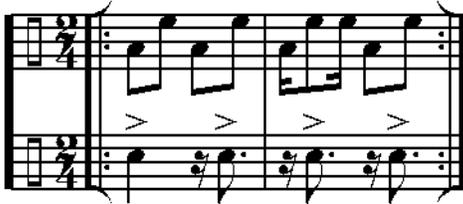
4. Maracatu

According to historian Leonardo Dantas, in order to coordinate the management of Africans brought to Brazil as slaves on the first half of the 16th century, Portuguese settlers encouraged the institution of black kings and queens protected by catholic fraternities. The coronation pageants are believed to have originated *maracatu's* frolic music. Slavery abolition (in 1888) caused the disappearance of the pageants, so the *maracatus* were turned into music groups,

parading on holidays and in Carnival. The rhythms are varied and extremely syncopated, having as a basic structure the *gonguê* (agogo bell) pattern:



Underneath this pattern the bass drums, known as *alfaias*, lay down their deep tones, with a strong accent on the first downbeat of the cycle:



There are many possible variations of these patterns, as each *maracatu nação* (nation, or group) has developed their characteristic *baques*, or patterns. Melodically, the songs are usually built as arpeggios of major chords, including a call by a soloist and the response by the chorus, such as the example below, *Coroa Imperial*, a popular *maracatu* song:



These examples of Brazilian grooves are suggested only as a basic introduction to the styles and characteristics of the popular music of Brazil. As mentioned before, there is a lot more to be found by listening to the music, studying its history, traditions and cultural manifestations. The Internet has many resources, easily found by searching for any of the key words mentioned in this paper.

About the author:

Brazilian-born Jovino Santos Neto worked as a pianist, flutist and producer with the legendary Hermeto Pascoal in his native Brazil for 15 years. Since moving to Seattle in 1993, he has released several recordings as a composer, leader of his Quinteto and also in collaboration with musicians such as Bill Frisell, Gretchen Parlato, Paquito d’Rivera and many others. A worldwide performer and lecturer, he has received many commissions and awards for his work. Jovino’s music blends contemporary harmonies with a rich variety of Brazilian rhythmic languages. Jovino has received three nominations for a Latin Grammy (2004, 2006 and 2009). He’s a Professor of Music at Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle. His latest CD is a solo recording, out on Adventure Music. Bruce Gilman on *Brazzil* magazine wrote: “*Roda Carioca* reveals a complete artist – composer, arranger, soloist, multi-instrumentalist, ensemble leader – whose artistic sensibility and poetic playing creates a hypnotic authority that haunts the memory.” For more information about Jovino’s music, please visit his web site at www.jovisan.net and his Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/JovinoSantosNeto>