

# The Cuban Rumba Box

(La Rumba de Cajón Cubana)



Jorge Luis Santo

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Cover illustration: Musicians from the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba. Left, Ignacio Guerra, right, Ramiro Hernández. From a photograph by the author taken in Havana, Cuba.

Back sleeve portrait by Caroline Forbes, UK

## PREFACE

Cuban music has had a phenomenal global cultural impact. It is a mixture of African and European influences, and it's the fusion of these elements that has resulted in a fascinating mosaic of musical forms.



The world's interest in this music has increased over the past few years. Cuba's musical culture has become much more exposed due to the riches and dynamics it possesses. It attracts people from every walk of life, awakening

curiosity among those with the desire to learn, and is slowly making its presence felt in educational circles. However, it continues to be a subject of academic bewilderment due to a lack of knowledge and basic technical skills, also a shortage of qualified teachers in this field.

The purpose of this work is to contribute to an understanding and appreciation of Cuban percussion and culture, in particular the Rumba, a Cuban musical genre traditionally played on cajones (boxes) known as the Cuban Rumba Box, presented in a way that seeks to be readable and informative to everyone. It begins with a brief background to the history of the Cuban Rumba and an explanation of the different musical types and styles. A full graphic description of the percussion instruments used to play Rumba is described in the chapter entitled, 'Design and Technology'. Also included is a page on 'Interior Design'.

It should be noted that no rhythm notation nor playing techniques are described in this work. Similarly, a step by step guide on the construction of the Cajones (boxes), and a listing of tools and resources needed have also been omitted at this time, reflecting the fact that this is a work in progress and further research needs to be undertaken.

This work synthesizes and compiles basic data acquired from my own research as well as secondary sources. Some information has been obtained by talking to colleagues, as well as Cuban musicians and teachers who have maintained their culture from generation to generation through oral history and the narration of stories.

The following material cannot claim to be a definitive survey of the music. However, it is my sincere hope that the documentation provided here might be useful to those wishing to explore it further. If these pages spark debate and future development, then my endeavour will have been accomplished.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my mother **Blanca “Porota” Santo** for opening the door to my first musical experience, (this being piano lessons which I absolutely hated!). As a young man I rebelled, embarking on a journey of self-discovery that led to a life-long interest in Cuban Percussion and Cuban Culture.

This work would not have been possible without the help of many people, my sincere thanks to:

**All my past and present teachers.**

**Jan and Nat Steele** for their ideas.

**Nick Pamphilon** for allowing me to photograph his self-made “Cajones de Londres” (The London Boxes).

My forever mentor, **Tony Urdaneta**, for the London-Madrid-Havana connection and valuable advice.

**Les Fuller** for having all the answers to my questions.

**Sara Berbank** for graphic design and desktop publishing.

In Toronto, Canada: **Peter Clarke** and my brother **Daniel Santo** for their patience and help in editing, and re-editing this work, and also **Barbara Telfer**, for technical assistance in completing the booklet.

Last, but by no means least, everyone else who contributed in one way or another to this project.

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## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE RUMBA

The word Rumba is a generic term from the Afro-American vocabulary, formed from the same roots as the words: *Macumba, Tango, Mambo, Tumba, Tambo* and many others. It is also one of the many expressions used in Cuba as a synonym for fiesta (party), and as a result of its unique characteristics, it has become a defined genre of Cuban music as well as a very specific dance form.

This term has often been misused and misinterpreted. It should not be confused with the North-American version known as **“Rhumba”**, popularized in the 1930’s by orchestras in dance halls and on film in the United States and Europe <sup>1</sup>.

The Rumba in Cuba, its native land, is a secular folk music and dance form consisting of drumming, dancing, a lead vocalist and a call-and-response chorus. Rumba lyrics generally deal with love, friendship, betrayal, patriotic feelings, daily life, death, satire and national events. The Rumba was derived from several African influences and Spanish cultures and appears to have crystallized in the late nineteenth century. Often suppressed and restricted by the upper classes due to its sexually charged dance movements, it was viewed as harmful and indecent.

The Rumba is not a rhythm, but rather the umbrella title for what is interpreted in a percussion ensemble known in Cuba as **“Complejo de la Rumba”, (Complex of Rumba)** and consists of four different types along with its ramifications, which are as follows:

1. Yambú
2. Guaguancó
3. Columbia
4. Jiribilla

Each type of Cuban Rumba consists of the following four styles:

- a. Havana
- b. Matanzas
- c. Los Muñequitos de Matanzas
- d. Santiago de Cuba

<sup>1</sup> “Rhumba” refers to Latin-influenced ballroom dances, in a distortion of the authentic meaning of the Cuban Rumba.

The most prominent of the styles originated in the Provinces of Havana and Matanzas, Cuba.

Four main African cultures were brought to Cuba by the Spanish Empire: The Yorubá (Nigeria), Bantú (Congo), Arará (Dahomey) and Abakuá (Calabar) as the slave trade was introduced to fill the “space” left by the natives <sup>2</sup>.

Many of the slaves were forced to live in “*Barracones*”, (barracks-style shacks) where they worked on sugarcane and tobacco plantations. After slavery was abolished, many former slaves drifted into the outskirts of several Cuban cities where they built rudimentary dwellings (slums), while others became city dwellers, renting rundown houses. This type of housing is known in Cuba by the name of “*Solar*” (Quarter). In these surroundings the Cuban Rumba was born.

At that time, Spanish music was already a combination of many influences including European, Arabic, Gypsy and others. It was through the interchange between African and Spanish working class cultures that music, dance and song became an integral part of today’s popular Cuban Culture.

Despite the restrictions imposed by the Spanish authorities during the colonial period, it is of special importance to acknowledge that, particularly in Cuba, the enslaved African peoples were able to maintain their sacred and secular drumming traditions, and an ongoing dialectic rhythmic legacy has survived in Cuba to this day. As people adapted, “*Cajones*” (wooden boxes) were used, marking the birth of the **Rumba de Cajón Cubana**, (Cuban Rumba Box).

The shape, size and playing techniques of this type of Cajones are of entirely Cuban origin. Traditionally, workers gathered at the docks to “play rumba” using **codfish crates**, **candle boxes**, etc. Such musical events also occurred in people’s homes where any wooden surfaces, like the side of a cabinet, the over turned drawer from a dressing table, a pair of *cucharas*, (spoons) beating on a **tobacco box**, etc., becoming the life blood of the “*Rumbón*” (large-scale rumba party). Evolution led to changes: The furniture gave way to the Cajones that were the Rumba’s first true musical instrument.

The polyrhythmic and variational possibilities provide the Cuban Rumba with the creative range necessary to spark innovation and renewal. With its richness, versatility and complexity it is an important contribution to global music today.

<sup>2</sup>Indigenous Cuban peoples were virtually annihilated in the 16th century by the Spanish Colonists. Slavery in Cuba was abolished in 1886.

## THE MUSIC

**Yambú** has an urban origin and it is the oldest type of Rumba. Dating back to Cuba's colonial period, it is sometimes referred to as "Yambú del tiempo de España", (Yambú from the time of Spain). It is also the slowest type of Rumba.

It is danced by couples, adopting an elderly attitude and imitating difficulties in the movements that are relaxed and subtle. Unlike the Guaguancó, the dancers do not make any pelvic gestures (Vacunao) and this is why the phrase "*..en el Yambú no se vacuna, caballeros*" - "*gentleman, in the Yambú, we don't vaccinate*"<sup>3</sup> is often heard. Traditionally the lead singer starts the Yambú with a melodic phrase known as the "**Diana**" (vocal introduction).

Yambú is usually performed on Cajones, (wooden boxes). The **Bass-Cajón/Salidor** (the largest of a set of three Cajones) plays the bass part. The Cajón is placed on the ground; the player sits down on the box, playing with both hands on the side and front of the Cajón, producing a warm full-deep bass sound, which emerges through a round hole located at the centre-rear of the box.<sup>4</sup>

A small size, high-pitched **Cajón Repicador**, often played in combination with the **Quinto**<sup>5</sup> drum, performs the lead improvising part. The player, in a sitting position, places the box between the legs, resting on the calves (like holding a Bongó Drum<sup>6</sup>), striking the top on different areas between the centre and the edge. Cajones are accompanied by Claves and two cucharas which serve as drumsticks, striking on the side of the Bass-Cajón or any other wooden surface. Chekeré or Maracas are also played.

The traditional methods of playing have been handed down from generation to generation. As time passed, new techniques were introduced, placing the Cuban Rumba Box on a solid and exciting development path.

<sup>3</sup>The word "vaccinate" in Cuban Spanish is an euphemistic reference to the sexual act.

<sup>4</sup>This particular cajón can also be found in a vertical form, played in a seated position, placed on the ground between the legs, playing the top and side.

<sup>5</sup>The Quinto is a single headed, tall, high-tuned drum that improvises throughout, in Cuba referred to as Quintear. Approx. 75cm height and 28cm diameter at the head.

<sup>6</sup>The Cuban-created Bongó are a pair of small round drums joined by a piece of wood. The small high-pitched drum is called Macho (male) and the large low-pitched drum is called Hembra, (female). Originally the drumheads were tacked on and, eventually, a system of tunable hardware was introduced.



**Guaguancó** is the most popular type of Rumba, with a moderate to fast tempo. It is also of urban origin and traditionally performed on Cajones. The vocalist's use of improvisation is very common in this narrative genre. The Rumba was subject to important changes when the **Tumbadora**<sup>7</sup> and **Quinto** drums made their appearance, introducing different sounds and playing skills.

A medium-size tall, **Cajón Tres-Dos/Tres Golpes** was of great significance as an addition to the Cajón family, introducing a second "voice" that produced a compact, dry and medium tonal sound. The player takes a sitting position and places the Cajón on the ground between the legs, playing the top and side with a technique similar to that used for Tumbadoras.

As mentioned before, the **Cajón Repicador** and/or **Quinto** drum improvises throughout, while the **Bass Cajón/Salidor** and **Cajón Tres-Dos/Tres Golpes** play steady rhythm patterns.<sup>8</sup>

Subsequently the **Cucharas** (spoons) gave way to the **Palitos** (sticks), played on the **Cajita**<sup>9</sup> (little box) in Cuba generally known as "**Catá**" or "**Guagua**". A piece of **Caña Brava** (bamboo), horizontally placed on a stand, is also used. Chekeré or Maracas are also played.



*Guaguancó Dancers in Havana*

The Guaguancó is danced by couples in a flirtatious fashion and complex style: The man throws his arm, leg or pelvis in the direction of his partner, symbolically attempting to possess her. She then makes movements to entice him, but turns away when he is just about to reach her. The Spanish word "Vacunar" refers to that specific moment and comes from the term "vaccination". The rhythmic cells can be heard in many different styles of music such as contemporary Pop, Funk, Rock, Jazz, etc.

<sup>7</sup> The Cuban-created Tumbadora/Conga (some sources say derived from the large size Makou drum of Congolese origin) is a single headed, tall, barrel-like drum, held together by metal hooks. Originally the drum had tacked-on skins tuned by the application of heat. Later a revolutionized system of tunable hardware was added. Generally two Tumbadoras are used as the standard set when played in Cuban popular music: the Macho (male), also known as the Conga drum (medium-size), and the Hembra (female), also known as Tumbadora or Tumba drum (large-size). In Rumba, the Cajones/boxes are often played in combination with the Tumbadoras, and they can also be played on their own. The name each drum receives in the many genres of Cuban music makes reference to the function it fulfills. For example, in Rumba when Tumbadoras are used, the Salidor or Tumbador is the name of the large-size Tumbadora drum, while the Tres-Dos/Tres Golpes or Segundo, is a medium-size Tumbadora drum. According to Cuban Rumba players, the names Tres-Dos/Tres Golpes refers to the original pattern played. The word "Segundo" means second.

<sup>8</sup> Music is not a static thing, as music and drumming grows and advances with each generation of drummers. But there are also traditions worth preserving that should be passed on unchanged.

<sup>9</sup> Originally attached on a tall wooden single stand unit. "Cucharas"/"Palitos" can also refer to the rhythm pattern.

Today in Cuba, **Cajones**, **Tumbadoras** and **Batá Drums**<sup>10</sup> are completely integrated as part of the Rumba ensemble, producing an innovative repertoire of sounds and hand playing techniques. Due to its uniqueness and adaptability to different musical styles, the Guaguancó contains everything needed to contribute to the world of contemporary music.

**Columbia** is a vibrant type of Rumba, crossing over musical boundaries and reaching different cultures worldwide. Like the Yambú and Guaguancó, it has a polyrhythmic structure and a unique dance style. The Columbia came from the rural areas of the Province of Matanzas, towns such as Sabanilla, Alacranes and Unión de Reyes, but there are those who say it came from an old Solar called Columbia. In this particular type of Rumba, Tumbadoras are played instead of Cajones. Originally danced primarily by men (Columbianos), some women performers are actually quite proficient. The dancers perform acrobatic and daring moves to demonstrate courage, strength, agility and humour. Columbia contains elements of the Palo, Yorubá and Abakuá vocabularies used in Cuba. The singer or **"Gallo"** (rooster) makes plaintive exclamations or laments called **"Llorao"** (cry), which is characteristic of this type of Rumba.

The instrumentation consists of: Salidor, Tres-Dos and Quinto Drums. Once again, the Quinto drum improvises throughout, the playing of which is challenging, as the musician's technique and ability must allow for a careful and creative joining with the dancer's movements. Often the Quinto player wears a pair of metallic rattles called **"Nkembí"** on the wrists, enriching the rhythm. Claves, Palitos, Chekeré and a Guataca (hoe blade) or Cowbell are also played.

**Jiribilla:** The instrumentation, rhythm patterns, songs and dance appear the same as the Columbia, with the exception that the Jiribilla is played at a faster tempo.

## The Rumba Structure

Considering the types of rumba described earlier, the structure generally begins with a vocal introduction by the lead singer known as the **"Diana/Lalaleo"**. It "tunes up" the choir by providing a melodic line before the verses, developing into the main theme, **"El Canto"**, where the soloist sings a few stanzas, called **"Décima"**. The next part is the "call and response" section (**Capetillo**), in which the chorus alternates with the improvisations from the lead vocalist. This is the moment where the Rumba "breaks out" and the dancing couple makes their entrance.

<sup>10</sup> A set of three hourglass-shaped two-headed drums, of Nigerian origin: lyá, (the largest), Itótele, (medium size) and Okónkolo (smallest of the drums) used mainly in Afro-Cuban religious rituals.

## DESIGN AND TECHNOLOGY

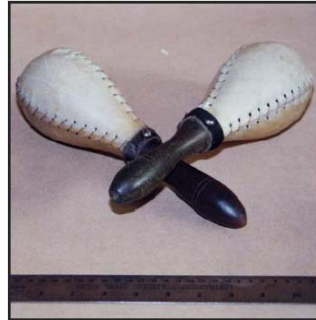
## Instrumentation - Specifications

## Claves



Two wooden sticks tapped together to set the clave rhythm  
Approx. 3cm diameter x 20cm length.

## Maracas



Matched pair of rattles made of rawhide shells, with wooden handles and filled with olive stones, buckshots, etc. Acherés or Marugas (shakers) are also played.

## Chekeré or Abwe



An African-derived rattle made of hollowed gourds, wrapped in a lattice of beads and commonly used in Afro-Cuban music. Also referred to as Güiro.

## Cowbell



Made of steel. Hand-held and played with a wooden stick. It is found in different sizes, producing a variety of sounds depending on the genre of Cuban music played. The rhythmic patterns played on cowbells provide most of the metallic percussive sounds of Cuban music.

### Cajita/Catá



Attached to a wooden stand and played with palitos (sticks)  
 Approx. 30cm width x 23cm depth x 11cm height  
 Underside 25cm width x 18cm depth  
 Stand 90cm height

### Cajón Tres-Dos/Tres Golpes



Compact-warm mid-range sound with very distinctive bass tone  
 Approx. 30cm width x 30cm depth x 65cm height

Base 22cm width x 22cm depth

### Cajón Repicador



High-pitched sound.  
 Approx. 30cm width x 23cm depth x 23cm height  
 Base 18cm width x 18cm depth

### Tumbadora/Conga Drum



Body constructed of wood or fibreglass with animal or synthetic hide head.  
 Large Size: Approx. 75cm height and 31cm diameter at the head.

### Bass-Cajón/Salidor

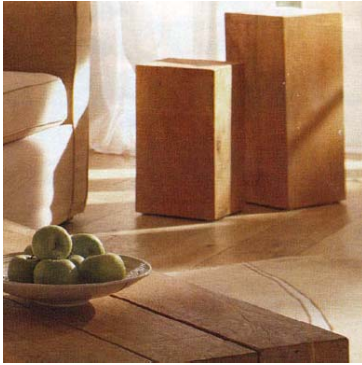


Warm-deep bass sound  
 Approx. 50cm width x 30cm depth x 50cm height

## INTERIOR DESIGN

### Adaptability

*"...making the most of reduced living spaces!"*



The idea of including an interior design page in this booklet occurred to me in my own situation of living in reduced spaces during my many travels. Thanks to the wood construction, innovative design, easy handling and the unusual and attractive shapes and sizes, the Cuban Cajones invite interior designers to explore and experiment with sequences of exciting and creative uses. Only - of course - when the cajones are not being played!

Due to the sturdiness of the hardwood construction, the large-sized Bass-Cajón can be used as a seat. Other uses may include as a coffee table, tray or TV stand; the medium size tall Cajón Tres-Dos could serve as a bed-night table, while the small size Cajón Repicador can be employed as a footstool, magazine table, etc.<sup>11</sup>



The multipurpose use of the Cajones can stimulate the imagination into creating a decorative, harmonious and versatile environment.

<sup>11</sup> The images on this page are for reference only and do not necessarily indicate accurate subject matter representation.

## CONCLUSION

It has been over 500 years since the first European set foot on the American Continent. Many races were exterminated by the brutal colonization, while a few managed to survive. Musical instruments also suffered the impact of this culture shock. Some vanished completely, but others, such as the Cuban Cajones, were born in an emergent Cuban culture.

This versatile and fascinating Cuban instrument has come a long way since its birth. The Cuban Cajones are able to meet the demands of today's percussionists, due to their remarkable and unique features, which were developed by a people who were compelled and inspired to create great music from objects of everyday life.

In the field of education, the Cuban Cajones offer unlimited possibilities, ranging from the assembly of the instruments to learning to use them in different musical scenarios. These creative activities can focus students' concentration, introduce experiences to broaden their imagination, and provide a vehicle to engage them in dialogues and cooperative projects with their peers, aiding in the development of healthy personality and positive self-esteem.



*Conjunto de Clave y Guaguancó, Cuba*

The Cuban Cajones promote and encourage people of all ages to musically express themselves, setting body and senses in motion, while stimulating personal growth.

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National Folkloric Ensemble"** .....by Rogelio Martínez Furé  
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### Rumba Artists: Recommended Listening

**Yoruba Andabo**

"El Callejón de los Rumberos" (2003)  
*Universal Latino*

**Pancho Quinto**

"En el Solar la Cueva del Humo" (1997)  
*Round World Music*

**Conjunto de Clave y Guaguancó**

"Noche de la Rumba" (2001)  
*Tumi Records*

**Los Muñequitos de Matanzas**

"Rumba Caliente 88/77" (1992)  
*QBADISC Records*

**Rumberos de Cuba**

"Dónde Andabas tú, Acerekó?" (2004)  
*EGREM Music Cuba*

**Gregorio Hernández Ríos: El Goyo**

"La Rumba es Cubana. Su Historia": Various  
Artists (2000)  
*Unicornio*

**Celeste Mendoza**

"La Reina del Guaguancó" (1988)  
*EGREM Music Cuba*

**Los Papines**

"Rumba sin Alarde" (1994)  
*Caribe Productions*

**Afro-Cuba de Matanzas**

"Raíces Africanas/African Roots" (1998)  
*Shanachie*

**Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba**

"Música Yoruba" (1996)  
*Bembé Records*

**Los Chinitos**

"Guarapachangueo, Rumba de mi Barrio"  
Afro-Cuban-Cajón: Irián López/Los Chinitos  
(2003)

**Carlos Embale**

"Rumbero Mayor" (1994)  
*EGREM Music Cuba*

*\*for further information, go to [www.descarga.com](http://www.descarga.com), an extensive, comprehensive web resource on Afro-Cuban music, including Rumba.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Jorge studied Cuban Percussion in Canada, then in Cuba, at the Ignacio Cervantes Centre for Professional Music Upgrading, with some of the most celebrated and renowned names in Cuban Percussion.

As a student, he wrote an article entitled **“The Tumbadora (Conga drum), It’s Origin and Influence in Global Music”**, Havana, Cuba (self-published). Jorge is currently revising this in booklet form.

Composer and arranger, Jorge lives in the United Kingdom where he performs regularly. He also runs Cuban Percussion Workshops for children and adults in schools, as well as teaching private and group lessons from beginner to advanced levels.

In 2006, Jorge completed the “Music Performance in Education Mentoring Programme” which is run by Music for Change, an arts organisation and registered charity based in Canterbury, UK.