

Salsa

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Urban popular dance genre developed in New York City and Puerto Rico during the 1960s and 70s, based on Cuban dance styles and incorporating Puerto Rican elements and influences from jazz and rock. The term 'salsa' literally means 'sauce', the culinary metaphor of a spicy concoction mirroring the music's hybrid origins and infectious appeal.

In general stylistic terms, salsa closely resembles its Cuban antecedents, fusing West African rhythmic and textural principles with Iberian melodic and harmonic structures. Most salsa compositions derive from the Cuban *son* and related forms such as the upbeat *guaracha*. Songs are based on a two-part formal structure, with verses sung by lead vocalist, followed by a call-and-response section known as the *montuno*. The *montuno* section features driving rhythms, solo improvisation and punchy brass choruses known as *mambos*. A salsa ensemble typically includes vocals, Cuban percussion, piano, bass, trumpets, trombones and saxophone, and usually ranges in size from ten to 14 members. The percussion instruments include small two-headed bongos and the long, cylindrical single-headed *tumbadoras*, more commonly known outside of Cuba as *conga* drums. Other important percussion instruments include timbales, a pair of toms mounted on a stand with accompanying cymbal, cowbells and woodblock; claves, two wooden sticks struck together; maracas (rattles); and *güiro*, a notched scraper of Amerindian origin.

The distinctive feel of salsa is based upon a foundation of interlocking rhythmic ostinati. These rhythms, and also the brass 'punches' and syllabic accents in the lyrics, are governed by a two-measure timeline known as the *clave*, which can be felt as either a 3+2 or 2+3 pattern. Each rhythm instrument has its own part, known as *tumbao* in the *conga* drums, *martillo* in the bongos, *cascará* on the timbales and *montuno* on the piano. The bass line is also notable for its 'anticipated bass' pattern, which emphasizes off-beats rather than the downbeat stress typical of other Latin American and Caribbean popular styles. The piano *montuno* is usually doubled at the octave in the left hand, but pianists can also use chord inversions in the left hand to enrich the harmonic texture (ex.1), a technique that became widespread during the 1990s. Most salsa tunes feature simple four- or eight-bar harmonic progressions (e.g., I–V–V–I or I–IV–V–I or VI–II–V–I); the excerpt in ex.1 has been condensed in order to show typical chord movement over salsa rhythmic patterns.

Ex.1 Salsa rhythmic foundation

The musical score for 'Ex.1 Salsa rhythmic foundation' is written for six instruments: CLAVE, BONGO, CONGA, TIMBALES (on sides), PIANO, and BASS. The music is in 2/4 time and spans two measures. The CLAVE staff features a 2-3 clave pattern. The BONGO, CONGA, and TIMBALES staves show various rhythmic patterns. The PIANO staff includes chords Am, D7, Bm7b5, and E7b9. The BASS staff shows a simple bass line.

Ex.1 Salsa rhythmic foundation

Given that its proponents in New York City were largely Puerto Rican migrants, it is not surprising that salsa became an emblem of Puerto Rican cultural identity in the 1970s, for both islanders and those living in the United States. Despite the oft-repeated claim that salsa is just 'Cuban music', New York and Puerto Rican salsa differs from its Cuban antecedents in several ways: the style of playing is more strident, with prominent use of trombones; Afro-Puerto Rican rhythms such as *bomba* are used (e.g. for contrast during instrumental interludes); the Puerto Rican *cuatro* (a small ten-stringed lute, shaped like a violin) is incorporated in the ensemble; there is a strong use of jazz harmonies and solo improvisation; and references are made in the lyrics to life in Puerto Rico and in particular to the harsh experiences of the New York Latino *barrio*. Important salsa innovators and performers include Eddie Palmieri, Ray Barretto, Willie Colón, Ruben Blades, Johnny Pacheco, Celia Cruz, Tito Puente, Mongo Santamaría, Louie Ramírez and Larry Harlow.

During the 1960s and 70s, salsa spread to other parts of Latin America, especially urban centres in Venezuela, Colombia and Panama. Venezuelan and Colombian salsa bands have also made their mark on the international scene. In the late 1980s and 90s, a new style called *salsa romántica* (fusing the pop *balada* with salsa rhythms) helped expand salsa's appeal to Latin American middle-class and upper middle-class audiences. Salsa's popularity in America has been superseded in some sectors by the Dominican *merengue*, but it remains one of the most prominent styles in Latin America and the Caribbean. It is firmly entrenched as a significant transnational musical genre, commanding large audiences throughout the Americas, Europe and Japan.

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See also

Blades, Ruben

Colombia, §III: Popular music

Colón, Willie

Cuba, §II, 2(iv): Traditional music: Popular genres: Son

'Gypsy' music, §7: New developments.

Panama, §II, 3: Traditional music: Popular music

Ramírez, Louie

Latin America, §IV, 2(iv): Popular music: The salsa phenomenon

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