

Chapter 5

KEY WORDS

meter
measure
ostinato
polyrhythm
pulse
syncopation
tala
tempo

Learning Objectives

After successfully completing this unit, the student will understand that:

1. Rhythm usually involves a consistent grouping of steady beats or pulses. In the West, these groupings comprise the linear concept of meter. In some other cultures, these groupings are seen as cycles. In all such groupings, at least one beat is consistently emphasized or accented.
2. Syncopation and swing are, respectively, variations on the accentuation and subdivision of beat groupings. Free rhythm and unmetered pulse do not involve consistent groupings of beats or pulses.
3. In polyrhythmic music, two or more rhythmic cycles based on the same underlying pulse are sounded simultaneously. Much of the music of Africa and African America is polyrhythmic.

Television Program

Rhythm

Audio Selections

10. "Scotland the Brave"
11. "Wedding Waltz"
12. "John Howatt"
13. "The Tar Road to Sligo"
14. Symphony No. 5 in C minor by Ludwig von Beethoven: First Movement
15. Jor in Rag Kamod
16. "Hifumi Hachi Gaeshi"
17. "The Comet"
18. Tabla demonstration in Teental: bols
19. Tabla demonstration in Teental: khali
20. Tabla kaida in Teental.
21. Gat in Rag Kamod
22. "Soft Black Jersey Cow" (excerpt)
23. Rumba guaguancó (excerpt)
24. "Ratos e Urubus . . . Larguem Minha Fantasia"

Rhythm

“Rhythm is something you either have or don’t have, but when you have it, you have it all over.”

ELVIS PRESLEY

This chapter provides an introduction to the subject of rhythm. Rhythm in music involves the patterning of sounds in time. Because all music unfolds in time, rhythm can be viewed as the duration of a whole piece or performance. The term can also be defined as the smaller patterns and durations that animate and structure the music—moving melodies and coordinating different parts together. Rhythm can be free, allowing the performer to play or sing without a fixed beat, but more often, rhythm involves a regularly recurring series of pulses or beats. The beat is what you can clap or tap your foot to. Beats are usually arranged in groupings or patterns of stressed and unstressed pulses, as in the meters of European-American classical and popular musics and in the cycles of North Indian and Javanese music. In the musics of the African diaspora, polyrhythms create a more complex grouping of beats among different musical parts.

The word rhythm refers to time and the organization of events in time. On a cosmological level, the earth, its moon, and the other planets each manifest a periodic rhythm, and it is the regular, predictable nature of such movement that allows us to divide decades into years, years into months, months into weeks, weeks into days, days into hours, hours into minutes, and minutes into seconds. The science of astronomy is dependent on rhythm—we would not know where and when to aim our telescope at a particular star or planet if these celestial bodies—especially our own planet—did not move in repeating temporal cycles. On a microcosmic level, our bodies manifest rhythm in the regular pulsing of our hearts, the alternation of inhalation and exhalation, the motion of our walking or running feet, and the functioning of the “internal clock” which tells us when to sleep, when to wake up, and when to become hungry.

Rhythm is perhaps the most essential ingredient of music—the motivating force that moves and structures music through time. The term can be used in several ways to designate everything that happens temporally within the confines of a composition or performance. Because all music unfolds in time, rhythm in its most general sense can be viewed as the duration of a whole piece or performance from start to finish. It can also be defined as the smaller patterns and durations that animate and structure the music—moving melodies and coordinating different parts together. On an even more micro level, rhythm can be viewed as the rate of vibrations of a single tone. As we saw in Chapter 1, every tone is a product of the periodic oscillation of a vibrating object.

In terms of structuring a piece or performance, rhythm can be free, allowing the performer to play or sing without a fixed beat. As we will see later, the *alap* or introductory section of a North Indian classical music performance begins with this kind of free rhythm. More often, rhythm involves a regularly recurring series of pulses or beats. The beat is what you can clap or tap your foot to. A strong beat is characteristic of dance music all over the world, from rumba to ballet, disco to Irish step dance. Beats are usually arranged in groupings or patterns of stressed and unstressed pulses, as in the meters of European-American classical and popular musics and in the cycles of North Indian and Javanese music. In the musics of the African diaspora, polyrhythms create a more complex grouping of beats among different musical parts.

PULSE, METER, AND RHYTHM

Western musicians usually begin their formal rhythmic training by learning to count evenly spaced pulses in *measures* or *bars* of four beats. We

say that musical time organized into such regular, repeating patterns is *metrical*—that is, it conforms to a *meter*, in this case, of four pulses. While pulse can be defined as regularly occurring beats of equal weight, like the ticking of a clock, meter groups pulses into recurring patterns of strong and weak beats. Each repeating unit of this pattern is called a bar or measure and these are marked off from one another in musical notation by bar lines. Western music is often composed in meters of two, three, four, six, nine, or twelve beats per measure; European and American dance music provide many examples.

Metered Pulse

Marches provide an example of a meter in two, with a stressed pulse on one and an unstressed pulse on two. This kind of pattern, in which alternate beats are stressed strong—weak—strong—weak is called *duple meter*. The rhythmic feel of marches is closely related to walking, and therefore, the music is often used to facilitate and inspire dances with walking steps and marching of all kinds.

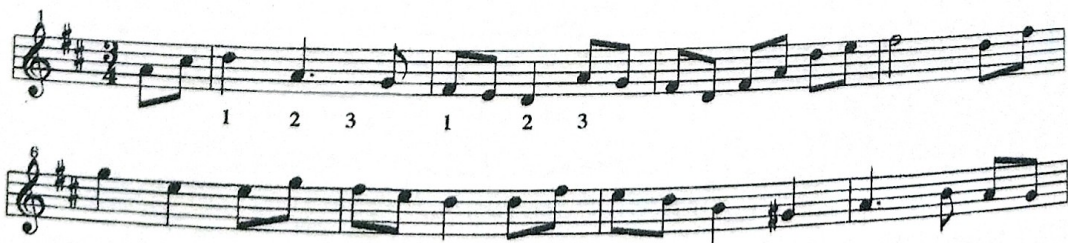
Rhythm Example 1: “Scotland the Brave”



Example 1 shows the first eight measures of “Scotland the Brave,” a traditional Scottish march. In this and the following three examples, numbers under the first two measures illustrate the meter.

When beats are grouped in threes with a stressed pulse on one, we have triple meter. Waltzes provide a good example of dance music in triple meter. Two well known compositions in triple meter are “The Star Spangled Banner” and “My Country ’Tis of Thee.”

Rhythm Example 2: “Wedding Waltz”



Example 2 shows the first eight measures of “Wedding Waltz,” composed by the American fiddler and guitarist George Wilson.



A performance of
“Scotland the Brave.”



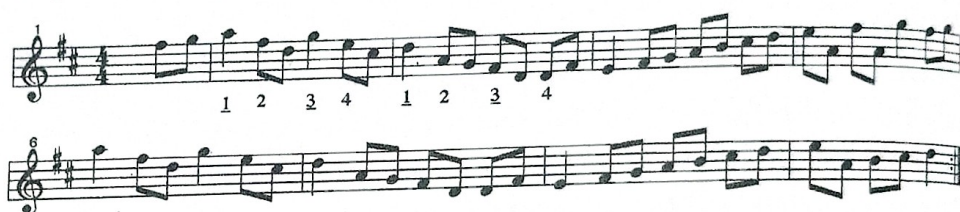
A performance of
“Wedding Waltz.”

Two beat and three beat measures are, in a sense, the basic units underlying meter in Western music: others are a combination of these. For example, two groups of two beats can be combined into a single measure to create four beats per measure. The strongest beat is on one and a secondary accent on three. This patterning in four is the meter for perhaps ninety percent of rock and many other kinds of popular music. Although written in units of four, much music in this meter (called 4/4) is perceived in two; music divided into measures of two or four beats is therefore said to be in *duple meter*.



A performance of
"John Howatt."

Rhythm Example 3: "John Howatt"



Example 3 shows the first eight measures of "John Howatt," a traditional Scottish reel in 4/4.

Compound meter involves larger groupings of beats divided into regularly recurring patterns of strong and weak. Compound meters consist of a certain number of main beats, each subdivided into subsidiary beats. The most common example involves two main beats, each one subdivided into three: 1 2 3 4 5 6/1 2 3 4 5 6. The meter is divided into units of six beats (and called 6/8), but the overall rhythmic feel is in two. It is therefore referred to as compound duple meter. The Irish jig is a dance type that is composed in compound meter, either in groupings of six (6/8) or groupings of nine (9/8) that have three strong beats. Other familiar American children's songs in 6/8 include "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" and "Three Blind Mice."



A performance of "The Tar
Road to Sligo."

Rhythm Example 4: "The Tar Road to Sligo"



Example 4 shows the first eight measures of "The Tar Road to Sligo," a traditional Irish jig in 6/8.

Because the meter often stays the same throughout a piece of music, it provides a rhythmic structure for all the musical content of the piece. The

arrangement of long and short durations within each measure vary and it is these rhythms that animate the melodies and harmonies. Thus the measure becomes a conduit for all the events that move the music through time. Joseph Kerman described this contrast:

In most Western music, duple, triple, or compound meter serves as the regular background against which one perceives the actual rhythms, which are almost always much more complicated. As the rhythm now coincides with the meter, then goes its own way, all kinds of variety, tension, and excitement can result. Indeed, it is the interaction of rhythm and meter that supplies much of music's vitality. Meter is background, rhythm foreground.¹

The famous first movement of this work provides an excellent example of the contrast between meter and rhythm. The first movement is in duple meter throughout. In terms of the rhythmic foreground, the piece is dominated by a single rhythmic and melodic motif that appears as the famous opening theme.

Rhythm Example 5: Beethoven's Fifth Symphony



Example 5 shows the first four measures of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in C minor. The first two phrases in this example end with pauses or interruptions in the tempo, as indicated by the symbol above the note.

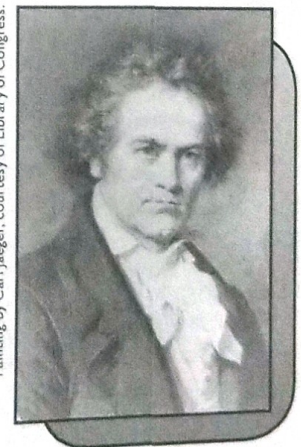
This theme surfaces over and over again in the movement—at different pitch levels and dynamic levels, in different parts, and even turned upside down. It also becomes joined together immediately after the first statement of the theme. The restatement of this motif in different keys set against the background of duple meter creates consistency, tension, and excitement in the music.

While meter is background and rhythm foreground in much of Western classical and popular music, we have not mentioned the overall speed of the music how quickly or slowly it is played or sung. The term *tempo* refers to this aspect of performance. We say that a song is meant to be sung slowly and expressively or that a tune is upbeat. The tempo of a piece indicates how fast the basic pulse moves through time. Western classical composers have often used Italian terms such as *adagio* (slow) and *allegro* (quick) to indicate tempo.



A performance of the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in C minor.

Painting by Carl Jaeger, courtesy of Library of Congress.



▲ Ludwig von Beethoven



Buddhadev Das Gupta plays the *jor* section of his *alap* in Rag Kamod.

Unmetered Pulse and Free Rhythm

Not all music has a regularly recurring pattern of strong and weak beats. Music may have a pulse which is non-metric; that is, it may maintain a regular beat without being organized into regularly recurring measures of a particular number of pulses. An example of this kind of rhythm is the *jor* section of a melodic improvisation in the classical music of North India.

Music may also be performed in “free rhythm,” without a steady, measurable beat. Such music is not a-rhythmic, because it still presents sounds organized in time—not in measures or pulses, but according to non-metric principles such as the length of an exhalation, the duration of a violinist’s bow-stroke, or the completion of a word or a phrase in a line of sung poetry. Such free rhythm is exemplified in the solo *shakuhachi* tradition of Japan, in which the player’s breath determines the length of the musical phrase. Both the technique of the flutist’s inhalation and exhalation, and the silences between phrases, are important in *shakuhachi* playing. The exhalation determines dynamics and tone colors in the musical phrase; typically the sound grows fainter toward the end of the exhalation. Some notes have more stress than others and there is a sense of gravitational pull forward. Nevertheless, it is impossible to tap out a regularly recurring beat or pulse. Tomie Hahn, an ethnomusicologist and *shakuhachi* player, states that breath determines the rhythm of the phrase as well as the whole piece:



▲ Tomie Hahn, *shakuhachi* player

So we have the inhale and then the note and the end of the phrase. . . . The breath . . . is what each phrase is built upon. And in between each phrase we have silence and then the taking in of the breath. This is actually the pace of all the units and how they connect all the little phrases that build up the piece into a larger rhythmic form.²



A performance of “Hifumi Hachi Gaeshi,” a traditional Japanese *shakuhachi* piece in free rhythm.

Music in free rhythm is often performed by a soloist—a singer or instrumentalist who doesn’t have to coordinate with other performers. When two or more musicians play or sing together, it is essential that they have markers to keep them synchronized. One important reference is the presence of a regular recurring beat or grouping of beats. On the other hand, an unaccompanied soloist, such as a ballad singer, can convey his or her message with more flexibility in terms of both rhythm and expression.

Free rhythm has also been an important component of some twentieth century avant-garde music and modern jazz. John Cage, the pioneer

of chance music, is perhaps the best known composer of music based on random and unpredictable sounds. In attempting to give up traditional structures and processes of music, Cage's compositions are often free in terms of predetermined length or overall rhythm and in the ways that performers perform their parts.

Cyclical Thinking

Western music is often conceived of as a linear phenomenon. The use of staff notation, with its horizontal lines that are read, like most Western languages, from left to right, reinforces this conception. In India, Indonesia, and the Middle East, meter is often organized not into visually conceived lines, but into time cycles which may best be represented as circles, much like the face of a rotary clock. These repeating rhythmic structures may be as short as a single measure of two or three beats, or they may combine large numbers of shorter metrical units into cycles of hundreds of pulses, which may take one or more minutes to complete. In Java, music played by the gamelan—an orchestra made up primarily of metallophones and knobbed and hanging gongs—is in rhythmic cycles almost always based on some factor of two, including cycles of 8, 16, 32, 64, or 128 beats. These cycles are regularly marked at key points by different sized gongs. The largest instrument in the ensemble—a hanging gong called the Gong Ageng—always plays the last and most important beat of the cycle.

In India, time cycles are central not only to musical thinking but also to commonly-held assumptions about the nature of human existence. In many societies, the rhythmic organization of music reflects cultural ideas about the structure of society and/or the cosmos. The relationship of time cycles to the music of North India will be discussed later in the chapter.

Syncopation, Swing, and Polyrhythm

In many kinds of music, rhythmic interest is heightened by the occasional emphasis of “weak” beats—such as beats two and four in 4/4 time—or notes which fall between the pulses—places within the measure which normally do not receive an accent. The accenting of such “off-beats,” called *syncopation*, may anticipate a strong beat by placing an accent just before it, or delay the emphasis by placing it immediately after a strong beat.

In jazz, syncopation and a more subtle form of off-beat emphasis known as “swing” animate performance. Although no two jazz musicians may



A performance of "The Comet" by Rave Tesar, demonstrating swing rhythm and syncopation.

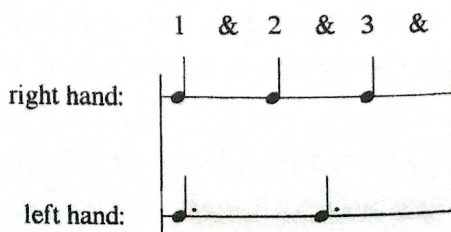
agree on exactly how to define "swing," it is "a combination of two things: rhythmic interpretation and rhythmic unity." According to saxophonist Josh Redman, swing is the essence of jazz:

One of the things that defines jazz and makes it jazz is the swing rhythm. . . . Swing is a subdivision of rhythm which is, in a certain way, off-center, it's uneven. If I play a series of eighth notes very straight [right on the beat], there's no swing involved. Now if I put a swing feel on those eighth notes, they're going to become uneven, one is going to be a bit longer than the other, and the shorter is actually going to have a certain accent that the longer one doesn't have. So the rhythm comes alive, it dances a little bit, and that is the essence of the swing rhythm. . . . I like to define it more as a feel. It's sort of a relaxed intensity; there's an edge there, there's forward motion, but at the same time there's a coolness to it.³

Syncopation and swing generate rhythmic excitement, but do not usually go so far as to obscure the basic meter of a piece. In much African traditional music, interlocking, repeating parts called *ostinatos* create multiple accents and a shifting sense of meter, in which it is neither possible nor absolutely correct to say that a particular piece of repertory is in 3/4 or 4/4 time. The individual parts in a Ghanaian Asante *Kete* ensemble, for example, do not all share a common beginning point in time. Each instrument is, in a sense, in its own meter, resulting in a combined rhythm which can be felt as having several possible beginnings.⁴ We call this metric ambiguity *polyrhythm*, defining it as the simultaneous sounding of multiple rhythmic frameworks.

The simplest example of polyrhythm is called "three-against-two," in which one player—or one hand—plays three evenly-spaced beats in the same time that a second player—or hand—plays two, also evenly-spaced, pulses. You can learn to clap this simple polyrhythm by filling in the beats and counting "and" after each beat, subdividing each measure into six equal parts (six being divisible by both two and three). The right hand claps on one, two, and three; the left on one and the "and" after two. The resultant, composite rhythm is shown in example 6:

Rhythm Example 6



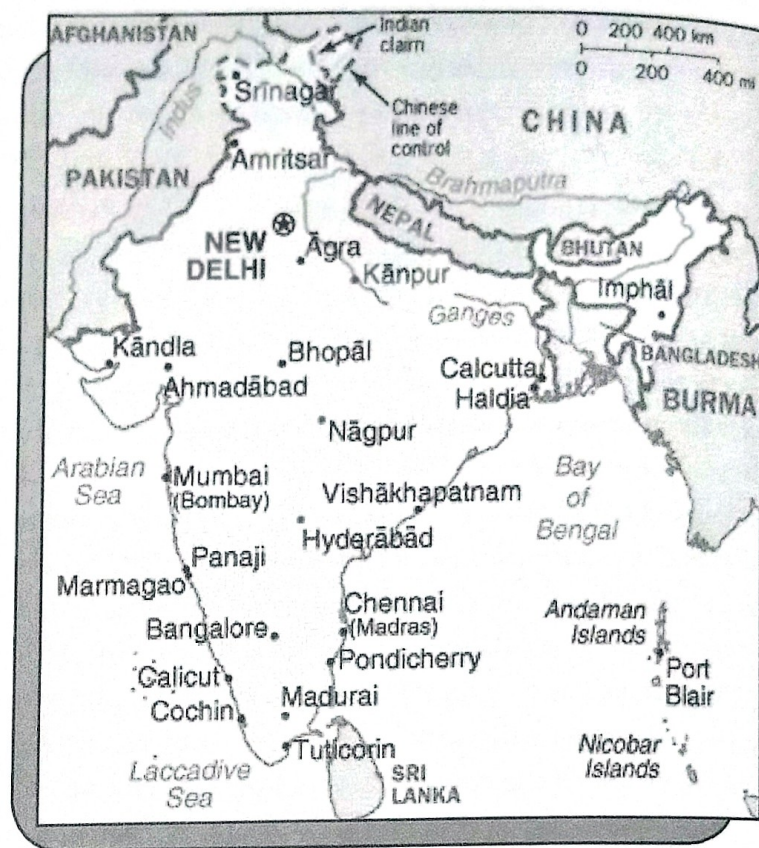
This way of counting organizes both hands into a basic measure of three beats, but in true polyrhythm, you should be able to feel each measure in either three or two equal parts (or both at once). To more fully understand this concept, give a strong accent to the “one” and the “and” claps of the left hand, which divide the measure into two halves. To get an even stronger sense of this polyrhythm, you may practice dividing the measure into two parts by counting “*one-and-a-two-and-a*,” clapping with the left hand on “one” and “two” and with the right on “one,” the “a” before “two,” and the “and” after “two.” When you have mastered the parts, you will be able to switch between feeling the triple pulse in your right hand and the duple pulse in your left.

The challenge is not physical but conceptual; the hands perform identically whether one is counting in two or in three. This metrical ambiguity characterizes much African music, and creates an important role for the listener—who may also be a dancer, singer, or hand-clapper. African music in many traditions has no role for a passive audience, but requires all present to participate, and the shifting perception of accent and meter provides the listener with the opportunity and need to “frame” the music according to a spontaneous and continually changing perception of its rhythmic organization.

RHYTHM IN SOUTH ASIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC: NORTH INDIA

We use the term “South Asia” to describe the region encompassed by the modern nations of Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. South Asia presents a complex overlay of cultures, the product of many centuries of migration, trade, travel and conquest involving a broad array of cultures, religions, and ethnic groups.

By 2500 BCE, a well-organized urban civilization had developed in the Indus River valley of present-day Pakistan. By 1500 BCE, nomadic herdsman from Central Asia called Aryans had begun to take control of the region. Over the course of several centuries, the Aryans established a dominant culture, with a classical Indo-European language (Sanskrit), a religious literature (the Vedas), a pantheon of gods and goddesses—the basis of later Hinduism—and a social hierarchy which came to be known as the varna-jati or caste system. This dominant culture faced repeated challenges both from indigenous, Indian-born religions (Jainism and Buddhism), and from conquerors and missionaries from the West (Islam and Christianity).



Such cultural contacts sometimes resulted in war and the establishment or overthrow of foreign rule, but as often as not, the conquerors themselves underwent a process of “Indianization” which resulted in the creation of hybrid forms of language, religion, art, and music. North Indian—also called *Hindustani*—classical music is one such form, resulting from the adoption and development of Indian court and temple music in the largely Muslim courts of North India, beginning in the thirteenth century and continuing into the twentieth.

Early treatises describe Indian classical music as a gift from the gods, derived from religious chant, and the form, content, and intent of modern Indian music continues to embody basic principles of Hindu cosmology. Central among these is the idea that everything in the universe moves in repeating cycles. Human life itself is considered to be a cycle including birth, death, and rebirth, and the entire universe also proceeds through unending circles of creation, dissolution, and recreation.

Tala and Alap

Rhythmically, the cyclical aspect of all existence is reflected in the concept of *tala*, which is the most important rhythmic principle in Indian

classical music. In both North and South India, classical songs and instrumental compositions are set to repeating rhythmic cycles called *talas*. North Indian *talas* may be as short as three beats or as long as one-hundred-and-eight. The longer patterns are commonly subdivided into smaller sections of two, three, four, or five pulses.

While *tala* is an important aspect of Indian classical music, the opening portion of a performance, called *alap*, is performed in free rhythm. This *alap* is frequently subdivided into three portions: 1) *alap*: graceful, unhurried melodic movement in which there is no obvious pulse; 2) *jor*: a medium tempo pulse is established, but no *tala* structure is applied; and 3) *jhala*: the pulse becomes quite fast, but still is not confined within a *tala* cycle.



▲ Tabla drums

Once the melodic soloist—either a singer or an instrumentalist—has completed the *alap*, he or she usually proceeds to a composition set in *tala*. At this point, the soloist is joined by a drummer, who provides accompaniment by outlining the rhythmic shape of the time cycle on the paired drums known collectively as *tabla*.

The most common *tala* in North India is *teental*, a cycle of sixteen beats divided into four measures of four. The first beat of the cycle is called *sam* (pronounced “sum”). This accented beat functions as a point of departure and return for the structured improvisations that make up a large part of Hindustani music performance. Musicians often show *sam* by clapping on the first beat of the cycle. The midpoint of the cycle, which falls on beat nine—the beginning of the third measure of *tala*—is called *khali*, and is shown by a “wave” in which the palm of the hand is turned upwards, the reverse of a clap. The fifth and thirteenth beats, which begin the second and fourth measures of *tala*, are shown by hand claps. The musician must always complete the cycle by returning to *sam* at the conclusion of a performance or practice session. An entire cycle of *teental*, then, may be counted and clapped as follows:

clap (*sam*)

1 2 3 4

clap

5 6 7 8



Ray Spiegel demonstrates teental, by counting, clapping, reciting, and playing the tabla.

wave (*khali*)

9 10 11 12

clap

13 14 15 16

clap (*sam*)

1

The tabla player is often restricted to a supporting role, showing the basic tala structure by playing a repeated, basic pattern, called the *theka* of the tala. Every theka is represented by a series of spoken syllables, each of which represents a stroke or combination of strokes on the drums. One common theka pattern for the sixteen-beat teental is as follows:

clap (*sam*)

Dha Dhin Dhin Dha

clap

Dha Dhin Dhin Dha

wave (*khali*)

Dha Tin Tin Ta

clap

Ta Dhin Dhin Dha

clap (*sam*)

Dha



Ray Spiegel demonstrates khali by counting and playing the tabla.

By playing the theka clearly, the tabla player provides an improvising soloist with audible “signposts” that help the soloist to tailor his improvisations properly within the tala. The clearest signpost occurs from beats 9 through 12 (“Dha Tin Tin Ta”), when the low sound of the bass drum is absent. The third measure of the cycle, in which the bass sound disappears, is called *khali* or “empty.”

The tabla player often fills in the theka with subtle ornamentation, clearly maintaining the basic shape of the tala, but sometimes he is given the opportunity to play a solo for one or more cycles. Both melodic soloists and drummers often display their mastery of rhythm by concluding a solo with a *tihai*, a rhythmic figure which, performed three times in succession, concludes on *sam*. In audio example #20, Ray Spiegel plays a tabla composition called a *kaida*, a set of variations on the theme, and a concluding *tihai*. The *kaida* and *tihai* are represented by the following syllables:

Kaida

dhati dha-tere kitataka terekita
 dhati dhaga tina kena
 tati ta-tere kitataka terekita
 dhati dhaga dhina gena

Tibai (the entire tibai is played 3 times to end on sam)

dhati dha ga dhina gena
 dhati dha-tere kitataka terekita dha -
 dhati dha-tere kitataka terekita dha -
 dhati dha-tere kitataka terekita dha -



Ray Spiegel performs
 an improvised tabla solo
 (kaida) in teental.

Songs and instrumental compositions in Indian classical music are set in tala cycles such as teental. We will explore one teental composition in Chapter 6 “Melody” and Chapter 10 “Form.”

POLYRHYTHM IN THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

The cultures of Africa and the African diaspora are especially rich areas for the study of polyrhythm. Along with call and response form, polyrhythmic texture is one of the most salient features of almost all of the musics of these cultures. Through an investigation of a few African-American examples in North, Central, and South America, we can begin to sense the tremendous diversity of rhythmic expression in what the collector and author John Storm Roberts has called the “black music of two worlds.”⁵

The connection between these two worlds involves one of the most heinous passages in recorded history: the slave trade. For over three centuries, until the countries of the New World abolished slavery in the mid-1800s, slave ships plundered the coast of western Africa, kidnapping countless inhabitants and condemning them to lives of forced labor, mainly in North, Central, and South America. Most slaves were taken from the regions of sub-Saharan West Africa. In the United States, members of different ethnic and language groups were routinely mixed together to discourage cooperation and communication between the captives. As a result of this and other forms of suppression, relatively few African cultural practices survived unchanged in America; for the most part new cultural practices arose, rooted generally in sub-Saharan West African practices but adapted to the harsh new circumstances of slavery in an unknown land.

Little is known about the music of the slaves, except for reports of singing at work, worship, and recreation, and indications that a number of slaves were taught to furnish European-style music for the entertainment of their captors. But contemporary accounts only reproduced song lyrics—and those only occasionally—and very general and ethnocentric descriptions of performing styles. For specific musical details, we can only turn to those few examples in oral tradition which are said to come from the slavery era.

One such example is *Jibber*. According to Bessie Jones, who learned it sometime in the early twentieth century from her paternal grandfather, an ex-slave, “People say Juba, but it’s really jibber.”⁶ *Jibber* is a polyrhythmic song which can be performed by one musician: the handpatting pattern sets up a triple rhythm while the vocal part is in a duple rhythm, creating a constant three-against-two polyrhythm. While Jones referred to *Jibber* as a game, there was clearly more to it:

Many of the games used to be what you call “talking to the white man in song.” Like where my grandfather was in Virginia, they used to have the slaves eat out of a trough on Sundays. They used to have a big thing where they would bring mush from all the houses around and put it in there, then add all the leftovers from through the week, and sometimes fresh roasted rabbit or pig, and gather the slaves around to play games and eat that food. . . . *Jibber* was the ends of food that they used to have in that trough. . . . These games were for talking to them white folks direct, because the slaves didn’t like the way they were being treated.⁷

Example 7 shows the handpatting and vocal parts for one verse of *Jibber*. “*Jibber* kill the alley cat” means that the leftover food isn’t even fit for a stray cat to eat. “Get over double trouble” refers to the wish to escape from slavery; as Jones put it, it means “Someday I’ll get to cook my own food.”⁸

To perform *Jibber* yourself, start with the handpatting rhythm. With your left hand held just over your right, strike your right thigh with the palm of your right hand. Now bring your right hand up so that its back strikes the palm of your left hand. Now strike your right thigh with your right palm again, while you move your left hand to your left thigh. Repeat the same pattern there: left palm to thigh, left backhand to right palm, left palm to thigh while moving your right hand back to your right thigh. Now work on getting the rhythm steady—right palm, right back, right palm/left palm, left back, left palm. You are producing a triple rhythm,

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Many of the games used to be what you call “talking to the white man in song.” Like where my grandfather was in Virginia, they used to have the slaves eat out of a trough on Sundays. They used to have a big thing where they would bring mush from all the houses around and put it in there, then add all the leftovers from through the week, and sometimes fresh roasted rabbit or pig, and gather the slaves around to play games and eat that food. . . . *Jibber* was the ends of food that they used to have in that trough. . . . These games were for talking to them white folks direct, because the slaves didn’t like the way they were being treated.⁷

Example 7 shows the handpatting and vocal parts for one verse of *Jibber*. “*Jibber* kill the alley cat” means that the leftover food isn’t even fit for a stray cat to eat. “Get over double trouble” refers to the wish to escape from slavery; as Jones put it, it means “Someday I’ll get to cook my own food.”⁸

To perform *Jibber* yourself, start with the handpatting rhythm. With your left hand held just over your right, strike your right thigh with the palm of your right hand. Now bring your right hand up so that its back strikes the palm of your left hand. Now strike your right thigh with your right palm again, while you move your left hand to your left thigh. Repeat the same pattern there: left palm to thigh, left backhand to right palm, left palm to thigh while moving your right hand back to your right thigh. Now work on getting the rhythm steady—right palm, right back, right palm/left palm, left back, left palm. You are producing a triple rhythm,

two groups of three beats. Once you can keep this pattern going, start adding the vocal part. It's tricky at first, but eventually you'll be able to reproduce this polyrhythmic game song from the slavery era of the United States.

Although polyrhythms are usually social in nature, involving at least two musicians playing different rhythmic patterns, Jibber shows that one resourceful person can produce polyrhythmic music. Polyrhythms can also be played on a single multi-toned instrument. One of several West African examples is the *kora*, a spiked harp with a large gourd resonator. While kora performances may involve various practices, pieces are always based on a repeating polyrhythm known as *kumbengo* which supports singing and/or instrumental improvisation.

Rhythm Example 7: Jibber

The musical score for 'Jibber' is presented in four systems. Each system consists of three staves: a vocal line (voice) and two instrumental lines (right leg and left leg). The vocal line is in treble clef, and the instrumental lines are in bass clef. The lyrics are written below the vocal line.

System 1:

- Voice: Jib-ber jib-ber jib-ber this and jib-ber that jib-ber kill the al-ley cat and
- Right leg: [Rhythmic notation]
- Left leg: [Rhythmic notation]

System 2:

- Voice: get o-ver dou-ble trou-ble jib-ber jib-ber I sift your meal you
- Right leg: [Rhythmic notation]
- Left leg: [Rhythmic notation]

System 3:

- Voice: give me the husk I cooked the bread you give me the crust I fried the meat you
- Right leg: [Rhythmic notation]
- Left leg: [Rhythmic notation]

System 4:

- Voice: give me the skin and that's where Ma-ma's trou-ble be-gin and then you jib-ber etc.
- Right leg: [Rhythmic notation]
- Left leg: [Rhythmic notation]

African-American blues musicians approached the guitar in similar ways, layering repeating polyrhythms in different registers of the instrument to accompany their songs and improvisations. This kind of polyrhythmic solo playing fed into the development of ragtime guitar and piano playing, which in turn inspired the virtuoso piano music of the 1930s and 1940s known as "boogie-woogie." Another African-American development, the drum set, allowed a solo drummer to produce polyrhythmic layers on an array of percussion instruments.

But the most widespread examples of polyrhythm involve various instruments played by more than one musician. Although few African-American polyrhythms can be traced to specific African pieces, African organizing principles can be found in many of the African-American musics of the New World. There are few North American examples of percussion ensembles dating from the slavery era. Many slaveholders in the southern United States forbade drumming among their slaves for two reasons: 1) concerns over the sanctioning of "pagan" rituals and 2) the fact that drums could be used to send subversive signals through the African practice of using them to replicate speech. But some polyrhythmic drumming practices survived into the twentieth century in that region, as we will see below.

Slaveowners in South and Central America tended to be more indulgent of ensemble drumming, and we will turn to these regions later for two further explorations of African-American polyrhythmic traditions. Finally we will look at developments in African-American popular music in the late twentieth century, when polyrhythmic practices became salient in the development of funk music, leading to the growth of the richly polyrhythmic genre known as rap.

Mississippi: Fife and Drum

Although the largely pre-revolutionary Black Codes had a chilling effect on drumming among slaves in the southern United States, leading to the banning of drums in some areas, such practices were not wiped out entirely. Throughout the slavery era, informal accounts such as letters and diaries bear witness to polyrhythmic drumming practices in various parts of the region. There are also plenty of accounts of drumming among slaves in the northeastern United States, where the Black Codes had less influence. Black fife and drum bands existed even before the Revolutionary War in the north, and participated in that war as well as in the Civil War. Presumably these bands played in the characteristic European-derived military style. But as time passed, southern African-Americans evolved very different ways of playing these instruments.

On a trip to Mississippi to record folk music in 1942, the American folklorist Alan Lomax heard about Sid Hemphill's group, located and recorded them. This remarkable African-American ensemble of multi-instrumentalists could perform as a string band on fiddle, guitar, banjo, mandolin, and harmonica; as a full brass band; or as a fife-and-drum band. Their repertory included music to appeal to white audiences, from barn dances to the latest popular tunes. But they also played polyrhythmic music on their drums, with Hemphill blowing short repeated phrases on panpipes—one-note reed pipes attached in a scalar sequence—whooping and shouting in between. Listening to Lomax's recordings, it is difficult to imagine that one is listening to the same musicians from one song to the next—the string band selections sound like any good white country band of the period, while the panpipe and drum music sounds like it could have been recorded in Africa.

Panpipes are no longer played in the region, but local fife and drum music could still be found in some agricultural areas of rural Mississippi when the American folklorist David Evans visited there in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The music was mainly performed at summer community picnics, often on Saturday afternoon after a baseball game. A few people might dance, but mainly the picnickers just enjoyed the music, the food, and the chance to socialize. Othar Turner, an outstanding player of this music, described the feeling of such occasions:

Laughin', talkin', just associatin' with one another—just fun. Little kids go out and dance behind the drum. We have all of that, just a real of what you call a good time. Just for enjoyment, just to keep from bein' at home alone, just goin' out for a little enjoyment, that's the way we do. We all meets there, white peoples come there just like colored, right there, sit down there laughin' and talkin'. . . no clownin', cussin', hootin' and hollerin', no gun, no cuttin' and shootin'. Everybody bein' lovin' and peaceful—we always want that. Just to enjoy.⁹

Although Turner and his friends refer to the music as "fife and drum," they call the wind instrument a "cane." It is indeed a piece of fresh cane stalk, cut from a local creek bottom and reamed with a hot poker, with five or six finger holes and a breath hole burned into it. The drums are the usual commercial instruments found in marching bands: one or more snare drums and a bass drum. While the music is essentially instrumental, the cane player may stop to sing a few lines of a blues or some other song; otherwise he improvises on short repeating phrases, varying them with different decorations, sometimes throwing in a long, undecorated note

reminiscent of a vocal whoop. The musicians sometimes dance with their instruments, even occasionally performing stunts such as the cane player doffing his hat with one hand while continuing to play with the other. The musicians refer to their own dancing and antics as “marching,” recalling the military origins of this instrumental grouping.



A performance of “Soft Black Jersey Cow.” At one point in this performance the cane player sings two humorous verses about the cow in the title: “mama gonna milk you or either kill you dead,” derived from a local children’s song, and “had no milk and butter since old Jersey been gone,” derived from a country blues in which the lost cow symbolizes a former lover.

Rhythm Example 8: “Soft Black Jersey Cow”



Example 8 shows the basic polyrhythmic cycle for “Soft Black Jersey Cow” as played by three of Turner’s associates. The cane line shown is one of several possible ostinatos. In most drumming traditions the lowest-pitched drum plays a slower rhythm while any higher-pitched drums play quicker, more improvisatory parts, but that norm is inverted in this performance: the snare drum plays a relatively unchanging part somewhat reminiscent of the *clave* of some Cuban musics, while the bass drum is both more active and more improvisatory. The bass drum part shown here is the general pattern, which the player elaborates on or departs from in various ways.

Cuba: Rumba

The largest and most populous island in the Caribbean Sea, Cuba is a land of severe economic hardship—but also of great cultural abundance, including a bountiful musical environment. Historically, this creative richness is mainly the result of contacts between Hispanic and African peoples—the former initially as conquerors and settlers, the latter subsequently as their slaves—over the last few centuries. The indigenous *Taino* people of Cuba were exterminated by the Spanish in the decades after Columbus first reached the Caribbean; today their cultural impact on the whole region is minimal.

The spectrum of Cuban musics runs from practices directly derived from Africa, such as those of the *santería* religion, which is founded in beliefs, rituals, and music of the Yoruba of Nigeria, to genres rooted mainly in European-based traditions, such as the popular, politically-oriented



nueva trova songs. Cuba's musical influence is felt all over the Caribbean, and since the nineteenth century it has spread to Europe and other parts of America. By the mid-twentieth century many of the popular musics of urban Africa were derived from Cuban models. And, as we will see later, one Cuban genre—*son*—evolved into a music whose impact extended even further.

Rumba apparently developed in the 1860s, in the black, lower-class urban areas of Havana and Matanzas provinces. Centered in the large, crowded residences known as *solares*, where many poor Afro-Cubans were forced to live, its songs spoke of hard times in both love relationships and social injustices, while its music affirmed the inner vitality of the heart, like much of the music of oppressed peoples. In the *solares*, rumba was a communal music which could involve any number of percussionists and chorus singers. The lead singer improvised lyrics on topics ranging from local news or the personalities and proclivities of those present to broader themes of troubled or happy love, the inequities of racism, and the bitterness of poverty. Initially the instruments were often just empty wooden crates of various sizes, bottles, spoons, and so on—whatever people could find that made a strong sound.

From the *solares*, rumba disseminated throughout the island, evolving many different local idioms, both in music and dance. Soon it was being exported to other parts of the Caribbean, to Africa, and to Europe and the United States, fueling the "Latin Dance" fad of the 1930s. The ballroom

Photograph by Mary A. Overy

Los Muñequitos de Matanzas ►



style, sometimes known as *rumba de salón*, may involve elegant dancers in tuxedos and evening gowns, accompanied by a full Western orchestra—a far cry from the culture of the solares! But despite such class-crossing, and the Cuban government's overt manipulation of the genre for propagandistic purposes, rumba essentially remains a music and dance of the heart.

Today three forms of rumba survive in oral tradition, each with its own characteristic rhythmic cycle and dance form: *yambú*, *columbia*, and *guaguancó*. While rumba music may be played for general social dancing, the traditional dance forms are improvised by one couple (*yambú* and *guaguancó*) or by a solo male dancer (*columbia*) within a circle of onlookers who may participate with handclaps and encouraging shouts.

The *columbia* is a display of the soloist's grace, skill, and inventiveness. It may involve humorous miming movements evoking sports events, drunkenness, fighting, and so on—or it may be purely abstract, with subtle or flamboyant movements, sometimes involving manipulating knives or other hand-held objects. In all cases, the excitement of the *columbia* derives from both the creativeness of the dancer and his ability to move instantly and flawlessly from quick, off-center movements to a state of perfect balance.

The *yambú* and *guaguancó* depict the ageless game of flirtation, the woman alternately inviting and resisting the man's advances, the man successively showing off, imploring her, or even teasing her with a sharp pelvic thrust or mimed assault, which she must repel gracefully, usually

by protecting herself with a swish of her long skirts. These couple dances always stress good-humored sophistication and virtuosity, avoiding vulgarity. They require intense concentration and split-second timing, as well as technical and improvisational skill, belying the apparent nonchalance of the performers. Yambú, which some musicians consider the oldest form of rumba, is comparatively low-key and stately, while guaguancó is quicker and flashier.

Example 9 shows the basic polyrhythmic cycle for rumba guaguancó.

Rhythm Example 9: Rumba Guaguancó

The musical notation for Rhythm Example 9: Rumba Guaguancó consists of three staves: *clave*, *segundo*, and *conga*. Each staff begins with a 3/4 time signature. The *clave* staff shows a 12-measure cycle with notes and rests. The *segundo* staff shows a 12-measure cycle with notes and rests. The *conga* staff shows a 12-measure cycle with notes and rests. The notation illustrates the characteristic polyrhythmic cycle for rumba guaguancó.



An excerpt from a rumba guaguancó performance by Cuban street musicians.

The core instruments of the rumba ensemble are three standing barrel drums, usually called *conga*, *segundo*, and *quinto*, from the lowest in pitch to the highest, and a pair of sticks called *clave* which may be played by the lead singer. The quinto player improvises almost constantly; the other parts are relatively unchanging, anchoring the group with the characteristic poly-rhythm of each rumba type. Other hand-held percussion instruments may be involved, but the four core instruments are essential.

Brazil: Samba

Brazil is the largest country in South America, and it is one of environmental contrasts—from the humid rain forest surrounding the Amazon River to the arid desert of the Northeast to the lush grasslands of the South. It is also home to manifold cultures. Some Native American groups live in much the same way they did before Europeans ever arrived; sprawling cities pit glamour and technology against teeming slums and appalling poverty; and some villages in the Bahia region very closely resemble their counterparts in West Africa. In fact, there are more people of African descent living in Brazil than in any other country outside of Africa. Yet the national language is Portuguese, a distinction Brazil shares with but a handful of other countries.

The country's cultural diversity is reflected in the panorama of its music, which runs a gamut from the comparatively conservative traditions of



the Amazonian and Bahian regions to the wildly eclectic urban genre known as MPB—*música popular brasileira*, “Brazilian popular music”—which seems to borrow musical sounds and ideas from every corner of the earth while still retaining a clear Brazilian essence. Between these extremes are a number of indigenous forms which have sprung largely from connections between cultures from Europe and Africa. To many people, the genre which functions as the primary wellspring of truly Brazilian music is *samba*.

Apparently *samba* developed in the African-American community of nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro, one of Brazil’s most important seaports. By the early twentieth century it was a distinct form, differentiated from other urban Brazilian genres by its greater reliance on such African elements as call and response singing and polyrhythmic accompaniment, influenced

to some extent by the musical practices of Brazil’s syncretic *macumba* religions. *Samba* has taken several different forms, from the intimate, soulful melodies of *samba-canção* to the boisterous *samba-enredo* of Carnival. It can involve a voice and one or two instruments, a large group of singers with a massive *batucada* percussion ensemble, and just about any kind of assemblage in between.

The heartbeat of *samba* is the *surdo* rhythm, emphasizing the third beat of each four-beat group with a low-pitched accent which might be played on the large *surdo* drum, any other comparatively low drum, or in the low register of a guitar or other accompanying instrument. Various cross-rhythms may be played above this rhythmic basis, by smaller percussion instruments, in the higher registers of the guitar, or on the *cavaquinho*, a small four-stringed guitar-like instrument.

Samba is also a dance form, which has many regional variants. Some forms are presentational, with improvising soloists alternating within a circle of spectators like the forms of *rumba* discussed earlier; some are relatively informal couple dances; and the competing groups of Carnival perform extravagant, carefully-rehearsed choreography.

Carnival is a pre-Lenten festival. In the Christian calendar Lent is a period of austerity, and several cultures have evolved traditions of exuberant celebration just before this time of fasting and repentance—one well

known example is the Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Since the nineteenth century, Rio's version of Carnaval has included parades, percussion and vocal music, and dancing, in addition to nonmusical pleasures, such as drinking and general merriment.

In the early twentieth-century *escolas de samba* ("samba schools") arose: community centers, usually in poor neighborhoods, whose annual function was to organize music and dance groups for Carnaval. Often they are also year-round social centers, and they may provide other community services as well, such as medical assistance or day-care. Today there are over fifty *escolas de samba* in Rio alone, and the centerpiece of Carnaval is their competition. Each *escola* spends most of the year creating elaborate costumes and floats and composing, choreographing, and rehearsing their *samba-enredo* group.

While it is dear to the hearts of many Brazilians, Carnaval is also a mammoth tourist event. The *samba-enredo* competition has sometimes appeared to be corrupted by political interests, and some *escolas de samba* are suspected of connections to money laundering from drug trafficking and other illegal activities. Some *sambaistas* are disillusioned about what Carnaval has become, seeing it as an empty exercise in mindless euphoria, turning the pleasures of the poor into political propaganda and exploiting the music of the people for the enrichment of cynical manipulators. On one occasion, this disillusionment found a voice in an unexpected way.

In 1989 the members of *Beija-Flor*, an *escola de samba* which had been famous for its particularly opulent costumes and extravagant performances, astonished all of Rio by appearing at Carnaval dressed in rags and garbage, singing a song which addressed the disparity between reality and fantasy in *samba-enredo*: "*Ratos e Urubus. . . Larguem Minha Fantasia*" (Rats and Vultures. . . Let Me Have my Costume). "In life I am a beggar," they sang, "but I am the king of the revelry . . . if you stay the rat will catch you; if you fall the vulture will eat you!" Although the group's presentation was the audience's clear favorite that year, *Beija-Flor* missed the first-place designation by one point, losing to a group whose presentation was not socially charged.¹⁰



Beija-Flor's recording of
"Ratos e Urubus."

Rhythm Example 10: Ratos e Urubus, Larguem Minha Fantasia,
Basic Cycle

The musical notation shows five staves, each representing a different instrument. The *agogo* staff has a syncopated melody with eighth and quarter notes. The *caixa* staff shows a steady stream of eighth notes with accents on the first and fourth of each group of four. The *reco-reco* staff also shows eighth notes with accents on the first of each group of four. The *tambourim* staff has a melody with eighth and quarter notes, including some beamed eighth notes. The *surdo* staff shows a simple pattern of quarter and half notes, with a half note on the third beat of each measure.

Example 10 shows the basic polyrhythmic cycle of “Ratos e Urubus.” As in any large batucada, the pulsing *surdo* part is divided between two sizes of *surdo*, the lowest ones sounding on the decisive third beat. The *agogo*, a double cowbell, provides a syncopated rhythmic cycle, interlocking with the *tambourims*, small pan drums held in one hand and played with a stick in the other. The *caixa* snare drum plays a steady stream of eighth notes, accenting the first and fourth of each group of four; the *reco-reco* scraper characteristically accents just the first of each eighth-note group.

Funk and Rap

In the mid-1960s African-American popular music was dominated by two generic categories: rhythm & blues, a youthful development of the forms and practices of older electric blues styles, and soul, which, while its lyrics were secular, drew more on the conventions of gospel music. There was much intermingling of the two—for example, Ray Charles’s celebrated “What’d I Say” used a twelve-bar blues form, but featured gospel-style call and response singing. But the distinction widened as rhythm & blues increasingly was marketed as “rock & roll,” expanding its territory into white America while soul remained more of a distinctly African-American genre. Many of soul’s most accomplished singers, such as Aretha Franklin and Sam Cooke, came from a solid background in gospel music, using its declamatory style and upbeat music to fashion a sound

which to many fans symbolized the contemporary growth of “black pride” and the Civil Rights Movement.

James Brown, one of the popular young soul singers of this period, developed a new genre, grounded in gospel and soul but also seeming to have a tap root stretching back to Africa. As the American critic Robert Palmer put it, “Brown, his musicians, and his arrangers began to treat every instrument and voice in the group as if it were a drum.”¹¹ Perhaps influenced by Cuban and other Caribbean genres which could be heard in the United States, Brown and his band pioneered a highly polyrhythmic music which became known as funk. While American popular music had previously been essentially homophonic, funk was a polyphonic music in which both voices and instruments produced interlocking rhythms and melodic lines. Over this pulsating web of sound, Brown could sing or speak rhythmically, setting up further polyrhythms and showcasing his improvisatory virtuosity.

Following the success of Brown’s innovations funk became a genre in itself, further popularized by groups like Sly and the Family Stone, Parliament, and Funkadelic. The rise of disco in the 1970s overshadowed funk’s popularity, ushering in a period in which polyrhythm played a less significant role in African-American music. But by the end of the decade a new genre that had been developing in poor urban neighborhoods started to gain more and more attention. With the release of Sugar Hill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight” in 1979, rap music burst out of the ghettos and into the national—and subsequently international—spotlight.

To a certain extent, rapping grew out of an African-American form of spoken oral poetry known as “toasts.” Taking their generic name from their function at drinking parties, these rhymed couplets are often a humorous satire on the conventional “here’s to your health” kind of toast. They are stylized insults, usually obscene, often denigrating the subject’s parentage, sexual mores, and so on. Toasts may be traded in an improvisatory, competitive interaction, a game known as “signifying” or “the dozens.”

Some longer toasts are stories—involving, for example, a signifying monkey who manages to repeatedly insult a lion while avoiding its claws—until the tale’s end, or a legendary black man named Shine who survives the Titanic disaster by swimming home (“When the news hit the street that the Titanic had sunk / Shine was standin’ on the street corner, one-half drunk”), always in strings of rhymed couplets. Another important influence came from the rhythmic declamations of the “beat poets” of the 1950s and 60s, particularly the African-Americans collectively known as The Last Poets.



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Today's rappers may compose their raps carefully, or they may improvise; one can even find a contemporary version of "the dozens," with rappers competing in rhymed insults. Whatever the situation, rapping combines rhetoric, rhythm, and rhyme in a celebration of verbal virtuosity. Although some forms of rapping are stylized to the point of sounding like chants, by definition rap is never literally sung to a melody.

The non-vocal components of rap are most often polyrhythms derived from funk conventions, though these are usually articulated through technological manipulation rather than by live instrumentalists. Rap musicians are well aware of their musical heritage, and often include digital samples from older funk recordings in their polyrhythmic creations. Indeed, it has been noted that James Brown's recordings may be the most often-sampled sources in rap music.

In all of these African-American group examples, polyrhythmic practices symbolize a particular kind of cultural value: the participants know and stick to their roles, yet each is a distinctive contributor to a larger whole which comprises more than the sum of its parts. Polyrhythmic groups portray a vision of individuality and cooperation in a vibrant society, enacted in sound.

SUMMARY

Rhythm, in its broadest sense, is fundamental to our world. From the rotation of our planet to the beating of our hearts, it pervades our experience. People use musical rhythm to articulate this central fact of living, celebrate it, and to organize and synchronize bodies, minds, and spirits. And perhaps more than any other aspect of music, rhythm connects us not only to what people think, feel, and do, but also to the pulses, cycles, and tempos of the natural world.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

1. Rhythm is the time element in music. The term refers to the durations of musical sounds in relation to each other.
2. A pulse is a steady rhythmic unit. A beat is a regular grouping of pulses. Beats are further grouped into meters (in the West) or rhythmic cycles. Polyrhythm is the simultaneous sounding of more than one rhythmic cycle.
3. Tempo refers to the relative pace of beats.
4. Music which has no steady pulse is said to be in free rhythm.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Define the term "rhythm" as it is used in music.
2. What is the difference between beat and meter?
3. What are some examples of music that are said to be in free rhythm?
4. What is polyrhythmic music?
5. How does North Indian tala relate to the concept of meter in Western music?

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the relationship between pulse and meter?
2. What is duple meter? What is triple meter?
3. Define the following terms:
syncopation
swing
4. What general rhythmic term applies to each of these genres?
alap
march
rumba
samba
gat
jig
5. What musical characteristics do rumba, samba, funk, and rap have in common?

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