

One of the most challenging performance situations for trombonists is playing in a Latin or salsa band.

Salsa music has been the popular music of Cuba, Puerto Rico and many Central and South American countries for decades. This dance-oriented music has become more popular than ever, thanks to high exposure bands such as The Miami Sound Machine and movies such as "The Mambo Kings." Acoustic Latin bands, such as the groups led by Poncho Sanchez, Eddie Palmieri and Ruben Blades, provide good opportunities for horn players to keep their chops up and contribute creative solos.

A typical road map for each piece is as follows: play difficult trumpet register lines for a couple of phrases, throw in a few exposed bass trombone licks, launch into a lengthy improvised solo, sway back and forth while other bandmates get their turn to play higher/louder/faster, continue into the high sustained solo background section (played 4–16 times, depending on the dance floor situation), then wrap it up with a recap of the ensemble section. Before you have a chance to contemplate how your chops are going to feel at your church gig the next morning, the next tune is counted off. You need to be in shape for this job!

Rather than examine the challenging aspects of ensemble playing, this article will explore some of the elements useful in creating a solo. Improvised sections often consist of a montuno/vamp in which a two, four, or eight-bar phrase repeats over and over. Harmonically, the changes tend to be rather simple, usually staying close to the diatonic ii/V or iii/VI/ii/V of the given key. For the sake of simplicity, all the examples will use a two-bar montuno with a measure each of D minor 7 and G7, which function as the ii-7 and V7 in the key of C major (see Example 1). The corresponding diatonic modes are D dorian over the D minor 7 and G mixolydian over the G7.

Driving rhythm creates excitement in Latin music. The heavily articulated music consists of predominant eighth note lines with plenty of syncopation (see Example 2). Within the syncopated lines, eighth notes are played long and quarter notes are played short,

THE LATIN JAZZ SOLOIST

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unless indicated otherwise. The music in these bands almost always requires an aggressive, on top of the beat style of playing. You will not play many mellow bossa novas in these groups. There will be an occasional bolero or ballad, but most of the music tends to be more up-tempo mambos, cha chas and merengues.



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Latin musicians refer to their music as being "in clave" when rhythm lines up correctly and "out of clave" when an element is out of sync with the other instruments. Rhythm sections often include several percussionists who know (hopefully) right where their part fits into the rhythmic jigsaw puzzle. Piano and bass play their ostinato parts to correspond and interact with the percussionists.

A majority of Latin music is in 2–3 clave (see Example 3), but there are many pieces and styles performed in 3–2 or reverse clave. The "2" measure of the clave consists of downbeats on beats two and three, and is the important bar in determining the clave. Your solo will sound "in clave" if you include or imply these clave beats within your playing (see Example 4, 5 and 6). You do not have to limit yourself to quarter notes on beats two and three, however. Try to include these clave beats within an eighth note or syncopated line. Avoiding strong accents on the upbeats of beat one and beat two will help insure the rhythmic integrity of the "2" measure. Another option is to rest during these beats and let the rhythm section take care of the clave (see Example 7). Arrows within examples 4 through 7 point to the "2" measure clave accents.

Practically anything can work with the "3" measure of the clave. This is the part of the clave where most rhythm section fills occur and where you can take more liberty with rhythmic accent. In Example 4, notice how the triplets start in the "3" measure and continue until setting up beat two in the next bar. A measure of upbeats in the second bar of Example 5 works well after establishing the two clave accents in bar one. The driving offbeat rhythm can continue throughout the remainder of the phrase, since the "in clave" rhythm has been established.

As is the case with most general musical concepts, there are plenty of exceptions to playing in strict clave. Melodic and rhythmic sequence can be used to place accents convincingly anywhere in a measure. In Example 8, a polyrhythmic effect is created by a two note sequence for two bars and then a four note sequence for two bars. In Example 9, the accent shifts from beat three in the first measure, to beat two in next bar and to beat one in the subsequent measure.

Navigate the chord changes with the same harmonic principles for improvisation used in other jazz styles. Diatonic scales and modes, such as those appearing in example 1, will become predictable and "vanilla" sounding if overused. Restructure the same diatonic pitches into pentatonic scales to produce harmonic variation (see Ex-

ample 10). Apply altered tones such as flat nine, sharp nine, flat five and flat thirteen to dominant chords. This will add interesting coloration to the harmony. In Example 11, a polychord is implied in the second bar by superimposing an A triad over the G7. The colorful pattern in the fourth bar of

Example 11 uses several of the altered dominant pitches. Other harmonic devices to try are use of quartal lines, tritone substitution of the dominant chords, and ascending and descending chromatic patterns (see Example 12).

The impressive list of great trombone soloists in past and present Latin

bands will be the topic of a future article. There is a vast amount of Latin jazz recordings available. The music continues to provide an exciting outlet for players to develop good command of their instrument, refine their improvisational skill and participate in a fun, adrenaline-filled musical experience.

LATIN JAZZ EXERCISES

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Ex. 1 **D-7** **G7** **D DORIAN MODE** **G MIXOLYDIAN MODE**

Ex. 2

Ex. 3 **2-3 CLAVE** **3-2 CLAVE**

Ex. 4

Ex. 5

Ex. 6

Ex. 7

Ex. 8

Ex. 9

Ex. 10 **A MINOR PENTATONIC** **E MINOR PENTATONIC**

Ex. 11 **A TRIAD OVER G7** **f9 b9 b13 f9 b9**

Ex. 12 **QUARTAL LINE** **TRITONE SUBSTITUTION** **CHROMATIC PATTERN**