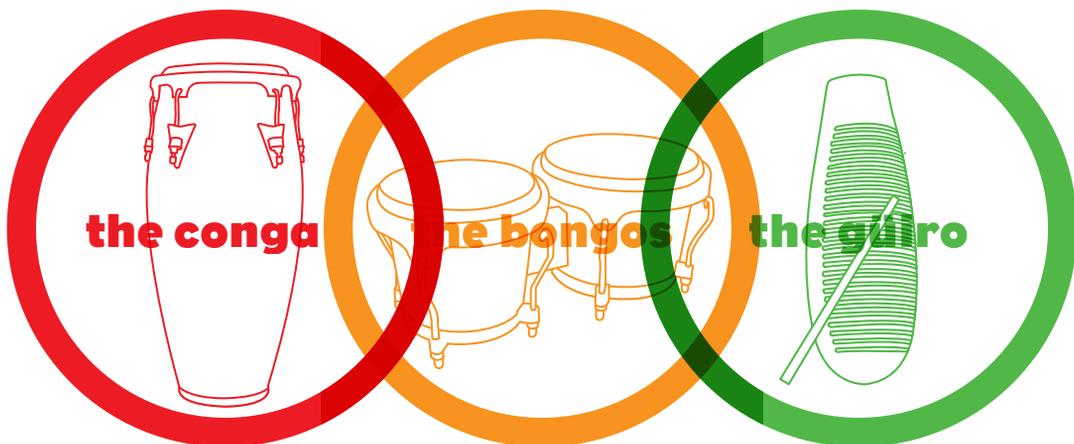


Lose the count... and find the rhythm



Lee Knights tells **Nicola Rayner** about her unique approach to teaching salsa and other Cuban rhythms

One-two-three... five-six-seven." It's the clarion call of every salsa teacher, whose voice booms the count from the front of the class. I would wager that almost everybody who has learned salsa – in the UK at least – has mouthed "one-two-three..." as they spin around the dancefloor, but salsa teacher and music lover Lee Knights is on a one-woman mission to change things.

"The problem with counting and turn patterns is that they eliminate the music," explains Lee, who danced salsa for many years before she began

to investigate the music in more depth. "Salsa is such a complex rhythm – I didn't feel I was connecting to the music before. I thought, 'This isn't satisfying.'"

Lee's friendship with Latin jazz pianist, composer and bandleader Alex Wilson and her research for *Find the Rhythm! A Guide for the Salsa Dancer*, the book they wrote together and published in 2009, formed the trapdoor to a new world.

Now Lee, an IDTA-trained Latin teacher, leads workshops focusing on musicality in salsa, son and Cuban cha cha cha throughout the UK.

"Now when I dance I feel I'm inside the music," say Lee. "The musicians are having fun and I'm *with* them. I'm embodying the music... I wanted to know ahead of time what's happening with the music and use my body to reflect that. For instance, one of the tracks the other day, in one of my workshops, had a lot of cymbals going on. The musician was using them to add drama... but then, 'cause he's already used them once, you know he's going to use them again."

To demonstrate her methods, Lee gives me ➤

and my husband, Jason, who is musically minded but mildly terrified of Latin dance, a lesson at Greenwich Dance Agency in south-east London.

In the session, we look at the Cuban (as opposed to the ballroom) cha cha cha. First we listen to two instruments played separately – the güiro and the conga and the timbale. The güiro is an open-ended, hollow gourd with parallel notches carved in one side, which is played by rubbing a stick along the notches to produce a ch-ch-ch noise. “The güiro runs throughout with a syncopated beat,” explains Lee. “It makes the cha cha cha sound that’s going on all the time.”

“The conga [a type of drum] gives you the break step. It’s like the heartbeat.” Lee slaps her chest and then her thigh – boom-boom. “It comes from within you, it doesn’t come from outside.”

Lee has us dancing the cha-cha-cha chassé to the güiro and the break step, which anchors the dancer, to the conga and then we put them together. Once we’ve got over the self-consciousness of dancing around on our own, it begins to make sense. Next we begin to dance together, again taking our cues from the instruments, listening to them for the signals rather than counting aloud. It’s intuitive way to dance and, it has been said, much more relaxing, than counting aloud. For Jason it “removed the panic of where my feet are meant to be.”

“It was a revelation using the instruments to find the rhythm – the music tells you what to do,” says Lee over tapas after we’ve



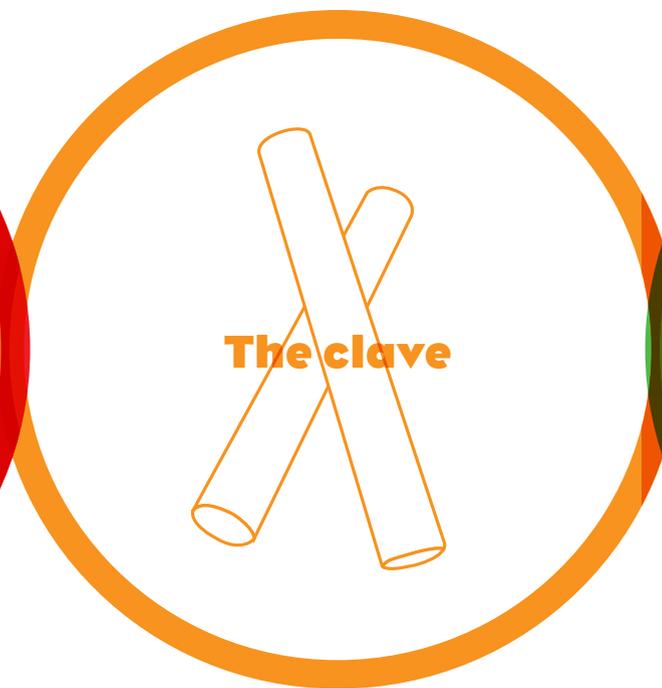
danced. How would this work in a typical salsa song? What should dancers listen out for in terms of musical structure?

“At the beginning is the intro and really the intro is for dancers to connect and for you to connect with the music. The piano tells you where your feet are meant to be. You can tell where the ‘one’ is. Often the intro tells you what the rest of the music is going to be like. If it’s really fiery and spicy you know you are in for trouble, so you’re already getting clues, but at that point you shouldn’t really be doing anything because the music isn’t really doing anything. You’re saying hello...”

“Then, typically, it goes into the first section. The first section is just singing and that point everything is written down

and restrained, because you can’t have everything going off when the vocalist is singing, otherwise you can’t hear what they’re singing about. Everything is restrained, but then it gets more and more exciting.”

The signal that things are hotting up is one of my favourite instruments – the cowbell. “It’s the definitive sound of salsa,” says Lee. What is its role? “It’s a sign that the song is reaching its climax – for the band to let go, before they go into their descarga mode, their improvised mode. It’s like jazz in that way... The bongo player at this stage leaves the bongo and picks up the cowbell. Dong-diddity-dong-diddity. You can feel that heavy beat. That’s the definitive signal that you’ve entered the ‘montuno’ section.”



The clave

The montuno – or mountain – section is where everything moves up a gear and you find the improvised solos in salsa. “There is a peak to the song, then it comes down the other side,” says Lee. “It is really a mountain and you can trace the fall and rise before it goes into the outro, so you’ve had the drama and it goes back to ‘romantica’. It’s a completion.”

What’s the minimum number of instruments you need for salsa? “About 106,” laughs Lee. “There are many sets of drums – the congas, the timbales, the bongos. Who needs that many drums?”

“Salsa music is based on the clave [a pair of hardwood sticks], but people go on about it too much and they don’t understand it. With the clave, you do the basic



The cowbell

step.” She gets to her feet to clap the clave rhythm and dance the salsa steps at the same time.

“It’s slightly off-rhythm – it comes in on the ‘two’. Latins don’t realise how hard this is, but if you’re British you might say: what’s that got to do with what I’m doing, if I’m stepping on ‘one’? It’s hard.”

It is hard. Salsa and its Cuban relations – such as son, cha cha cha and rueda – require a bewildering array of instruments and even after two or three hours talking about it, I feel we’re only just scratching the surface. Still, we come away with some useful tools to tackle salsa in the future.

Does Lee have any final words of wisdom? “Stop counting and stop using turn patterns,” she emphasises. “If you’re not

counting, your ear will start listening to the music. Throw away the crutch. Otherwise you can’t be alive on the dancefloor.” ●



Lee Knights teaches at Greenwich Dance Agency (www.greenwichdance.org.uk) and will be at X on November X. See www.londonsalsascene.co.uk for more information.