

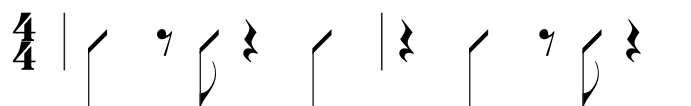
Latin Rhythms

By Mike Christiansen

The music of Latin America is rich in diversity of styles and rhythms. Because of the complexity of the rhythms, Latin music can be challenging, but at the same time rewarding to play on the guitar. If played correctly, the rhythm guitarist can add a relaxed feel to the music. Of the many varying styles of Latin music, this article will focus on the bossa nova and samba. While these two styles of music differ, in some ways they are very similar to each other. This article will concentrate on playing rhythm guitar (providing chords for a solo instrument or vocalist).

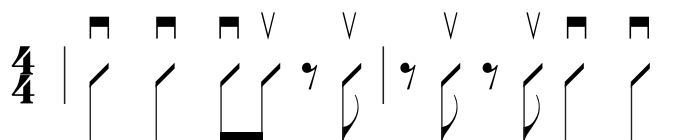
At the root of much Latin music is a rhythmic pattern called a *clave*. Example 1 shows the clave rhythm. The clave rhythm is in 4/4 time and takes two measures to complete.

Example 1



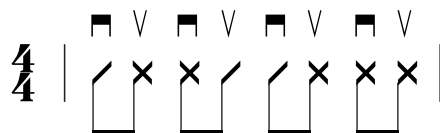
This rhythm is often played by percussionists in Latin bands. The clave rhythm may also be strummed on the guitar. However, it is more common for the guitarist to strum or play fingerstyle a rhythm which complements the clave rhythm. One of the most popular Latin rhythms is the bossa nova. Example 2 is an example of a bossa nova rhythm. This pattern works for 4/4 time and takes two measures to complete. Be sure to use the correct strum direction. When eighth notes are written, divide the beat into two equal patterns. The eighth notes should be even. It is uncharacteristic of the style to swing the eighth notes. Hold any chord and practice this bossa nova pattern. After practicing this strum holding one chord, practice changing chords and playing the pattern.

Example 2



Another way of strumming the bossa nova is written in Example 3. Again, this pattern takes one measure to complete. The "X" which is written indicates a muted strum. This is done by lifting the left-hand fingers slightly so the strings sound dead when strummed.

Example 3



Latin rhythms are frequently played fingerstyle rather than using a pick. The bossa nova pattern played fingerstyle is shown in Example 4. The letter “P” represents picking the bass string of the chord with the right-hand thumb. The bass string of the chord is the lowest string in the chord which would be played if the chord were being strummed. For example, if an open position Cmaj7 chord (drawn below) were played, the fifth string would be picked with the thumb. When a strum bar is written, pull strings 1, 2, and 3, or strings 2, 3, and 4 with the right-hand fingers 1, 2, and 3. The pattern written below is a popular bossa nova pattern.

Example 4

CMaj7

$\frac{4}{4}$ | P | P | P | P |

The next bossa nova pattern in Example 5 is also played fingerstyle. This pattern takes one measure in 4/4 to complete. Notice that if the chord changes after playing the pattern, the pick on beat four is to be done on the new chord.

Example 5

Example 6 is a pattern for the bossa nova which is very popular. The pattern takes two measures in 4/4 to complete. If “P” is written under a strum pattern, the bass note is picked at the same time three strings are pulled with the right-hand fingers.

Example 6

Practice using the bossa nova patterns to play Progression 1 and 2. First, use the same pattern throughout the entire progression. Then, practice combining the patterns. If two chords appear in one measure, divide the pattern.

Progression 1

CMaj7 FMaj7 CMaj7 Bm7b5 E7

Am7 Dm7 G7 CMaj7

Progression 2

Am7 Dm7 Bm7b5 E7 Am7 A7

Dm7 G7 CMaj7 Bm7b5 E7 Am7

The Samba may be played by using the bossa nova patterns but playing them faster. The samba usually has a two-feel (two beats to the measure) and is often written in cut time. There are, however, strum and finger-style patterns which differ from the bossa nova and are commonly used to play the samba. One of these patterns is shown in Example 7

Example 7

C | □ V V □ V V |

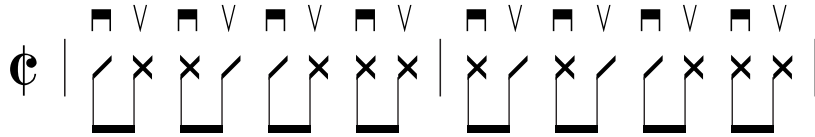
Example 8 is a samba pattern which takes two measures to complete.

Example 8

C | □ □ □ V V V □ V □ |

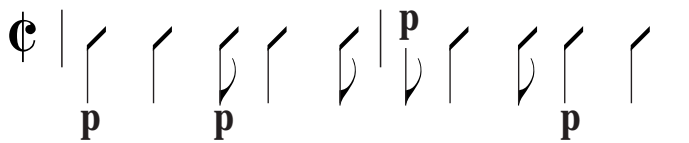
The samba pattern shown in Example 9 uses the muted strum.

Example 9



Like the bossa nova, the samba rhythm is often played fingerstyle. Example 10 is another samba rhythm which is very popular and uses the picking of the bass string with the right-hand thumb and the pulling of three strings with the first three fingers of the right hand. The pulling of the three strings is done where the strum bars are written.

Example 10



Practice Progression 3 using the patterns for the samba.

Progression 3

AMaj7 Am7 AMaj7 G#m7b5

C# F#m7 B9 Bm7 E7 AMaj7

A7 DMaj7 Dm7 C#m7 F#m7

Bm7 E7 AMaj7

It is crucial to the feel of the Latin music that these rhythms be played smoothly. Be careful not to rush the tempo.

Each of the Latin rhythms which have been presented can be used to play any bossa nova and samba. Try applying them to familiar bossa novas and sambas from fake books and/or sheet music. If you have been playing folk strums or jazz comps to these styles, using these new patterns will make your accompaniments sound more interesting and authentic. As with other styles of music, to get a clear picture of what the style sounds like, you need to surround yourself with the music. If you haven't already done so, listen to the music of artists such as Antonio Carlos Jobim, Louis Bonfa, Baden Powell, Bola Sete, and Jeff Linsky. They will direct you in getting the sound, and inspire you.