

# Ginga: a Brazilian way to groove

by Jovino Santos Neto

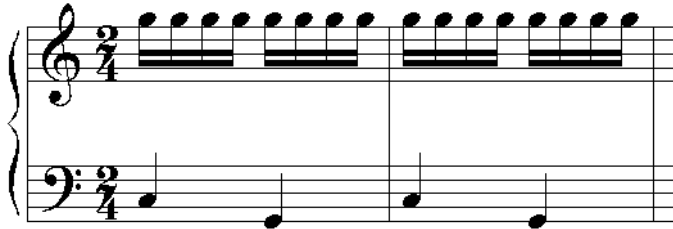
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## Introduction

Brazilian music in all its forms has enjoyed tremendous popularity in recent years, especially among jazz musicians who appreciate its rhythmic and harmonic sophistication. Almost every contemporary jazz performance features tunes with a Brazilian flavor, either a composition by a Brazilian composer or a jazz standard set to a *samba* or *bossa nova* feel. However, with notable exceptions, the musical results fail to achieve the essential characteristics that define those Brazilian styles. This is caused not by a lack of musical ability, but by an improper understanding of the rhythmic essence of the styles. In Brazil, this most subtle aspect of groove is often known as **ginga** (with a soft *g* as in *ginseng*). It may mean the way in which a dancer moves as well as the way that music incites motion in the listeners. The purpose of this clinic is to provide rhythmic information in a practical and concise way, leading to the development of *ginga* in the performance of Brazilian-based music. We will be looking at 2 distinct grooves, *samba* and *baião*, from that perspective, hoping to create a deeper intuitive feeling for their rhythmic nature. Before delving into the grooves, however, some basic considerations are necessary. Obviously, listening to Brazilian grooves as played by Brazilian musicians from different generations is very helpful in developing a sense of the underlying rhythmic pulse for each groove, but if the basic concepts are not clear, confusion may arise. Below are a few concepts that might be useful:

## Basic considerations

In most popular Brazilian musical styles, the rhythmic flow consists of evenly spaced subdivisions, usually represented as 16<sup>th</sup> notes:

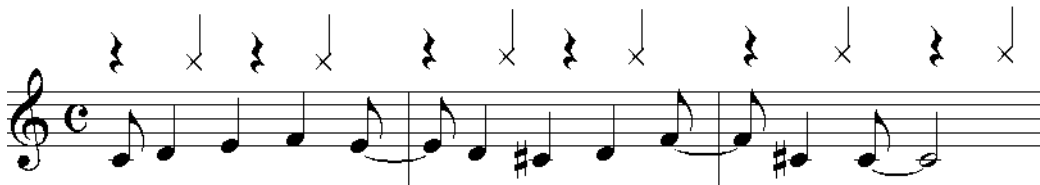


Jazz players, accustomed to playing swing and bebop lines, often fail to produce the necessary evenness when required, resulting in a mismatch of pulse that can compromise the integrity of the groove.

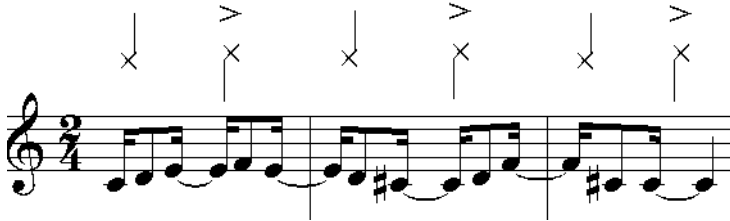
- **Feeling the Pulse before counting**

In feeling the rhythmic pulse of a piece and counting off a tune, there are some fundamental differences between a swing jazz approach and a Brazilian groove such as the *samba*. For instance, if you take a tune like *Desafinado* (Antonio Carlos Jobim / Newton Mendonça), in jazz circles it is often felt and counted off like in the example below, with the Xs indicating finger snaps:

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Compare this to the following example, favored by most Brazilian musicians:



This is not a difference in notation only, but in the fundamental way that the players perceive the groove internally. The second approach will definitely lead to a better internal grasp of the groove and a better performance of the tune. Note the accent on beat 2 of the 2/4 measure, corresponding to the *surdo* (bass drum) accent, which is one of the fundamental structural elements of Brazilian *samba*.

- **The Circle Dances**

Historically, many Brazilian grooves evolved from circle dances or *rodas*, in which participants (originally slaves in a farm yard) would form a circle, inviting solo musicians or dancers into the middle to perform. *Roda* participants would clap syncopated patterns while simultaneously singing and stepping from side to side. This concept is very useful as a perceptual tool to internalize grooves like *samba* and *baião*. By perceiving the rhythm as a bilateral motion, one can place the syncopation of the phrases, accents and structural elements on different parts of the body, literally *incorporating* the essence of the groove. Compare this to the incorporation of swing lines, which tend to move forward and backward. This motion is best exemplified by the concept of the walking bass line that often accompanies swing-based music. So here we have another fundamental difference: an implied *bilateral motion* in most Brazilian grooves, as opposed to a *back and forth motion* representing swing.

- **Basic rhythmic figures**

**1. The Fork:** One of most commonly used rhythmic figures in the music of Brazil, this 1-beat rhythmic cell has 3 notes: a 16<sup>th</sup>, an 8<sup>th</sup> and another 16<sup>th</sup>:



It is often used in phrases such as:



In Brazil, this cell is often played in a crisp, articulated way as:



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Or, depending on the interpretation, as relaxed triplets:



It can be made up of repeated notes as above, or spread out in extended lines as below:



Often rests may be used to create varied syncopations:



The musical lines might touch the downbeat and use the fork as a springboard for further syncopation:



## 2. Dotted figures:

### a) 3-3-2



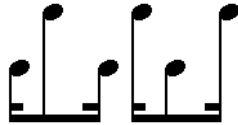
This is a 2-beat rhythmic cell that divides the 8 16<sup>th</sup> notes in 3 groups with 3, 3, and 2 notes. It is common in many other musical cultures as well, such as on the 3 side of Afro-Cuban clave (*tresillo*), Middle Eastern grooves, second-line beats, etc. In Brazil, it underlies the family of Northeastern grooves related to **baião** (*xaxado*, *coco*, *forró*, *arrasta-pé*), representing the *zabumba* drum pattern. It is also a structural element of both *marcha-rancho* and *frevó* grooves, and it is used as a handclap pattern behind *partido alto samba* styles. When playing any of these, it is essential for the musician to learn how to keep this 3-3-2 cell pulsating in the background, so that the phrasing, accents, articulations and other subtle details will be coherent with the groove.

### b) 3-2-3



This less common cell splits the 2 beats in 3 groups of 3, 2 and 3 16<sup>th</sup> notes respectively. It is used in *maxixe* and in some *xaxado* grooves. It can also be felt as 2 forks which alternate low and high sounds:

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c) 3 over 2 (or over 4)



This is a common polyrhythmic pattern, which can begin at any point in the measure. It groups 16<sup>th</sup> notes in 3s, taking 3 measures to return to its beginning. It can be subdivided as in:



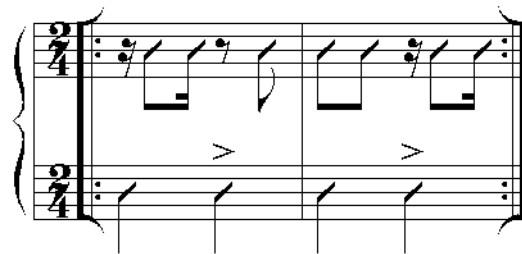
## THE GROOVES

### 1. Samba

Considered the national rhythm of Brazil, *samba* has evolved over the centuries from a circle dance performed by African slaves in plantations (*rural samba*) to urban forms developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, including *samba de roda*, *partido alto*, *samba enredo*, *samba exaltação*, *samba canção*, *bossa nova*, *samba jazz*, *samba funk*, *samba reggae* and many more. In its most basic form, it consists of 2 rhythmic layers: the lowest sounding one, represented by the *surdo* drum, which marks the beats as quarter notes, with an accent on beat 2, and a higher sounding layer, representing the *tamborim*, which can either start on the downbeat as in example *a* below or in an offbeat as in example *b*:



Example a:



Example b:

The *tamborim* patterns can be varied and switched around, especially when there are fewer players. The *surdo* patterns can also incorporate ghost notes and syncopated pick-ups. These basic rhythms can be translated to different instruments, such as guitar (thumb being the *surdo*)

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and the other fingers the *tamborim*), piano (left hand – *surdo*, right hand – *tamborim*) or to functions within a musical ensemble (bass, drums, horn sections, etc.).

*Bossa nova* holds a special interest for jazz musicians, given its widespread influence in recordings and concerts. Both basic *samba* patterns above can be used in a *bossa nova* setting, the main difference being the subdued and restrained energy level, such as when singers are singing with a whispering, intimate voice, which is the main characteristic of *bossa nova*.

*Samba* melodies are almost always syncopated, rarely beginning or ending on the downbeat. Here are some examples – first, the opening line of the 1938 classic “Se Acaso Você Chegasse”, by Lupicínio Rodrigues and Felisberto Martins:

Musical notation for the opening line of the 1938 classic “Se Acaso Você Chegasse” by Lupicínio Rodrigues and Felisberto Martins. The notation is in 2/4 time and features a syncopated melody. Above the staff, the following chords are indicated: DM7, G7, DM7, G7, D/F#, F°7, Em7, and B7.

We can see how the melody line has the same rhythmic exuberance of a *tamborim* pattern. The fork figure is present throughout, mostly with a rest replacing the first 16<sup>th</sup> note.

Next, a phrase from Ary Barroso’s “Camisa Amarela”, also from the 1930s:

Musical notation for a phrase from Ary Barroso’s “Camisa Amarela”, also from the 1930s. The notation is in 2/4 time and features a syncopated melody with repeated 16<sup>th</sup> notes. Above the staff, the following chords are indicated: G7(#5), CMaj7 Bb7, Am7, Eb7, Dm7, G7, Dm7, G7/B, G7, CMaj7 C/B, and Am7G7.

Here the vocal line doubles the figures that the *pandeiro* plays, stressing repeated 16<sup>th</sup> notes. These examples show the importance of understanding the basic rhythmic patterns of a style and how they are applied to melodic material. Harmonically, it is better for chords in the samba style to be played in anticipation of a 16<sup>th</sup> note before the downbeat, often following the melodies. In most swing-based jazz, chords are more likely to be delayed in relation to the downbeat.

## 2. Baião

Originally from the Northeastern region of Brazil, the term *baião* is derived from *baiano*, meaning a native from the state of Bahia. It encompasses a wide range of sub styles, but its main characteristic is a syncopated low drum figure (compare with the non-syncopated bass drum in *samba*). This function is traditionally represented by the mallet that plays the top skin of the *zabumba* drum. Here are some basic patterns:

Four basic rhythmic patterns for Baião, shown as musical notation in 2/4 time. Each pattern consists of a sequence of notes and rests, representing different syncopated low drum figures.

When we add a higher part (usually represented by the *bacalhau*, or bamboo stick that hits the lower head of the *zabumba*), some great combinations become possible, such as:

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In *baião* music it is common to find vamps built over a single chord (usually a dominant 7<sup>th</sup>) or over a simple chord progression, such as C6 – G7, C7 – F7 or Cm7 – F7. *Baião* melodies often are built on the mixolydian mode with either the just 4<sup>th</sup> or the augmented 4<sup>th</sup>. They usually have repeated notes, and accents on the 4<sup>th</sup> 8<sup>th</sup> note of alternate measures, as in the example below, taken from “Baião”, by Luiz Gonzaga and Humberto Teixeira:



This other example, by the same composers, is a line from “Que Nem Giló”:



These examples of Brazilian grooves are suggested only as a basic introduction to the styles and characteristics of the popular music of Brazil. As mentioned before, there is a lot more to be found by listening to the music, studying its history, traditions and cultural manifestations. The Internet has many resources, easily found by searching for any of the key words mentioned in this paper.

To download a longer version of this paper with more grooves, please scan the QR code below:



### About the author:

Brazilian-born Jovino Santos Neto worked as a pianist, flutist and producer with the legendary Hermeto Pascoal in his native Brazil for 15 years. Since moving to Seattle in 1993, he has released several recordings as a composer, leader of his Quinteto and also in collaboration with musicians such as Bill Frisell, Gretchen Parlato, Paquito d’Rivera and many others. A worldwide performer and lecturer, he has received many commissions and awards for his work. Jovino’s music blends contemporary harmonies with a rich variety of Brazilian rhythmic languages. Jovino has received three nominations for a Latin Grammy (2004, 2006 and 2009). He’s a Professor of Music at Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle. His latest CD is a solo recording, out on Adventure Music. Bruce Gilman on *Brazil* magazine wrote: “*Roda Carioca* reveals a complete artist – composer, arranger, soloist, multi-instrumentalist, ensemble leader – whose artistic sensibility and poetic playing creates a hypnotic authority that haunts the memory.” For more information about Jovino’s music, please visit his web site at [www.jovisan.net](http://www.jovisan.net) and his Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/JovinoSantosNeto>