

An Introduction to Conga Technique

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A Brief History of the Conga Drum

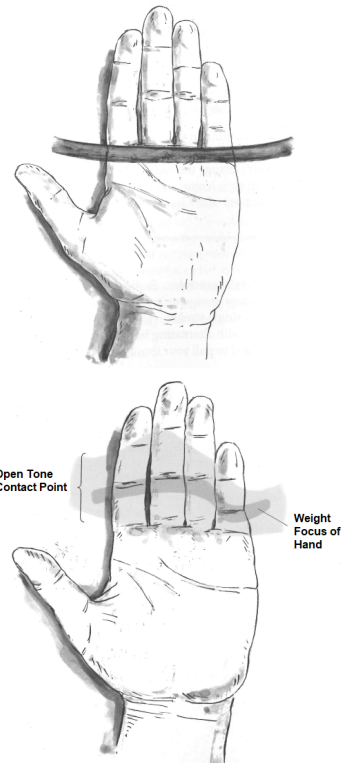
- Origin: Cuba, late 19th - early 20th century
- Common names for conga drums (tumbadoras) - often changes depending on style of music being played
 - High: Quinto, Cachimbo, Niño
 - Middle: Conga, Tres Golpes, Tres per Dos, Segundo, Mula
 - Low: Tumba(dora), Salidor, Caja

The Instrument & Set-Up

- Angle of the Drum & Body Set-Up
 - The drum is resting between the knees and is slightly angled forward; wrists should be relatively straight.
 - Avoid the tendency to drop your wrists or hyperextend; keep them engaged!
 - The angle of your wrist determines the sounds/tones.
- Seat Height
 - This is more important than you think! Try to find a height adjustable stool.
 - Avoid hyperextending the elbows or creating scrunched shoulders.
 - Allow separation between the chest cavity and the elbow.

The Essential Tones: Open, Muff, Slap, & Bass

- **Contact Point:** where the hand makes contact with the head of the drum
- **Bearing Edge:** where the head of the drum comes in contact with the shell of the drum
- **Open Tone**
 - Contact Point: "meat of the hand;" between where the fingers join the palm and the last knuckle of each finger
 - Weight Focus: joint at the first knuckle
 - Bearing Edge Alignment: where the fingers join the palm
 - Wrists: straight (in-line from tip of middle finger to elbow) & engaged
 - Fingers: together as one unit
 - Avoid over-extension or pronation of fingers after the stroke
 - You'll know you're in the right place (contact point) based on the openness of your sound!

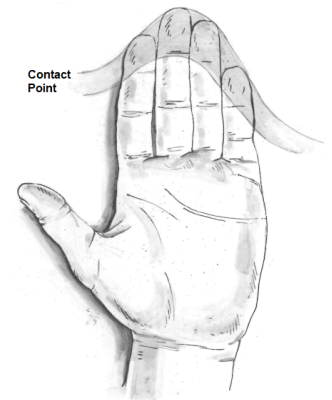


Illustrations by Jay Kendall

- **Muffle (Muff) or Mute Tone**
 - VERY similar to open tone, except the fingers stay on the head
 - The stroke initiates from wrist, making it harder to feel the placement of your hand's weight
 - Accelerate your velocity on the way down to create a full sound
 - Avoid hyperextending the wrist or "dog paddling" with an extended height

- **Slap Tone**

- Contact Point: finger pads
- Bearing Edge Alignment: middle of the palm
- Wrists: bent/broken and relaxed
- Fingers: naturally curved
- Avoid the tendency to grab the drumhead
- You'll know you're in the right place (contact point) based on the high pitched sound
- Channel the relaxed "mousetrap" velocity
- While one hand plays, the other hand usually stays down (closed slap)



Illustrations by Jay Kendall

- **Bass Tone**

- Contact Point: full flat palm
- This stroke is ALL about relaxing and channeling the weight of your arm (similar to low-end marimba)
- The palm and whole hand makes the sound (avoid hyperextension of fingers)
- No punching or placing, just dropping. Let go!
- Your shoulders should not be actively engaged; feel the resonance move up your arm

Extended & Combination Strokes: Heel-Toe & Touch Tone

- **Heel-Toe**

- The driving rhythmic force & power behind any salsa band
- Toe: the "toe" motion stretches the palm and fingers upward as a single unit while the wrist stays planted on the bearing edge, all fingers move downward.
- Heel: the "heel" stroke is the exact same as the bass tone, but is renamed if it is followed by a "toe" stroke
- Similar to double bounce technique, there is a technique shift as tempo increases
 - Individual heel & toe motions → hybrid heel with toe up on the rebound

- **Touch Tone**

- A quiet stroke that only you (the player) should hear
- Used for time keeping by dropping your fingers onto the head

The Essential Styles & Where to Go From Here

- Essential Musical Styles & Concepts - for the beginner conga player
 - Clave - both styles & directions (rumba & son, 2-3 & 3-2)
 - 12/8 Bell Patterns - traditional, modern, & variations
 - Salsa
 - Rumba
 - Cha-Cha-Cha
 - Begin to immerse yourself in recordings & performances to become familiar with the rhythmic language and vocabulary
 - Historical Context - instrument, musical styles, rhythms, melodies, cultural context, and more are essential
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Resources for Further Information

Method Books

- *The Conga Drummer's Guidebook* - Micheal Spiro (Sher Music Co.)
- *The Essence of Afro-Cuban Percussion & Drum Set* - Ed Uribe (Alfred)

Transcriptions/Sheet Music

- *The Language of the Masters: Transcriptions and Etudes of 10 Great Latin Percussion Artists* - Michael Spiro & Michael Coletti (Sher Music Co.)
- *Salsa Guidebook for Piano & Ensemble* - Rebeca Mauleon (Sher Music Co.)
- *101 Montunos* - Rebeca Mauleon (Sher Music Co.)
- *Roadmap for the Oru del Igbo (Oru Seco)* - Michael Spiro & Justin Hill
- *Bata Rhythms from Matanzas, Cuba: Transcriptions of the Oro Seco* - Kristin Olson & Michael Spiro (Kabiosile)
- *Music of the Arará Savalú Cabildo* by Joseph C. Galvin and Michael Spiro (Sher Music Co.)

Albums/Recordings

- *Bata Ketu: A Musical Interplay of Cuba and Brazil* - Mark Lamson, Micahel Spiro, Bobi Cespedes, & Jorge Alabe
- *Bakini: En el Nuevo Mundo* - Michael Spiro & Joe Galvin
- *Vacunao* - Los Muñequitos de Matanzas
- *Tambor de Fuego* - Los Muñequitos de Matanzas
- *Raices Africanas* - Grupo Afrocuba
- *Habana Dreams* - The Pedrito Martinez Group
- *Indestructible* - Ray Baretto
- *Nuestra Música* - El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico
- *Moliendo Cafe* - Jerry Gonzalez & The Fort Apache Band
- *Mabagwe: A Tribute to "Los Mayores"* - Los Rumberos De La Bahia
- *Toques y Cantos de Santos Vol. 1* - Grupo Folklorico De Cuba

Instructional Videos

- Introduction to the Conga Drum (DVD) - Michael Spiro
- Conga Masterclass: Online Videos, Playalongs, & Resources - Jesus Diaz, Phil Hawkins, & Michael Spiro
 - <https://congamasterclass.uscreen.io/>
- Mastering the Art of Afro-Cuban Drumming - Ignacio Berroa, Giovanni Hidalgo, Changuito, Michael Spiro
- Conga Chops: Online Lessons, Videos, & Resources - Paulo Stagnero
 - <https://www.congachops.com/>

History/Context

- *Music of Latin America and the Caribbean* - Mark Brill (Routledge)
- *Cuba and Its Music: From the First Drums to the Mambo* - Ned Sublette (Chicago Review Press)

If you have any additional questions, feel free to email/DM at the links below:

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McKayla Phillips is a percussionist and educator based out of Raleigh, North Carolina. They are currently a Visiting Lecturer of Percussion at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and an Adjunct Professor of Percussion at Shaw University. McKayla is currently pursuing a Doctorate of Musical Arts (DMA) at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where they serve as a graduate teaching assistant. They earned a Masters of Music degree from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music and received a Bachelor of Music Education and Bachelor of Music Performance degrees from The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. They would like to thank the following sponsors for their support:

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