

# THE LANGUAGE OF THE MASTERS

TRANSCRIPTIONS AND ETUDES  
OF 10 GREAT LATIN PERCUSSION ARTISTS

by

**Michael Spiro**

and

**Michael Coletti**

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Publisher and Editor - Chuck Sher  
Graphic Design - Attila Nagy

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ISBN 1-883217-88-1

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### Thanks to the following individuals/organizations for their contributions to this book:

Chuck Sher for his faith and belief in this project.

Joe Galvin, Kristin Olson, Jamaal Baptiste, and Jeremy Allen for their great playing on the recording.

Martin Cohen for sharing his wonderful photos.

LP Percussion, Remo Drum Heads, Sabian Cymbals and Vic Firth Sticks, whose instruments Michael Spiro proudly endorses.

“By definition this book is a tribute to the great artists whose solos are transcribed here. It is not an overstatement to say that a large part of my artistic life has centered on the study of their music, their style and their creativity. I hope this book gives you some insight into these iconic musicians, and brings you the same joy I have felt over these many decades as I’ve tried to “get inside” their musical genius.”

- **Michael Spiro**

“I would like to thank my parents, Bob and Wendy, for their undying love and support for me throughout my life. They have encouraged me to carry on in even the darkest of times and I am eternally grateful!

Without question I need to thank my mentor, my teacher, my friend, and my big brother: Michael Spiro. Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to work together on this project; it has truly been an honor. But more importantly, I need to thank you for not only making me a better musician, but a better human being. I have learned far more from you outside the classroom than in it, and I will forever be thankful for the time we have spent together over the years!”

- **Michael Coletti**

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## INTRODUCTION

We all stand on the shoulders of those who came before us. It is undeniable that you can't master a musical style unless you understand its lineage; Latin percussion is no exception. Modern Latin percussion playing has become a very sophisticated and technically advanced art form. Players such as Giovanni Hidalgo, Pedrito Martinez, Paoli Mejias, Richie Flores, Jesus Diaz, Adel Gonzalez, Yaroldy Abreu, Jose Febres, Eliel Lazo etc. (to name but a few of the current generation of brilliant conga players) have taken their instrument to an entirely new virtuosic level. Yet it was the work of their predecessors that provided the foundation for this development. In order to help understand the 21st century approach to Latin percussion, we have transcribed the work of seminal artists who helped define the sound and style of the 20th century conga drum, bongo, and timbale.

We began this process by selecting several masters of each instrument who are universally recognized as "trailblazers" of their generation:

**Congas:**

Tata Guines  
Mongo Santamaria  
Ray Barretto

**Bongo:**

Rogelio "Yeyito" Iglesias  
Johnny "Dandy" Rodriguez  
Armando Peraza

**Timbales:**

Guillermo Barreto  
Tito Puente  
Manny Oquendo  
Orestes Vilató

In addition to their mastery, each of these artists has an extensive body of publically available recorded work from which we chose certain solos that define their classic styles. They are transcribed as accurately as possible, with the understanding that notation is not an exact science and is always open to interpretation.

From these transcriptions we then composed several etudes, each of which represents the signature style of these artists. While we find it essential to both transcribe and play along with recordings, it is also useful to play transcription-like compositions without the aural support of the original artist. This develops a musical independence and confidence that can't be acquired through transcriptions alone. We strongly encourage you to learn these etudes, and use the accompanying "minus-one" play along in order to help facilitate this growth. The effort can be intensive, but the results will be very gratifying.

## INTRODUCTION

We should add that there is a second motive for writing this book that goes beyond helping to develop soloing skills in Latin music. It has been apparent for some time that although there are wonderful materials published for both orchestral percussionists and drum set players looking to take auditions for ensembles and/or college programs, there is almost nothing available in that vein for Latin percussionists. Our experience inside the university setting has made it clear that there is a need for resources to not only improve understanding and skills, but to use in audition contexts. The etudes we have written will hopefully be of value to future college students as they prepare to enter the academy as percussion majors, as well as to general percussionists within the Latin genre.



## IMPORTANCE OF AFRO-CUBAN FOLKLORIC MUSIC

simultaneous layers of improvisation (in much the same way as a saxophonist might play behind a jazz vocalist), and obviously requires a high level of skill in both phrasing and musical awareness.

- d) One of the main characteristics of folkloric music is that the line between 4/4 and 12/8 time signatures is often blurred. You will also find this to be a recurring element in the way these artists construct their solos. (See discussion of "Stretched Rhythms" in the "Notational Topics" section.)



## “Stretched Rhythms”

The line between 4/4 and 12/8 time signatures is often blurred in African diasporic music; Latin percussion solos are no exception. It must be understood that although the rhythm section parts of a Latin band are in a “duple” feel, soloists often employ this intentional ambiguity in their phrasing. This definitely contributes to the character and “swing” of their improvisations. The transcriber then has to make a decision: “Do I notate this phrase using duplets or triplets?”

### Example A

Duple

Triplet

In performance and to the ear, the rhythm is not entirely even or “straight”, and so we refer to these types of figures as “stretched rhythms.” As an example see measures 2 – 6 of the Tata Güines etude. The metric ambiguity leaves room for interpretation and could very easily be written using triplet notation. However, we have generally chosen to notate this phrase using duplets, but our decision to use duple notation for these passages is not an overly intellectual one: we believe this system is easier to read and understand. It makes more sense to write a duple rhythm, and in performance “stretch it” towards a triplet, rather than to write a triplet and “square it off” towards a duple.

**Here is another example where we have chosen to use duple notation for the same reasons:**

### Example B

Duple

Triplet

You will learn over time to interpret the notation to play the correct feel. We should point out that the concept of stretched rhythms is certainly not unique to Latin music. For over a century the entire Jazz world has understood that the written page needs to be interpreted in order to make the music swing properly. Here is a prime example: