

Curriculum-Based Study Guide Caribbean Holiday Dance Ensemble: Caribbean Dance, Music and Musical Instrument Guide

The Caribbean

The Caribbean is a region consisting of the Caribbean Sea, its islands, and the surrounding coasts. The region is located southeast of the Gulf of Mexico and North America, east of Central America, and to the north of South America.



Figure 1. Map of the Caribbean

The region comprises more than 7,000 islands, islets, reefs, and cays. These islands are often referred to as the *West Indies* because when Christopher Columbus landed there in 1492 he believed that he had reached to the west of India.

The Caribbean is a very ethnically diverse region, largely due to patterns of settlement and migration, as well as the transatlantic slave trade that began in the fifteenth century. Caribbean people have diverse family lineages spanning indigenous native, European, African, and Asian roots. The people of the Caribbean speak Spanish, English, French, Dutch, and Portuguese, as well forms of local speech known as *patois*. This melting pot cultural heritage is a significant reason why the Caribbean is such a socially and artistically vibrant region.

Caribbean Music

Similarly, the music of the Caribbean is a diverse grouping of musical genres. These genres are each syntheses of African, European, Indian and native influences, largely created by descendants of African slaves. In these musics we can hear clear African and European influences. For example, many African percussion instruments such as drums, bells and shakers are used which lend the musics a *polyrhythmic* vitality similar to traditional West African traditions such as drum ensemble music. As well, many European instruments such

as winds, keyboards and guitars are used. Largely due to the prominence of African musical influences on the sounds of Caribbean musics, it is quite common to refer to many of the styles as *Afro-Caribbean* musics. Some of the musical styles to gain wide popularity outside of the Caribbean include *reggae*, *salsa*, *soca* and *calypso*, steel pan music, and *reggaeton*. However, due to the artistic vitality of the region, new styles are being created all the time!

Caribbean Musical Instruments

Congas—Congas are barrel drums played with the hands.



Figure 2. Conga drums

Maracas—Maracas are small round vessels filled with rice to create a percussive sound when shaken.



Figure 3. Maracas

Steel Pan—The steel pan is a tuned metal drum fashioned out of recycled oil drum containers. It is found on the island of Trinidad.



Figure 4. Steel pan drum

Claves—Claves are a pair of tuned wooden sticks that are struck against one another to make a piercing percussive sound. Claves are used to play the *timeline* or steady pulse in many Caribbean musics.



Figure 5. Claves

Guiro—The guiro is a hollow wooden percussion instrument that is scraped with a small stick to produce a textured and rhythmic percussion sound.



Figure 6. Guiro

Djembe—The *djembe* is an hourglass-shaped West African hand drum that can produce *bass*, *tone*, and *slap* sounds. Because of its loud volume, the djembe is often the lead drum in the drum ensemble.



Figure 7. Djembe drum

Dundun—The *dundun* is a barrel-shaped West African bass drum played with a stick. The instrument produces a deep bass tone. A bell is sometimes attached to the drum so the player can combine the sound of the *dundun* and the bell. The *dundun* comes in three sizes:



Figure 8. (from left to right) *Dundunba*, *Sangban*, and *Kenkeni* drums

Kenkeni—the smallest *dundun*. The *kenkeni* has the highest pitch and plays a simple rhythmic pattern.

Sangban—the medium sized *dundun*. The *sangban* has a medium pitch and plays a more complex part that defines the *dundun* rhythm.

Dundunba—the largest *dundun*. The *dundunba* has the deepest pitch of the three drums and plays a sparse rhythmic pattern with widely spaced notes.

Caribbean Dance

Caribbean dance is similar to Caribbean music in that it reflects both African and European influences. Throughout the Caribbean, music and dance go hand-in-hand, the dance steps reflecting the rhythms of the music. This is particularly true when it comes to new and popular dance styles. In fact, dances are often named for the music or song from which they derive. Some of the most well know Caribbean dances are the following:

• Puerto Rico: Bomba

Bomba is a folk musical and dance genre native to Puerto Rico. The *bomba* originated in Central Africa and was brought to Puerto Rico by African slaves. The dance incorporates call and response singing, drumming, and rhythmic dancing. *Bomba* dancers make a series of dramatic gestures to which the lead drummer responds with *syncopated* rhythms. (A syncopated rhythm is one that accentuates the “off-beats” to create a lively effect.) For female *bomba* dancers, dance movements are augmented by use of large skirts and headscarves (as pictured below).



Figure 9. *Bomba* dancers and drummers in Puerto Rico.

• **Trinidad and Tobago: Limbo**

The limbo is a popular form of dancing that originated on the Caribbean island of Trinidad. In the limbo, the dancer moves to a Caribbean rhythm (such as Trinidadian *calypso* songs), leans backward and dances under a horizontal pole without touching it. Limbo dancing takes place during *Carnival*, a two-day celebration of music, dance, pageantry and masquerade preceding Ash Wednesday. Limbo dancing is also used as a popular game for tourists at Caribbean resorts. Did you know: The word limbo derives from the English word “limber” which means “to be flexible”!



Figure 10. *Limbo* dancer in Trinidad.

• **Venezuela: Joropo**

Joropo is a musical style and dance that resembles the European waltz. *Joropo* is a folk rhythm in Venezuela and became the country’s national dance in 1882. The count for *joropo* is “**One** Two Three, **One** Two Three” played by a Venezuelan percussion instrument called **maracas**.



Figure 11. Venezuelan *Joropo* band

- **Cuba and USA: Salsa**

Salsa derives from the *mambo*, a Cuban dance popularized in nightclubs in Havana in the mid-1900s and brought to the U.S. through Harlem, New York. When the mambo was taken from the ballrooms and the dance floors to the streets it became known as *salsa*. Salsa is a partner dance that combines many Afro-Caribbean elements and is characterized by quick stepping movements where one's weight shifts from one foot to another while the upper body remains level and unaffected. Today, salsa is one of the world's best selling Caribbean musics.



Figure 12. Salsa dancers

- **Guadalupe: Beguine**

The Beguine is a syncopated, two-beat dance found on the French Caribbean island of Guadaloupe. The dance is characterized by hands on the hips coupled with a light spring-like motion in the knees.

- **Jamaica: Dancehall**

Dancehall is a popular electronic music and dance form that evolved from Jamaican reggae music. *Dancehall* dance moves are closely connected to *dancehall* music, responding to song lyrics that call out particular steps. In Jamaica, new *dancehall* moves continue to evolve almost every week!

During The Performance

• Caribbean music and dance performance events are multimedia happenings where a lot of different things happen at the same time. Try to *watch* and *listen* to everything onstage: the dancers, the musicians, the movements and sounds, the costumes and facial expressions. As you take in the performance, think about how the dancers and musicians work together and communicate using movement and rhythm.

Guide To The Performance

We begin by introducing the drums through interactive clapping to help students learn Caribbean rhythms.

- **Bomba**—Bomba is a folk musical and dance genre native to Puerto Rico. The dance originated in Central Africa and was brought to Puerto Rico by African slaves. *Bomba* incorporates call and response singing, drumming, and rhythmic dancing. *Bomba* dancers make a series of dramatic gestures to which the lead drummer responds with *syncopated* rhythms. For female *bomba* dancers, dance movements are augmented by use of large skirts and headscarves.
- **Funga Alafia**—This is a traditional welcome song and dance that originates with the Hausa people in Nigeria, West Africa. “Alafia” is a Hausa greeting and “Asheey” means “good health and peace.”
- **Gang Gang**—This is an African-American form of African dance that uses elements from modern, jazz, and ballet. The dance was created by Katherine Dunham (1909-2006) and other choreographers during a time when African Americans were not allowed to study or perform classical ballet. This piece incorporates the dancing of the Stilt Walker.
- **Gumbe**—*Gumbe* is a celebration dance from the country of Guinea, West Africa.
- **Menjani**—This is a traditional West African dance that celebrates the rite of passage into adulthood. The dance and music originates in the West African country of Guinea.
- **Raboday**—*Raboday* is a popular Carnival dance that incorporates much foot and hip movement.
- **Soberao** – *Soberao* is a Puerto Rican dance circle derived from the movements of *bomba*.
- **Whining**—A sensual hip-gyrating movement common at Trinidad Carnival.
- **Wukking Up**—A sensual, hip-thrusting dance found in the Virgin Islands.

- **Zapateado**—A Spanish dance of Mexican origin that involves the dancer’s flat foot heel stomping an incisive rhythmic pattern as in Spanish *flamenco* dance.

Questions For Discussion After The Show

- What words would you use to describe Caribbean dances?
- How did the costumes worn by the dancers affect the performance? Did they help the performance? What did you notice most about the costumes?
- What did you learn about Caribbean rhythms and how they are created? Can you remember any of the rhythms enough to sing them?
- If someone asked you about the performance you just saw, what would you tell them about it? What would you say is the most significant aspect of the performance?
- How does the music that accompanies these Caribbean dances differ from the music you usually listen to? What does it have in common with it and how is it different?
- How is seeing and hearing a live performance of Caribbean dance and music different from watching it on TV or listening to it on the radio?

Group Activity To Practice: How To Play A Caribbean Rhythm: The Cuban *Son* Clave

One of the most prominent rhythms in Caribbean music is the **5-beat *son* clave rhythm** played by wooden percussion instruments called **claves**.

This very catchy rhythm is used as a *timeline* to guide the drumming in Afro-Caribbean musics and dances such as *rumba*, *mambo*, *salsa*, and many others. The *son* clave timeline tells the musicians and dancers exactly where the count is and keeps everyone in sync.

Here are three ways to think about learning the rhythm:

The son clave rhythm has strikes on beats 1, 4, 7, 11, and 14. Because of the way the beats are spaced, the rhythm has sound like:

“*one, two, three ... one, two... one, two, three...one, two*” (repeat!)

or

Count: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16
Clap: x x x x x (repeat!)

or

ONE two three **FOUR**

five six **SEVEN** eight

nine ten **ELEVEN** twelve

thirteen **FOURTEEN** fifteen sixteen (repeat!)

Try counting this sixteen while you clap on beats 1, 4, 7, 11, and 14. Once you can clap the rhythm consistently you are playing the *son* clave rhythm!



Figure 13. Caribbean art: Woman selling fruit at market.

Caribbean Music And Dance Word Search

L G N I N I H W W S D W I S D R R Q F W
M A M B O N J E A G U A Q A S J Z M O B
Y A V A C O S G Y K N A V C L E E T S D
I Z Y I R T N C K L D A U A O S I M U B
F M O O N O U I A X U Y G R X U S D B B
G R P O C R N Z F R N V D A F R I E N E
M O H L F G A E G S I J F M B P O C Y I
J E P Q U A K C U U N B G F A B T K U L
K N N P I O E H M Z Y E B W R X A M S H
X N W J Z H W K B A R S T E B J P X O R
G F E X A S L F E U O L Y R A T B S U A
D L Q G I N A J U B D H Z L U N P Y N B
S O C S E D I L E R A A Q A C Y P U X O
B E G U I N E R S N N B L C L A V E S D
P S R V U N A F O A C M U A O Z P N Z A
Q M T W G O T R D P E O C B R R K J I Y
P O L Y R H Y T H M H B M N S C I K Q O
G C J D I S K V H C A I O G D C F U W V
O D A E T A P A Z T L N K D I H U G G H
U L D L C L N N N J L U B D Z M F A R W

Word Bank

Caribbean
West Indies
Patois
Congas
Maracas
Steel pan
Raboday
zapateado

Claves
Guiro
Djembe
Dundun
polyrhythm
Bomba
soberao

Limbo
Soca
joropo
salsa
dancehall
gumbe
whining

Carnival
calypso
mambo
beguine
gang gang
menjani
wukking up

Answer Key

L G N I N I H W W S D W I S D R R Q F W
M A M B O N J E A G U A Q A S J Z M O B
Y A V A C O S G Y K N A V C L E E T S D
I Z Y I R T N C K L D A U A O S I M U B
F M O Q N O U I A X U Y G R X U S D E B
G R P O C R N Z F R N V D A F R I E N E
M O H L F G A E G S I J F M B P O C Y I
J E P Q U A K C U N B G F A B T K U L
K N N P I O E H M Z Y E B W R X A M S H
X N W J Z H W K B A R S T E B J P X O R
G F E X A S L F E U O L Y R A T B S U A
D L Q G I N A J U B D H Z L U N P Y N B
S O C S E D I L E R A A Q A C Y P U X O
B E G U I N E R S N N B L C L A V E S D
P S R V U N A F O A C M U A O Z P N Z A
Q M T W G O T R D P E O C E R R K J I Y
P O L Y R H Y T H M H B M N S C I K Q O
G C J D I S K V H C A I O G D C F U W V
O D A E T A P A Z T L N K D I H U G G H
U L D L C L N N N J L U B D Z M F A R W

Further Resources

Books

Manuel, Peter. 2006. *Caribbean Currents: Caribbean Music from Rumba to Reggae*. Temple University Press.

Penalosa, David. 2009. *The Clave Matrix – Afro-Cuban Rhythm: Its Principles and African Origins*. Bembe Books.

Sloat, Susanna, ed. 2010. *Making Caribbean Dance: Continuity and Creativity in Island Cultures*. University Press of Florida.

Films

Aguilar, Pamela A. and Daniel McCabe. 2009. *Latin Music USA*. (DVD).

Rosow, Gene and Howard Dratch. 1994. *Roots Of Rhythm*. (DVD).