

## **From the Bandstand to the Classroom : Thinking and Playing Grooves**

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# From the Bandstand to the Classroom

## Thinking and Playing Grooves

**Abstract:** In this article, narratives of a salsa concert and a lesson with a Native American flute performer provide openings for exploring grooves and their application in the music classroom. The term *groove* is examined, along with some non-Western ideas about time as represented in the music of the West African Kpelle people. A sixth-grade composition project in upstate New York offers a window on nontraditional notation and compositional models that hold potential to deepen and extend students' understanding of rhythmic structures and concepts.

**Keywords:** creativity, cross-cultural competence, general music, groove, improvisation, multi-cultural, Native flute, rhythm, salsa, time

### Latin Ensemble Concert, Hosmer Hall, State University of New York, Potsdam

*With the familiar five-clap pattern, I cue tempo and downbeat of Eddie Palmieri's hard-grooving salsa tune "Tu Tu Ta Ta Tu." Scored for "la perfecta" (an instrumental combination of three trombones, flute, and rhythm section), the music is structured around the two-measure rhythmic pattern called clave. Each musician on stage tunes into the clave, whether it is sounded or simply felt, and the interlocking Afro-Cuban riffs of the piano montuno, timbales cascara, conga, and bass tumbao. The interplay of rhythms creates a groove that energizes the musicians and audience members, many of whom have left their seats to dance in the aisles of the hall. Like marathon runners who pick up their pace as they approach the finish line, we lean into the front of the beat, gradually accelerating through the montuno and mambo sections to the coda and punctuating final break.*

### Private Lesson with Native Flute Performer Frank Menusan

*"Imagine the drum pattern as buffalo galloping across the plains, and in a different tempo, the melody as clouds moving across the sky, the stresses of each part coming together only occasionally." Frank tapped a heartbeat pattern with his foot and began to play the Lakota love song "Winchinchila" ("Dearest Sweetheart"). The heartbeat, he said, accompanies all Lakota love songs and songs about people coming together. Phrase by phrase and then together, we played the melody to the undulating, waltz-like pattern. Menusan noted the rhythmic counterpoint between the drum and flute parts and described the song as one of the most "on-the-beat" songs in the Native American repertory (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup>*

These vignettes, drawn from aural traditions, each reveal a culture-specific way to think about and experience time. To listen to or play Afro-Cuban mambo, a Native

*How people hear sounds, perceive time, and feel rhythms can make a difference in the musicality of their performances and their capacity to improvise.*

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## FIGURE 1

### Transcription of “Dearest Sweetheart” as Sung by Frank Menusen<sup>2</sup>

American flute song, or numerous other examples of non-Western European genres invites us to cultivate new ways of perceiving time. In turn, rhythm and time become pathways into larger musical and cultural complexes. For example, we may trace ancient Dahomean and Congolese rhythmic patterns and structures in the music of salsa or discover the expression of the natural world in the rhythms and melodies of Native American music.

### What Does It Mean to Groove?

*I don't think about notes; I just focus on the groove.*

—Brian Lotze, trumpet player,  
New York City's PitchBlak Brass Band  
and former lead trumpet player, SUNY  
Potsdam's Crane Latin Ensemble

“It's got a great beat!” “That was totally in the pocket.” “Tonight's session was really cooking!” As listeners and performers, we know a groove when we hear one. We find grooves in the heartbeat rhythms of Jamaican Kumina drumming, DJ Shadow's pulsing drum breaks in “Holy Calamity (Bear Witness II),” the animated continuo line of a Telemann trio sonata, and the pounding bass guitar riffs of a James Brown tune. But what makes a rhythm a groove? What does it mean to groove? How might we center music instruction around grooves in our classrooms?

Beyond the time construct conventional to Western musical notation, grooves exist solely in the moment they occur and in the visceral experience of participants. Musicians of divergent styles have attempted to characterize the illusory nature and experience of grooving. Max

Weinberg, familiar to many American television viewers as the drummer of *The Tonight Show* Band, observes that selecting a certain groove will make the music flow, “and when you have it, it's in your pocket.”<sup>3</sup>

In *Born to Groove*, an online book authored by Charles Keil and Patricia Campbell (<http://borntogroove.org/course/view.php?id=2>), Keil suggests that grooves are created by “participatory discrepancies or measurable differences in attack and release points along a continuum of time.”<sup>4</sup> To illustrate, let's imagine the improvisations of a seasoned jazz trio. As note values stretch and contract, placements of attacks and releases shift, each musician plays in time—in sync—with the other two. Such nuance and flexibility occur within a spontaneous interaction and synchronization of musical ideas—an environment essential to grooving.

The role of the musician as participant is embedded in the experience of grooving. Levels of involvement range from listening actively to feeling that “you are in the music and the music is in you.”<sup>5</sup> It is this degree of deep engagement that lies at the heart of grooving. Students reach beyond their individual limitations to craft meaningful, unique musical experiences through the dynamic, participatory process of creating grooves.<sup>6</sup>

“A song going down the road.” Investigating diverse cultures' musical traditions uncovers alternative notions of time and contexts where grooves are regularly used. Understanding concepts of time in unfamiliar cultures prompts investigation of culture-specific ways in which music and elements of rhythm, tempo, and pitch are defined and conceived. In her fieldwork among the Kpelle people of Liberia, ethnomusicologist Ruth Stone documented how music is not just sounded, but is danced and spoken. Intricate drumming patterns, sumptuous dances, and eloquently delivered proverbs are all embodiments of music.<sup>7</sup> When the Kpelle refer to “a song going down the road,” they imply that the sounds align simultaneously in the appropriate tempo and pitch combination.<sup>8</sup>

To the Kpelle, music becomes an “event” existing within a time sphere

that transcends what we achieve by turning on a metronome or tapping our feet. Stone describes *pele*, a type of music event in which communication between musicians, dancers, and audience is particularly significant. The interaction as a “dynamic ongoing symbolic process” among participants gives the event meaning and defines it as *pele*.<sup>9</sup>

Stone draws from Alfred Schutz’s description of concepts of inner and outer time in her analysis of the Kpelle *pele*. Outer time can be measured by tools such as a metronome or clock, while inner time occurs in the “stream of consciousness and does not contain homogeneous units of measure.”<sup>10</sup> Two performances of the same length in outer time may have strikingly different durations in inner time.<sup>11</sup>

The participatory process of grooving, beautifully detailed in Stone’s ethnography of the Kpelle, is manifest in countless music traditions. To work toward listening to, investigating, and crafting original grooves in the music classroom, we turned to a nontraditional notation device: the rhythm matrix. We discovered that matrixes offer entry points into the intuitive, aural, and kinesthetic processes of grooving. Used in tandem with these processes, matrixes function as “lead sheets,” simply reminding performers what to play.

## From Matrix to Grooves

Winter Concert, St. Mary’s Elementary School, Canton, New York

*Four sixth-grade musicians clamored onto the brightly lit marble stage of the austere old church. Silence fell, and with the director’s cue, they began to play their Latin-flavored composition, “Big Bang Theory.” The air of the church came alive as the deep tones of the djembe’s hammering ostinato reverberated off the stone walls. The temple blocks entered, as lightly and cleanly as raindrops, enlivened by the rhythmic vitality of the maracas and claves patterns. Each instrumentalist took turns improvising over the group’s pulsating rhythmic texture. After each student had*

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**FIGURE 2**

**“Big Bang Theory”**

This musical score is for the piece "Big Bang Theory" in 2/4 time. It features four staves: Clav. (Claves), Mrs. (Maracas), T. Bl. (Temple Blocks), and C. Dr. (Conga Drums). The Clav. part consists of a simple rhythmic pattern. The Mrs. part has a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The T. Bl. part plays a sequence of quarter notes. The C. Dr. part features a complex, syncopated rhythmic pattern with various accents and dynamics markings.

**Big Bang Theory**

Ms. Angenstein's 6th Grade Class

This musical score is for the piece "Big Bang Theory" in 2/4 time, specifically for Ms. Angenstein's 6th Grade Class. It features four staves: Claves, Maracas, Temple Blocks, and Conga Drums. The Claves part has a simple rhythmic pattern. The Maracas part has a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The Temple Blocks part plays a sequence of quarter notes. The Conga Drums part features a complex, syncopated rhythmic pattern with various accents and dynamics markings. Below the main score, there are three solo sections: "Block Solo" for Temple Blocks, "Claves Solo" for Claves, and "Maracas Solo" for Maracas.

*improvised, the director gave one final cue. The music halted and after a short drum roll, the performance ended with a percussive BANG! played as loudly as each sixth grader could muster.*

The sixth-grade composers used a rhythm matrix—a grid illustrating layered rhythmic patterns—to create and record their musical ideas during the initial phases of the compositional process. Devised by ethnomusicologists to transcribe complex drumming styles, the matrix offers a vehicle for exploring rhythmic traditions—and grooves—from diverse cultures. As an alternative compositional tool, the matrix allows students to create rhythmic patterns often difficult to capture through Western notation and provide a canvas for the testing, analysis, and revision of musical ideas.

Over the course of several weeks, the composition “Big Bang Theory” evolved into a musical event that revealed students’ abilities to groove and improvise in inner time. With parts memorized, the young musicians no longer needed the matrix to represent and remember their musical ideas: They were free to add sections of improvisation and develop their piece in terms of *grooves*. As the transcription demonstrates, students created a texture of interlocking patterns and syncopations. A distinct opening and coda framed the rhythmic texture (see Figure 2).

We observed that students discard notation and find alternative ways to convey their musical intentions when adding specific expressive elements, such as dynamics, phrasing, articulation, or improvisation. At this stage of exploration, grooves are most likely to be created. An intuitive, organic process unfolds as students internalize short rhythmic cells and respond to their peers’ musical ideas. Students are no longer concerned with fitting notes into a visual grid, but with blending their own part into the musical texture around them.

We may ask, “How do I know if my students are grooving?” The answer lies within each individual’s level of engagement and definition of groove. The more

## Lesson 1: The Rhythm Matrix<sup>13</sup>

Beat Cycle	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Master drum	1		3	4		6	7	
Low drum	1			4		6	7	
Medium high drum		2	3		5	6		8
High drum					5	6	7	8
Rattle		2		4		6		8
Small woodblock	1			4			7	
Large woodblock	1		3		5		7	
Agogo	L		H		H	H		H

1. Introduce the matrix as a visual representation of rhythmic patterns and relationships between different parts. The horizontal axis of the matrix presents the cycle of beats, the vertical axis the assigned parts or instruments. A number placed on the grid indicates where each instrument will sound.
2. Clap and say the numbers of each pattern. Explore playing selected patterns together, for example, the agogo and rattle, a small woodblock, and a medium-high drum, or a master and high drum. Observe the timbral melodies created when the patterns are played together. Where do the intersections occur? On what beats do the parts intersect?
3. Explore timbral options:
  - a. Invite students to assign a vocal and/or body percussion sound for each pattern.
  - b. Alternatively, assign a found object that captures the timbre of the specified African instrument.

- c. Perform the matrix on African percussion instruments.
  - d. Invite students to explore orchestrations that combine multiple timbres, such as vocal sounds, body percussion, found objects, and/or classroom instruments.
4. Invite students to construct different performance formats, using sound sources previously explored. Possible questions to guide exploration:
    - How shall we begin the matrix?
    - What would you like to happen in the middle section?
    - How shall we end?
    - How might we use the matrix to build a longer work?

Record musical ideas explored for playback and analysis.
  5. Invite students to explore different expressive options. For example, consider the following:
    - How might silence be used?
    - How might we introduce dynamic contrast? Tempo changes?

- Record musical ideas explored for playback and analysis.
6. Introduce improvisation. Invite student volunteers and/or combination of instrumentalists to improvise for a specified number of rhythmic cycles.
  7. Invite students to compose their own matrixes. Record for further listening and analysis.

### Extensions and Variations

- (a) Present the instrumental patterns through an aural process. Employ the matrix as an investigative tool to visually and aurally analyze the structural features.
- (b) Explore additional rhythmic styles through the matrix, such as salsa and/or drumming styles in compound meters, such as the 12/8 West African drumming style *Agbadza*. Alternatively, present the patterns through an aural process. Listen to, analyze, and play along with recorded examples.

### Mambo Matrix<sup>14</sup>

Beat Cycle	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Conga	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Clave			3		5				1			4			7	
Timbales	1		3		5	6		8	1		3	4		6		8
Bass				4 G			7 C					4 G			7 C	
Piano	1 C			4 G		6 B <sup>b</sup>		8 C	1 C		3 E		5 B <sup>b</sup>	6 D		

### Ewe Anlo Agbadza<sup>15</sup>

Beat Cycle	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Hand claps	1			4			7			10		
Double bell (gakogui)	L		H		H	H		H		H		H
Rattle (xatse)	1		3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
High-pitched drum (kaganu)	1	2	3				7	8	9			
Hand drum (asivui)	1			4	5		7			10	11	
Large drum (sogo)	1			4			7	+		10		

## Lesson 2: "Dearest Sweetheart"

1  
Dear - est Sweet - heart, — Ev' - ry time —

4  
I see you — I can still re - mem - ber — the times —

7  
I was — with you, — Hi - yo. — I don't care

10  
what they say a - bout us, Hon - ey. — I still —

13  
love you, Hi - yo, Weh hi - hi, Weh hi - hi,

16  
yo. Eh ya weh ya - ha, —

19  
Weh ya - ya - ya hey ya, — Weh ya ya -

22  
ya hey ya ya, Weh ya ya ho hi ya, —

25  
Weh hi ya heh ya heh ya heh ya eh, — Eh ya

1. Students listen to and analyze the Lakota song "Dearest Sweetheart" with accompanying heartbeat rhythm. Questions to prompt analysis include

- How would you describe the melody?
- The rhythm of the drum accompaniment?

- The relationship between the melody and drum pattern?
- The lyrics? (Menusan described "Dearest Sweetheart" as one of hundreds of love songs that began as courting songs, became lullabies, then round dances, and were later transposed to be played on the flute. The lyrics

and song typify what might be sung at a powwow.<sup>16</sup>) Why might a heartbeat pattern accompany love songs and songs about people coming together?

2. Invite student volunteers to play the accompanying drum rhythm as the song is taught aurally phrase by phrase.

relevant question may be, “How has the pursuit of grooving broadened and deepened my students’ connection to music?” This inquiry may be the most concrete way to assess the attainment of grooving.

## “The Tune Doesn’t Go That Way”

When performer Frank Menusan asked musicians to play Native songs transcribed in Western notation, he observed that they did not reconstruct the tune accurately, and he would tell them, “The tune doesn’t go that way.”<sup>12</sup> Knowing how a tune *goes* can begin with a sense of rhythmic feel and drive. Designing instructional strategies around grooves and matrixes opens the door to new ways of perceiving time and engaging with musical sound.

Offering students alternatives to Western concepts of time broadens their understanding of diverse musical idioms and lays the foundations for future explorations in the classroom, on stage, and in more informal settings. In the process of presenting their creative products, students reach a level of participation and musical interaction that goes beyond the physical act of singing or playing instruments. In other words, they begin to groove.

We have learned from the Kpelle and from Marianne Augenstein’s sixth-grade class (St. Mary’s Elementary School, Canton, New York), that a *groove* is an experience, one that cannot be translated into notation or recorded and played back for the same effect. It is a visceral, sensory experience: the rustle of shirtsleeves, the smell of sweat, the sandpaper scraping of calloused hands against a drumhead. We find grooves in concert halls, on street corners, and in our mind’s ear. They move us, they inspire us to shed convention and bend rules to breaking. *Grooves* bring music to life, drawing together those who make it.

## NOTES

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9. *Ibid.*, 1.
10. *Ibid.*, 9.
11. *Ibid.*, 9.
12. Baxter, “The Chinese *Dizi*,” 73.
13. The creative strategy is drawn from Lenore Pogonowski’s work using the rhythm matrix as a nontraditional notation and compositional tool in her “Creativity and Problem Solving” classes at Teachers College, Columbia University.
14. Excerpt transcribed from Gil Lopez’s arrangement of “Mama Guela” by Tito Rodriguez, from the Spanish Harlem CD *Un Gran Dia en el Barrio* (New York: Rope a Dope, 2002). iTunes.
15. The matrix is based on the Ewe Anlo Agbadza example in *African Songs and Rhythms for Children* (London/New York: Schott, 1971), 24.
16. Baxter, “The Chinese *Dizi*,” 73.