

BEYOND SALSA PIANO

THE CUBAN TIMBA PIANO REVOLUTION



A LATINA

VOLUME 5 • ADVANCED INTRODUCTION TO TIMBA

by Kevin Moore

photography by Tom Ehrlich
cover photo subject: Iván "Melón" Lewis

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Table of Contents

Introduction to the Series	7
How the Series is Organized and Sold.....	7
Book	7
Audio	7
Video	8
Series Overview.....	8
Introduction to Volume 5.....	9
Chapter 1: What is Timba?.....	11
Timba Etymology.....	11
Timba Dance and Culture.....	11
Timba Harmony.....	11
Timba Arranging.....	12
Timba Rhythms	13
Chapter 2: Timba in the 1990s – History and Listening Tour.....	14
NG La Banda	14
Charanga Habanera: 1993-1997	16
Manolín, el Médico de la Salsa.....	18
Issac Delgado.....	19
Paulito FG y su Élite.....	20
Klímax	21
Manolito y su Trabuco	22
Bamboleo	23
Azúcar Negra	23
Charanga Habanera 1998-2001	24

Danny Lozada y su Timba Cubana	25
Charanga Forever	26
Elio Revé y su Charangón	27
Los Van Van	28
Pupy y Los Que Son Son	30
Chapter 3: Ten Piano Innovations of the Timba Era	31
Innovation #1: The Piano Tumbao as a Song-Specific “Hook”	31
Innovation #2: Increased Length of Tumbaos.....	33
Innovation #3: Contrasting Gestures	33
Innovation #4: Extra Notes in the Left Hand.....	34
Innovation #5: Repeated Notes	35
Innovation #6: Contrary and Oblique Motion.....	35
Innovation #7: Grace Note Rolls	36
Innovation #8: Clusters and Jazz Voicings.....	36
Innovation #9: Anticipation and Displacement.....	36
Anticipation.....	36
Displacement	38
Innovation #10: Cross-Rhythms	38
Chapter 4: Exercises to Develop Timba Piano Technique.....	39
About the Play-Along Tracks	40
Clave Markers	59
Chapter 5: Timba Gears	75
What Are Gears?	75
Why Are Gears So Important for the Pianist?	76
The Genesis of the Gear Concept.....	76

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The General Theory of Gears	77
Muela Gears	78
Marcha Gears	79
Chart: The Marcha Family of Gears.....	80
Timba Gears	81
Chart: The Timba, Despelote or Meneo Family of Gears.....	82
Gear Changes versus Changes in the Arrangement.....	82
The Overall Form of a Live Timba Performance.....	83
Gear Differences Between Bands	85
Timba Gears from the Pianist’s Point of View	85
Classical Music Analogies	86
Looking Ahead.....	88
Appendix 1: Frequently Asked Questions	89
What is the role of the piano in a Latin ensemble?	89
What’s The Difference between a “tumbao”, a “guajeo” and a “montuno”?.....	89
Why is every example shown in both 16 th notes and 8 th notes?	89
How can I improve my time feel and sense of clave?	89
Appendix 2: Glossary – General Terms	90
Appendix 3: For Further Study	95
Suggested Reading	95
Suggested Listening to Prepare for Subsequent Volumes	96
Appendix 4 – Timba Harmony.....	98
Understanding the Harmony Charts	98
Why Roman Numerals are so Important	98
Harmony Exercise 1	98

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Understanding Roman Numeral Notation	99
Common Harmonic Practice in Cuban Music.....	100
Chart 1: Most Common Chords in Major Keys	100
Chart 2: Most Common Chords in Minor Keys	100
How to Read the Chord Charts	101
Timba Harmony Charts	101
Disclaimer.....	101
How the Material was Chosen	101
Deciphering the Charts	102
Major and Minor Keys and Modulations	102
Acknowledgments.....	120
About the Author	120
Earlier Volumes of <i>Beyond Salsa Piano</i>	121
Continuing the <i>Beyond Salsa Piano</i> Course	123

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Chapter 3: Ten Piano Innovations of the Timba Era

Before getting immersed in the technical challenges of playing timba tumbaos, let's take a listening tour, familiarizing ourselves with some of the classics of the genre while learning to identify each of the major stylistic innovations.

Innovation #1: The Piano Tumbao as a Song-Specific “Hook”

This is by far the most significant innovation of the timba era and we'll find ourselves returning to it over and over throughout these books.

In salsa and most pre-1990 Cuban music, the rhythms and voicings of piano tumbaos are so standardized that it's frequently impossible to identify the song by listening to the piano alone.

The following figure, for example, is used for literally hundreds of Cuban and Nuyorican songs recorded between 1950 and 1990:



The image displays two staves of musical notation for piano tumbao. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. Both staves are in a key signature of one flat (B-flat major or D minor). The music consists of a series of chords and single notes, with a repeating rhythmic pattern. The notation includes stems, beams, and various chord symbols. The first staff shows a sequence of chords: F major, B-flat major, F major, B-flat major, F major, B-flat major, F major, B-flat major. The second staff shows a similar sequence: F major, B-flat major, F major, B-flat major, F major, B-flat major, F major, B-flat major. The notation is typical of a piano accompaniment for a song.

Hundreds more songs applied the same rhythm to different chord progressions, with the voicings and common variations and embellishments also becoming standardized.

Beginning in the early 1990s, this changed very rapidly. Piano tumbaos began to vary wildly and some were so catchy that they actually became “hooks” – those magical little nuggets of the arrangement that stick in the listeners' ears and make them want to buy the record. This presented pianists and arrangers with a much greater challenge, but it also gave them much more freedom. They could write an unusual vocal part and tailor the piano to it, or vice versa, rather than being constrained by the constant similarity of the notes and rhythms produced by the traditional piano formula. It should be noted that there were occasional song-specific piano tumbaos prior to timba, especially in the work of César “Pupy” Pedrosa with Los Van Van. Several early examples of this can

Chapter 5: Timba Gears

gear photo © JanSpurny – fotalia.com



What Are Gears?

When a band develops a specific combination of piano, bass and percussion parts, and returns to it multiple times in multiple songs, we call this a “gear”. It could be as simple as repeatedly using one groove for the *cuerpos* and another for the *coros*, or breaking down for the singer to talk to the crowd. Using this basic definition, we could say that all dance music has some sort of gear system, but the Cuban music of the 1990s took the concept to an unprecedented level of complexity and creativity. In fact, when answering the obligatory question “*what’s the difference between salsa and timba?*”, the most important part of the answer revolves around the subject of gears.

The Cuban bands of the 1990s came up with a much wider spectrum of gears than their predecessors, but more importantly, many of them devised visual, verbal and/or musical signals to enable them to apply the gear changes spontaneously in different ways for different performances of the same song, i.e., to improvise the form of the piece. For example, the singer or musical director might give a hand signal or cry out “*bomba!*”, after which the bassist would begin to slide his or her right hand down the low string of the bass in a distinctive pattern, with the percussionists simultaneously changing their patterns to a pre-determined combination that works with the bass

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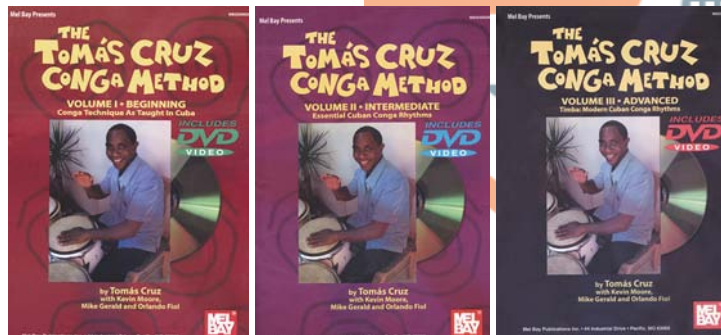


Melón Lewis, Kevin Moore – Los Angeles, 2009

Kevin Moore (kevin@timba.com) is the co-founder and music editor for the world's largest Cuban music website, www.timba.com, to which he has contributed the free online multimedia book *The Roots of Timba*, dozens of book-length articles, discographies, record analyses, interviews and the daily Cuban music blog *La última*, which is nearing its 10th year of publication.

In the early 2000s Kevin co-wrote *The Tomás Cruz Conga Method, Volumes 1-3*, a critically acclaimed method book used as a text at various educational institutions.

The Tomás Cruz Conga Method – Volumes 1, 2, & 3



Published by Mel Bay

As musical director, composer, arranger and violinist of the California-based salsa band Orquesta Gitano he co-produced the 1998 CD *Salsa Gitana*.

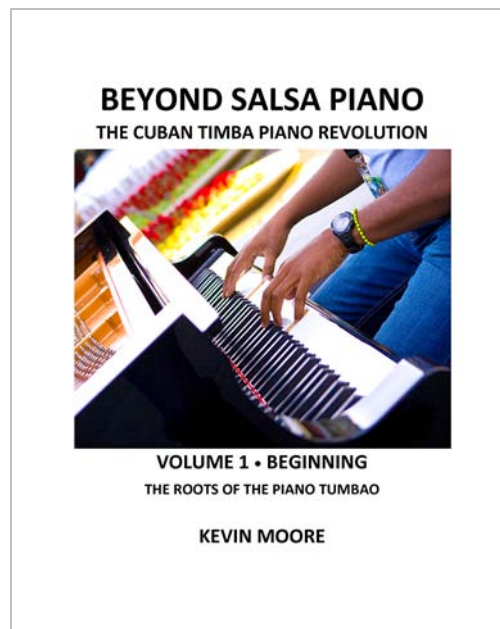


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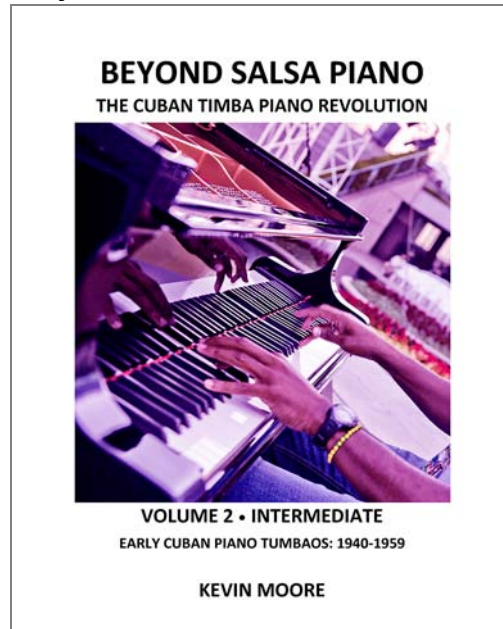
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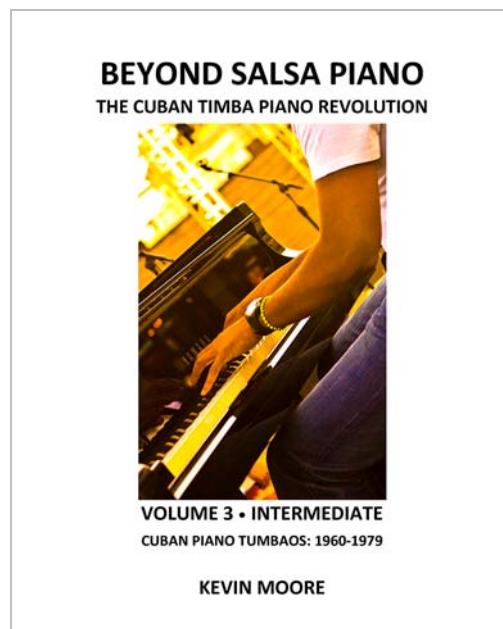
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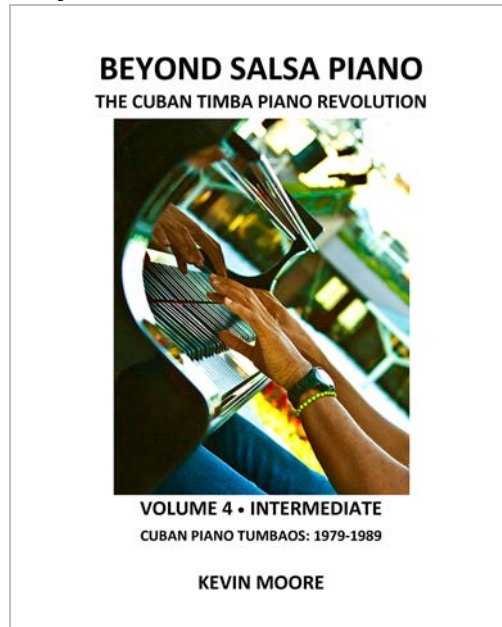


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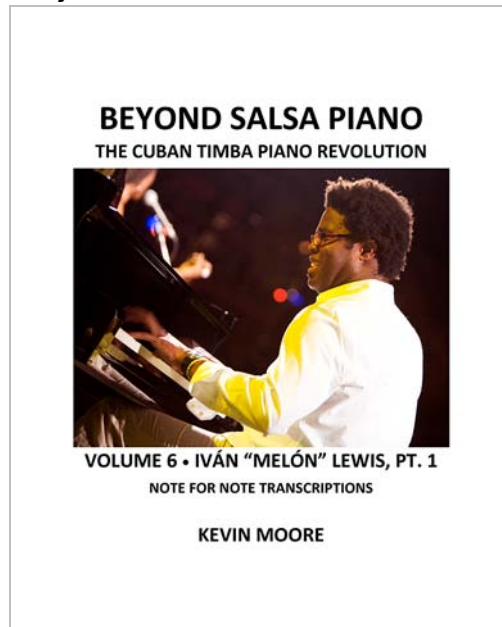


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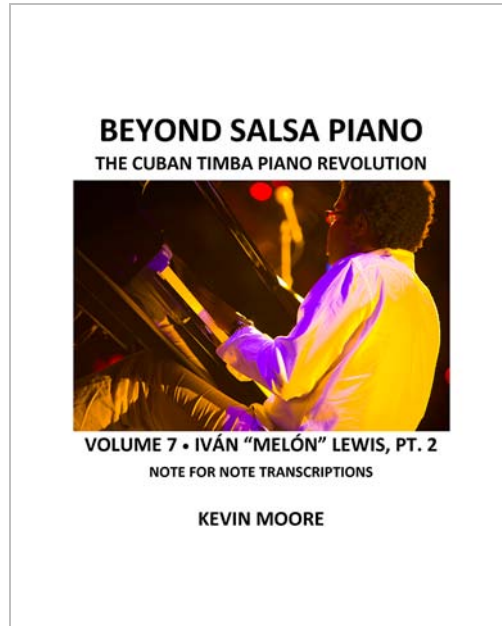
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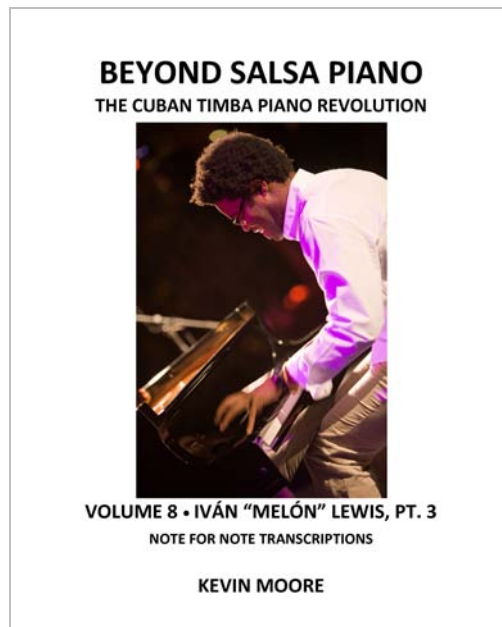


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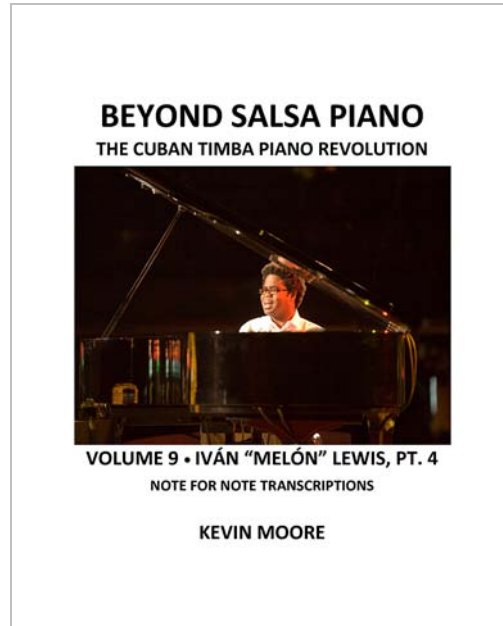
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