

# Colombian Cumbia: African, Indigenous, and Spanish Roots of Rhythm

## OVERVIEW

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What is Cumbia, and how do you play its traditional rhythms?

### OVERVIEW

*In this lesson, students will learn how to play Cumbia by using their own voices and bodies as instruments. They will familiarize themselves with how its traditional drums are played, how a percussion ensemble works, and will sing in Spanish and dance traditional Cumbia steps. Through these activities students will learn how to use their body as an instrument and explore Cumbia as a cultural practice that continues to change with the creativity and innovation of its members.*



Illustration: Henrique Gomes

Cumbia is a cultural movement that unites all of Latin America and represents the resilience of its people. After the Conquest of the Americas, the Spanish colonists granted enslaved Africans and Indigenous Peoples only one day of the year for celebrations. On that day, over many years, Cumbia was born. It is the creation of Black and Indigenous resilience in order to preserve culture and community through the act of music-making. According to oral tradition, the *El Dos de Febrero* (2nd of February) celebrates the survival of culture, community, and memory in Black and Indigenous communities that had otherwise lost land and experienced oppression at the hands of the Spanish *conquistadores* (conquerors). An act of remembrance, Cumbia is a symbol of identity and an homage to the roots of the original peoples of *Abya Yala*, a word in the Kuna language which means “mature land, living land or flowering land,” used by indigenous peoples of Latin America to describe the continents of North and South America.

With its roots in the five states of the Caribbean Coast of Colombia, and more specifically on the banks of the Magdalena River, Cumbia’s history is born from three cultures; African, Spanish, and *Los Indigenas* (First Nations Peoples) who were in the Americas before the Spanish arrived. Africans from diverse nation-states and cultures, were forced into slavery in the New World by the Spanish conquerors. But they brought with them the memories of their drums and rhythms, which they reimagined and refashioned as the percussive and sonic foundations of Cumbia. Already living on the land that is now called Colombia, the Koguis people of Santa Marta contributed the *gaita* (*kuisi* or flute), and the *maracas* (shakers) to Cumbia. The *pito atravesao* (pierced whistle), also known as *caña de millo* (millet cane), is another Indigenous flute from the Caribbean Coast and a foundational instrument of the genre. The third element, brought by the Spanish *conquistadores*, is the Spanish language and traditional clothing worn during the

dance: large skirts, flower headdresses and a package of candles for women; pants, white shirts, red scarves, *espadrilles* and *vueltiao* hats for men.

In the 1940s, Lucho Bermúdez, a clarinetist and composer who was inspired by the work of Jazz clarinetist Benny Goodman, combined the Afro Colombian rhythms of Cumbia with the format and sonority of a Big Band, and popularized the music across Colombia and Latin America by touring and playing for rich, white audiences. Cumbia and other traditional Caribbean rhythms such as Gaita and Porro had been previously frowned upon by the white, upper and middle classes of Bogotá because of its Black and Indigenous roots. Because of its assimilation into the Big Band format, it quickly became popular and was soon the national music of Colombia.

Bermudez's innovative approach to Cumbia inspired other musicians to continue mixing the diverse cultures and expressions of Colombia as an act of resilience to the violence, conquest and oppression that are part and parcel of its history of colonization. These musicians include José Barros, a prolific composer from el Banco, Magdalena, with more than 700 published songs; Andres Landero, “the King of Cumbia” an accordion player from San Jacinto, Bolivar; and Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto, music legends of Colombian Cumbia that spans the entire Caribbean.

In present day Colombia, the innovation of Cumbia continues. Young artists and bands like Carlos Vives, Sidestepper, Bomba Estéreo, Systema Solar and Lido Pimienta have incorporated Cumbia and other Caribbean oral traditions into their original Rock, Pop and Electronic styles. As a result, the Colombian music scene has exploded internationally since the 1990s.

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The history of Cumbia in Colombia and its African, Indigenous and Spanish roots
- The concept of rhythm and steady beat
- Spanish vocabulary related to Cumbia and Colombian culture
- How to play the four percussion instruments that are part of the cumbia ensemble (*tambor alegre, tambora, llamador, maraca*) through vocalizing and body percussion exercises
- How to sing Cumbia lyrics in Spanish and dance Cumbia steps

### 2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to perform the traditional rhythms of Cumbia by singing and playing a body percussion game.

## ACTIVITIES

### VOCABULARY INTRODUCTION

1. Distribute to students **Handout - Cumbia Vocabulary Flashcards** (you may need to cut the flashcards out beforehand).
2. Introduce students to the Spanish vocabulary used in this lesson by going through the **Cumbia Vocabulary Slideshow**.
3. Explore the document **Suggested Activities for LADAMA Vocabulary Flash Cards** for suggestions on ways students can practice Spanish using the flash cards either before the lesson or as homework.

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Ask students to close their eyes and take a moment to listen to the sounds of the classroom around them. Then ask students:
  - What did you hear in the classroom?
  - Were there any sounds that followed a pattern (for instance, a clock ticking or water dripping)?
2. Tell students that there is a word to describe repeating patterns of sound, like a clock ticking or water dripping. That word is **rhythm**, or *ritmo* in Spanish.
3. Ask students to put their hand on their heart so they can feel their heartbeat. Once they have found their heartbeat, ask them to tap along with its pulse.
4. Tell students that when a rhythm is played at a steady pulse, it is called a **beat**, or *pulso* in Spanish.

### PROCEDURE

1. Inform students that they will be practicing rhythms and beat by playing, singing, and dancing to Cumbia.
2. Show **Image 1, Colombia Illustration**. Tell students that Cumbia comes from the country of Colombia, in South America. Practice pronouncing the word “Colombia” and “Cumbia” together with the class. Explain that in the country of Colombia, people often gather to dance the Cumbia. It is a way to celebrate Colombian culture and community.
3. Tell students that they will be learning to play the rhythms of Cumbia. Direct students to stand up, and explain that they will be performing along with an interactive video. Then play **Clip 1, Cumbia Body Percussion**. Pause the video as needed to practice the rhythm and pronunciation, or use the below excerpted sections of the clip. Feel free to use **Handout - Cumbia Teacher’s Guide** as a reference if needed to help the students work on the rhythms. Excerpted sections:

- **Cumbia Body Percussion Excerpt: Cumbia Rhythm**
- **Cumbia Body Percussion Excerpt: Play Tambor Alegre**
- **Cumbia Body Percussion Excerpt: Play the Tambora**
- **Cumbia Body Percussion Excerpt: Play Llamador**
- **Cumbia Body Percussion Excerpt: Play the Maraca**
- **Cumbia Body Percussion Excerpt: Playing as an Ensemble**
- **Cumbia Body Percussion Excerpt: Follow Along with the Drums**

4. **Activity for General Music Class:** Use **Handout - Cumbia Teacher's Guide** and **Image 2, Cumbia Body Percussion Transcription** to show how the rhythms introduced in the clip are notated. Then, play Clip excerpt "Playing Along as an Ensemble" again so students can hear how all the rhythms sound together when combined. Following this, divide the students into four groups, and direct each group to learn one of the rhythms introduced in the video. Instruct students to play the four parts of a Cumbia ensemble using their bodies and voices, trying to make sure everyone stays on the same beat.

5. After students practiced the rhythms with the clip, ask:

- Was this the first time you have played a rhythm on your body? If not, when else have you played a rhythm?
- How does playing the music feel different than just listening to the music?

**(If splitting the lesson across sessions, this would be an appropriate break point.)**

6. Tell students that now they will be learning to sing and dance to Cumbia. Ask students to stand up, and explain that they will be performing along with this interactive video. Play and perform along with **Clip 2, Cumbia Dance and Song**. Pause the video as needed to practice the steps, vocals, and pronunciation, or use the below excerpted sections of the clip.

- **Cumbia Dance and Song Excerpt: Cumbia Dance**
- **Cumbia Dance and Song Excerpt: Cumbia Song**
- **Cumbia Dance and Song Excerpt: Sing with Dani**

7. After the video, ask students:

- Was this the first time you moved your body this way? What did the movements make you think of?
- Have you ever sung in Spanish before? How did it feel to move your body to the rhythm of Cumbia?

8. **Activity for General Music Class:** Use **Handout - Cumbia Teacher's Guide** and **Image 3, Cumbia Song Transcription** to show students how the vocal melody introduced in the clip is notated. Try to have students play the same vocal melody on instruments.

9. Free form dance and rhythm playing! Play **Clip 3, "Cumbia Brasileira"** as students move around and dance in the room using the tools they have just learned: body percussion, singing in Spanish and dance movement. This is the moment when they can use the song and dance skills from the second video.

## SUMMARY ACTIVITY

### 1. Ask students:

- What did you notice is important for staying on beat with your classmates when playing body percussion? Which senses did you use?
- Which part did you like doing better? Singing, dancing, body percussion? Why?
- How might dancing, singing and playing music together create a bond with your classmates? How did you feel after? How does moving and singing with your classmates feel different than doing other classwork?

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

### 1. Invent a new game! What can your class create that builds community and develops the culture of the classroom? Consider all of the tools you have: song, dance, rhythm, language, and your imagination. Teach your new game to friends and family! Games could include:

- **Dance Dance Freeze:** students freeze where they are when the music stops.
- **Mirror Movement:** pair students up, and have one student mirror the dance moves of the other. Follow the leader: Choose a leader, and have the rest of the class copy the dance movements of the leader.
- **Follow the Leader:** Choose a leader, and have the rest of the class copy the dance movements of the leader.

### 2. Further listening suggestions:

- Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto
- Lucho Bermúdez
- Pedro Ramayá Beltrán
- Ondatrópica

### 3. Further listening suggestions:

- *Drum Dream Girl*, by Margarita Engle and Rafael López. Inspired by the childhood of Millo Castro Zaldarriaga, a Chinese-African-Cuban girl who broke Cuba's traditional taboo against female drummers. Targeted single word Spanish vocabulary. K-2. (Connections to: drumming, gender stereotypes, Cuban history)
- *Biblioburro: A True Story from Colombia*, by Jennette Winter. A true story about a man who creates a traveling library to reach remote areas in Colombia using burros. Targeted Single word Spanish vocabulary. K - 3. (Connections to: Colombian culture, landscape and books).
- *Feliz New Year* by Ava Gabriela, Alexandra Allesandri, Addy Rivera Sonda. The story of a girl visiting family in Colombia and is introduced to local traditions. Targeted Single word Spanish vocabulary. K- 3. (Connections to: Colombian culture, feelings.)

## STANDARDS

**NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION – NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MUSIC EDUCATION (NAFME)***Core Music Standard: Creating*

Plan and Make: Select and develop musical ideas for defined purposes and contexts.

Evaluate and Refine: Evaluate and refine selected musical ideas to create musical work(s) that meet appropriate criteria.

Present: Share creative musical work that conveys intent, demonstrates craftsmanship, and exhibits originality.

*Core Music Standard: Performing*

Analyze: Analyze the structure and context of varied musical works and their implications for performance.

Interpret: Develop personal interpretations that consider creators' intent.

Rehearse, Evaluate, and Refine: Evaluate and refine personal and ensemble performances, individually or in collaboration with others.

Present: Perform expressively, with appropriate interpretation and technical accuracy, and in a manner appropriate to the audience and context.

*Core Music Standard: Responding*

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

*Core Music Standard: Connecting*

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.



## NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

### *Creating*

Anchor Standard 1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 3: Refine and complete artistic work.

### *Performing/Presenting/Producing*

Anchor Standard 5: Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation.

Anchor Standard 6: Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.

### *Responding*

Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

### *Core Music Standard: Connecting*

Anchor Standard 10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

Anchor Standards 11: Relate artistic ideas and work with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

## COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)*

Comprehension & Collaboration 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Presentation of Knowledge 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language (K-12)*

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and



multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

## **SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)**

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 9 : Global Connections





## RESOURCES

### VIDEO RESOURCES

- *LADAMA* - Cumbia Body Percussion
- *LADAMA* - Cumbia Dance and Song
- *LADAMA* - “Cumbia Brasileira”

### HANDOUTS

- Handout - Cumbia Vocabulary Flash Cards
- Cumbia Vocabulary Slide Show
- Suggested Activities for Vocabulary Flashcards
- Handout - Cumbia Teacher’s Guide