

## Learning Syncopation with the Partido Alto Groove

by Dennis Winge

One of the things I notice in many guitarists, not only just my students, is that they can sometimes get boxed-in rhythmically. As guitarists, we spend so much time learning fretboard theory, general music theory, chords, licks, arpeggios, etc. that we don't always make much time for developing our rhythmic versatility.

Learning the art of syncopation can greatly help this. Syncopation can be loosely defined as the art of emphasizing beats that are normally weaker. No better can this phenomenon be illustrated than in a groove where the downbeat is almost never played. Such an example is the song Partido Alto by Jose Bertrami.

Before we jump in, all the examples below can be heard in the short video summary I made about this groove.

The Partido Alto groove, in its most simplified form, looks like this:

$\text{♩} = 180$

basic drum groove

The notation shows a 4/4 time signature with a tempo of 180 BPM. The top staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The rhythm is: Bar 1: quarter, quarter, eighth rest, eighth note, eighth rest, eighth note, quarter, quarter. Bar 2: eighth rest, eighth note, eighth rest, eighth note, quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter. The bottom staff shows triplets of eighth notes on strings T, A, and B.

If you don't read music, the beats are (bar 1): 1, 2, (3) &, (4) &; (bar 2): (1) &, 3, 4 where the beats in not listed or are in parenthesis are not played.

A typical guitar part for the chords D7 & G7, two bars per chord, might look like this:

basic guitar rhythm

D7 G7

The notation shows a 4/4 time signature with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The top staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The rhythm is: Bar 1: quarter, quarter, eighth rest, eighth note, eighth rest, eighth note, quarter, quarter. Bar 2: eighth rest, eighth note, eighth rest, eighth note, quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter. The bottom staff shows chords D7 and G7 with eighth notes on strings T, A, and B.

Here the groove is (bar 1): 1, 2, 3 &, (4) &; (bar 2): (1) &, (2) &, (3) &, 4. This is a very fun groove to play in and of itself, but the fun is only just beginning. Take a minute to

feel how this groove feels. Notice that the “1” beat is played on bar 1, but not on bar 2. This is not uncommon and should hopefully not be a difficult rhythm for you. If you do have trouble with it, listen to it at one of the first 2 videos listed below.

In Brazil, it is very common to reverse the “clave.” This means that bar 1 now becomes bar 2 and vice versa. It now looks like this:

The notes above are (bar 1): (1) &, 3, 4; (bar 2): 1, 2, (3) &, (4) &. Notice that the downbeat of each 2-bar cycle is not played. This is what I meant when I said groove was going to get even more fun. Not playing on the first downbeat is true syncopation. The guitar part we had earlier, now reversed, looks like this:

(bar 1): (1) &, (2) &, (3) &, 4; (bar 2): 1, 2, 3 &, (4) &. This can take some getting used to, but is well worth the effort if you want to master the art of syncopation.

One way to adjust your ear to hearing the masked “1” beat is to listen to the samples, linked below, in which I counted the downbeat by saying “ta” at the beginning of every 2-bar cycle. It can be hard to hear, and I can’t lay claim to 100% accuracy as it was not always easy to hold it down, especially in the very syncopated improvisation sections.

Some musicians I shared it with even disagreed with me about how to analyze the groove, but I was relieved when not only certain trusted sources confirmed that I was on track, but also when someone had shared with me the sheet. The lead sheet transcription had the downbeat placed in the same place I had put it.

There are many other types of grooves that illustrate syncopation, and this example is only one of them. However, by embracing a groove such as this, you can begin to expand your rhythmic horizons by leaps and bounds. Good luck and have fun!

**Resources for Partido Alto** (both the song and the groove):

Explanation of the Partido Alto Groove:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Mdu4O8ACAo>

Summary I made of the groove: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mewroZ6fqWY>

Site where I count the downbeats of each version: <http://denniswinge.com/partido-alto/>

3 Versions of the Tune "Partido Alto" on Youtube:

Airto from "Touching You, Touching Me" -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lauWsWycvtg>

Azymuth from "Light as a Feather" - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hwP7mDVbIQ>

Airto from "Colours of Life" - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNO00IJg9II>

Chart of the song can be found in New Real Book, Volume 1 p. 261-2