Interlocking Rhythms

In a recent video, Cory Wong wisely said that there 3 common mistakes rhythm guitarists make: 1) they use voicings that are too big, 2) they aren't precise with their strumming hand to make specific accents accurately, 3) they aren't aware of what the other instruments are doing rhythmically.

I'd like to explore these concepts in the following study of interlocking rhythms to make you better equipped to avoid those 3 common mistakes, and to broaden your perspective on what rhythms you might use in various contexts.

We will address the contexts of standard 4/4 strumming and 4/4 shuffle rhythms, and then we will look at two heavily interlocked rhythms from Afro-Cuban music and apply those parts to guitar.

Click here to hear all audio examples below

I. Standard Guitar Strum | G | % | C | % |

Version A

Let's say you are playing the 2nd guitar part to a basic strum in 4/4 on a G & C chord progression where the first guitar is playing 1_2&_&4_ as shown below. The 'holes' that guitar 2 might choose to fill are the beats left open, i.e. the "and of 1," the "three" and the "and of 4" as shown below.

Note that in the **audio example 1** each guitar is panned separately and is using a different tone and playing in a different area of the neck. These are all ingredients to make parts stand out from each other in a live setting or when recording tracks. It is not necessary to only play in the "holes" as I have called them. The 2 guitars could both play some of the same beats, but it's a more effective demonstration to have it that way here.

guitar 1

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
attacks	x		x	x		x	x	

guitar 2

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
attacks		x			x			x

Version B

Now suppose guitar 1 decides to leave more space and only play 4 “attacks” (which could be called ‘events’ or ‘onsets’) per bar. This opens up more beats that guitar 2 can play as demonstrated in **audio example 2.**

guitar 1

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
attacks	x			x			x	x

guitar 2

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
attacks		x	x		x	x		

II. Shuffle | G7 | C7 |

Version A

Ever notice that in Western music the first and third part of each triplet are very strong in a shuffle and the 2nd part is mostly neglected? What would happen if a 2nd guitar accented the second part of each triplet? This is exactly what is done in **audio example 3**. You may not want to ‘comp’ (play rhythm guitar) this way on a shuffle groove the whole song or you might get some looks from other band members, but being familiar with accenting the weakest part of the triplet can broaden your rhythmic sensibility.

The numbers represent the intervals as they relate to the chord being played, and the specific notes change as the chords change.

guitar 1

1	&	a	**2**	&	a	**3**	&	a	**4**	&	a
1, 5		1, 5	1, 6		1, 6	1, 5		1, 5	1, 6		1, 6

guitar 2

1	&	a	**2**	&	a	**3**	&	a	**4**	&	a
	3, 7			3, 7			3, 7			3, 7	

Version B

In the alternate version of this progression, rather than playing chords, guitar 1 plays a riff which not only spans the most important chord tones (the 1, 3 & 7) but also spreads the rhythm over the bar in a potentially more creative way than simply strumming, without losing the rhythmic drive of the shuffle.

guitar 1

1	&	a	**2**	&	a	**3**	&	a	**4**	&	a
1		7	3		7	1		7	3		7

Because guitar 1 used specific intervals in the chord, guitar 2 can now choose to take some of the other intervals left behind (like the 5th) as well as add any other intervals that might give the chord extra flavor (like the 9th). The result can be heard in **audio example 4**.

guitar 2

1	&	a	**2**	&	a	**3**	&	a	**4**	&	a
	5, 9		9	5			5, 9			5	

III. Rumba Elements | Am | % | E7 | % |

There's perhaps no better place than Afro-Cuban music to look for a style that has great-sounding interlocking rhythms. Try to record a perfect 2-bar phrase into your looper or DAW, overdubbing each specific of the 2:3 Rumba rhythm below. You can even take a specific note in each chord for each part, as we have done below. If you're a music teacher, try getting each student in a group to play one specific rhythm.

Version A – 2:3 Clave

a) pulse (one bar repeated)

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
attacks	x				x			

b) clave (2-bar pattern)

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
attacks			x		x			

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
attacks	x			x				x

c) cascara (2-bar pattern)

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
attacks	x		x		x	x		x

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
attacks	x		x	x		x		x

d) bombo (2-bar pattern)

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
attacks								

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
attacks				x				

e) tumbao (one bar repeated)

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
attacks							x	x

In arranging these rhythms for 2 guitars, guitar 1 plays the pulse and the bombo & tumbao, while guitar 2 plays the cascara & the clave. Beats 4 and the and of 4 of every other bar has an asterisk (*) next to it because the chord tones are anticipating the approaching chord of the next 1 beat, as you will hear in **audio example 5.**

guitar 1 plays pulse plus bombo & tumbao (letters a, d, e above)

Am

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
attacks	3				3		1	1

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4*	&*
attacks	3			5	3		1	1

E7

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
attacks	5				5		1	1

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4*	&*
attacks	5			5	5		1	1

guitar 2 plays cascara & clave (letters b & c above)

Am

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
attacks	1		1, 5		1, 5	1		1

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4*	&*
attacks	1, 5		1	1, 5		1		3, 7

E7

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
attacks	3		3, 7		3, 7	3		3

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4*	&*
attacks	3, 7		3	3, 7		3		1, 5

Version B – 3:2 Clave

These rhythms are the rhythms above transposed, where bar 1 becomes bar 2 and vice versa. The effect of the resulting 3:2 clave as heard in **audio example 6**, is quite different from the 2:3 clave above.

a) pulse (one bar repeated)

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
picking	d	u	d	u	d	u	d	u
attacks	x				x			

b) clave (2-bar pattern)

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
picking	d	u	d	u	d	u	d	u
attacks	x			x				x

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
picking	d	u	d	u	d	u	d	u
attacks			x		x			

c) cascara (2-bar pattern)

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
picking	d	u	d	u	d	u	d	u
attacks	x		x	x		x		x

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
picking	d	u	d	u	d	u	d	u
attacks	x		x		x	x		x

d) bombo (2-bar pattern)

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
picking	d	u	d	u	d	u	d	u
attacks				x				

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
picking	d	u	d	u	d	u	d	u
attacks								

e) tumbao (one bar repeated)

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
picking	d	u	d	u	d	u	d	u
attacks							x	x

guitar 1 plays pulse plus bombo & tumbao (letters a, d, e above)

Am

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
attacks	3			5	3		1	1

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4*	4*
attacks	3				3		1	1

E7

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
attacks	5			5	5		1	1

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4*	4*
attacks	5				5		1	1

guitar 2 plays cascara & clave (letters b & c above)

Am

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
attacks	1, 5		1	1, 5		1		1, 5

Count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4*	&*
attacks	1		1, 5		1, 5	1		3

E7

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
attacks	3, 7		3	3, 7		3		3, 7

count	1	&	2	&	3	&	4*	&*
attacks	3		3, 7		3, 7	3		1

III. 6/8 on G7

The following are the basic rhythms for an Afro-Cuban 6/8 rhythm, except that I also added a 4/4 “pulse” so that they can also work for 12/8 rhythms or moderate-tempo shuffles. Again, try to loop or record each part separately, perhaps using different notes in the chord as we have done below.

4 pulse

1	&	a	**2**	&	a	**3**	&	a	**4**	&	a
1			x			x			x		

side stick

1	&	a	**2**	&	a	**3**	&	a	**4**	&	a
		x						x			

Clave

1	&	a	**2**	&	a	**3**	&	a	**4**	&	a
x		x		x	x		x		x		x

mid tom

1	&	a	**2**	&	a	**3**	&	a	**4**	&	a
						x	x				

low tom

1	&	a	**2**	&	a	**3**	&	a	**4**	&	a
										x	x

We will use the various chord tones of 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9 of a G9 chord, and, unlike the previous examples, we did not bother to condense multiple parts into an arrangement for 2 guitars. Instead, **audio example 7** overlays 5 different guitar tracks.

Guitar 1 plays pulse pattern

1	&	a	**2**	&	a	**3**	&	a	**4**	&	a
1			1			1			1		

Guitar 2 plays side stick pattern

1	&	a	**2**	&	a	**3**	&	a	**4**	&	a
		5						5			

Guitar 3 plays clave pattern

1	&	a	**2**	&	a	**3**	&	a	**4**	&	a
1		1		1	1		1		1		1

Guitar 4 plays mid tom pattern

1	&	a	**2**	&	a	**3**	&	a	**4**	&	a
						7	7				

Guitar 5 plays low tom pattern

1	&	a	**2**	&	a	**3**	&	a	**4**	&	a
										3	3

In summary, being aware of the distinct subdivisions of a rhythm, choosing specific intervals in each part, and emphasizing the beats and subdivisions accurately can add diversity to your rhythmic musicianship. This type of rhythm guitar study will also prove valuable in your lead playing, giving you more flexibility to access subdivisions within the groove. **Audio example 8** is a short demonstration of how being more fluent with the Afro-Cuban 6/8 rhythms, for example, could open up rhythmic aspects of your lead playing.

Good luck & have fun!