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Big Beats—Gridless Beats—Unstable Matrices

“The matrix is not stable.” Charles Keil describes the rhythmic ecology of a Bo Diddley performance thus, problematizing the notion that participatory discrepancies refer first of all to performed deviations of or alongside an isochronous norm. Michael Lydon writes, also of Bo Diddley, of a “beat, four-quarter time shoved off center” (1974, 65). And Fernando Benadon (2009) offers five ways to conceptualize “gridless beats”—displacement, swing, acceleration, polyrhythm, and wavering—that together form a rich set of typologies for thinking about what*kinds* of micro-stretchings occur in musical performance.

But Benadon’s gridlessness refers first of all to fluid spaces between, within, and around circumscribable beats. His beat–upbeat ratio (2006) provisionally fixes the first of pairs of swing eighth notes to equally spaced beats, as stable structures against which to measure comparatively mobile second eighth notes. Matthew Butterfield’s (2011) revealing analyses of Charlie Parker’s swing feel further reifies the fixity of the first of each pair of eighth notes. Vijay Iyer suggests that, in jazz and other African-derived North American musics, “individual players have their own feel, that is, their own ways of relating to an isochronous pulse.” (1998, 398) In all of these accounts, an underlying isochrony epistemologically constrains played events by providing an ideal periodic grid against which the latter can be measured (and, thereby, theorized). This, in fact, is how we are able to refer to musical microtiming as a practice of *deviations* against actual or virtual norms. And it is not (necessarily) wrong.

This paper introduces the unstable matrix back into microtiming theory, opening up a number of questions for discussion and avenues for investigation. Specifically, it focuses on the problems that a gridless model provides for the analyst, which may be summed up as: *how do we make analytic claims about expressive microtiming in the absence of clear reference points against which they may be measured?*

Certain West African and diasporic drum–dance practices lend themselves especially well to these kinds of questions. I will focus on an example of Cuban rumba where (a) no performance layer is providing a clear isochronous landing point against which we can unimpeachably measure performed onsets, and (b) the tempo of the overall performance accelerates according to performance convention, but in a way that is not clearly traceable in terms of who is steering it: no particular performance layer seems to be the one providing the impetus for acceleration.