

Let's face it, in most performance situations, drum solos are infrequent and even unnecessary interruptions of songs, used mainly to placate an overeager drummer or to give the rest of the band members a break. Consequently, many drummers are afraid to take solos and have no idea how to effectively form them and communicate to an audience other than to display a laundry list of technical patterns and rudiments. No wonder drummers are the brunt of so many musician jokes!

But what if we could solo utilizing tried and true methods and devices from the "melodic" world of music? This may be accomplished even though we play a non-melodic instrument. Our drumset contains relative pitches and melodies may thereby be implied. Generally speaking, from low to high pitches, we have bass drum, low to high-pitched (usually, biggest to smallest diameter) toms, and then snare drum as the highest pitch (this may change when the snares are disengaged). Your cymbals may be found to have relative pitches, too, and this order may vary if you "ping" them on the top or crash them on the edge. We also have long and short notes and so we may approximate longer and shorter durations such as a melodic instrument usually exhibits. Generally, the snare drum and closed hi-hat create the shortest durations, unmuffled toms sound for intermediate durations, while cymbals express the longest durations. Soloing musically, like everything else in drumming, takes practice and gets better with experience. The basic idea is to simply have some method behind your madness and mayhem while you solo and the audience will usually perceive your organization of solo content as intent and forethought (even if it's improvised forethought) within a structure.

We'll explore three methods of approaching a drum solo. The first two, THEME AND VARIATION and MELODIC SOLOING, may be effectively utilized in a variety of situations, from open solos where everyone leaves the stage, to improvising over musical vamps, to trading solos with another band member! Actually, MELODIC SOLOING may be considered a sophisticated and logical extension of THEME AND VARIATION. The third method, FREE-TIME SOLOING, may more abstractly borrow from our first two methods while also incorporating other creative approaches. FREE-TIME SOLOING was very popular in 1960s-70s Arena Rock concerts, and is presently often heard in contemporary abstract Jazz settings. Sadly, it is often used by drummers in all styles when the drummer has no concept of more musical approaches to soloing and then depends upon showcasing technical patterns, usually at each lick's most comfortable speed.

Theme and Variations

This approach to musical ideas dates back hundreds of years in Classical music composition as well as to the beginnings of Jazz improvisation. To use this method, simply create a short (or long) rhythmic theme and improvise around it. A theme may be some rhythm running through your head, a part of a song, a drum beat, or any other rhythmic/melodic idea that the listener can understand and perceive as a musical concept. As you improvise, or vary, the theme, return to it periodically to create cohesion and musicality. A musical device (see below) may sometimes serve as a theme.

Melodic Soloing

What if I told you that there are virtually an infinite variety of themes available to you, and you already know many of them?! Popularized and largely created by Max Roach, melodic soloing provides a melodic/rhythmic theme for a solo within any song- simply imply the melody of the song using the relative pitches and durations of your drumset while recreating the rhythms of the melody! Begin by implying the melody and rhythms as literally as possible, move towards playing more abstractly (while singing the song in your head), then return to the more literal version to end, thereby creating a sense of symmetry. ALWAYS FOLLOW THE FORM OR MELODY OF THE SONG to keep your place. Start by singing aloud! Remember that the pitches will not be exact. As you improvise you may sound quite counter-rhythmic and counter-melodic to the actual melody, which is fine- saxophonists play like this all of the time! Steal their rhythmic and melodic improvisational ideas if you'd like! The difficult part is to keep the real melody in your head and try to sing it while you are improvising against the melody. This exercise will deepen your rhythmic understanding immensely. I suggest starting with simple nursery rhymes since they are short and familiar. As you can see, this method is a more sophisticated form of THEME AND VARIATION and uses an entire song as the theme.

Free-Time Soloing

Most musical situations call for in-time soloing. Sometimes it is appropriate or necessary to solo freely out of time. The methods above apply here as well, but now strict timekeeping is not necessary. Other creative approaches may be attempted- try creating an environment (the woods, the sea shore, a social situation) in your mind and recreate the aural and/or emotional sound track for this environment. You can't really be wrong if you play with conviction!

In any case, tell a story with your solo- have a Beginning, Middle, and an End. Your climax should come towards the end of a solo, just like in a story from a book. Practice each method with the following devices slowly at first- don't "overrun you're your headlights on a foggy mountain road" or your solos will crash and frustration will settle in.

DEVICES

Apply the following technical and mental devices within your solo. For practice, just vary one at a time as creatively as possible:

Dynamics, dynamics, dynamics- This creates a 3-D textural effect and thus sustains rhythmic interest and usually provides an emotional response from and within the audience. Remember, with dynamics you give the illusion that you are near to the listener, far away, or somewhere in between...as if your drumset is on a hovercraft maneuvering around the room!

Space/Rests- Don't be afraid of this! Your solo must breathe! Try resting whenever you inhale, just like a horn player or singer. This forces you to leave space and will make you very aware of your own breathing and any problem habits you may have acquired. Space can speak very loudly by giving your solo a sense of drama!

Rudiments and other technical patterns- We tend to practice these mostly, anyway. Focus on just one rudiment or pattern and see how creatively it may be executed in time around the drumset.

Ostinatos (repeating pattern or patterns) in a limb or limbs while the other limbs improvise- This gives the effect of several drummers performing at once. The most common ostinatos are performed by the feet and may be simple (quarter notes on the bass drum), moderately difficult ("Samba feet"), or challenging (3 against 4 in the feet). Common hand ostinatos include playing the typical Jazz Swing pattern on the ride cymbal or performing a clave pattern. The point is to musically improvise with the other limbs while keeping the limbs playing the ostinato steady.

Sound Sources- Be acutely aware of the sounds you make. Try starting on one sound source (a tom, for instance) and gradually add others one at a time. Explore how many sounds you can elicit from a single drum or cymbal by striking it in different places, with different areas of the stick (or using mallets, brushes, or hands), by muting the drum or cymbal as you strike, etc.!

Repetition-Repetition-Repetition...- This creates the feeling of intention and conviction on the part of the performer and thus sounds like a musical part or theme. Repeat small mistakes or things you didn't intend to play to make them sound like intended ideas! Repetition often creates an emotional response as the audience entrains to the repeated phrase! Anything repeated over and over (to a reasonable extent) may be perceived by the audience to be difficult or important ("Why else would the performer be doing the same thing over and over?!").

Subdivisions- Be acutely aware of the subdivisions you are playing. Try playing a phrase or theme across the various subdivisions- e.g., start with eighth notes, then play the phrase in eighth triplets, then in sixteenths, etc. Try improvising while staying within a single family of subdivisions, e.g., duples, triplets, or quintuplets! This is more difficult than it sounds and is often found in South Indian improvisations.

Just as you would not leave your house to drive on a trip to an unfamiliar destination without a roadmap and a plan, decide upon a method before embarking upon a drum solo! Improvising rarely means leaving your actions purely to spontaneous chance, but rather communicating original ideas based upon some degree of forethought and planning, preferably in a context that displays universal musical values. By practicing the three soloing methods listed above and then concentrating on the devices individually within them, your solo performances will begin to convey more meaning to, and elicit more interest from, your audience and your fellow musicians. Your all-round sense of rhythm and technique will improve, and you will discover musical ideas that may have evaded you otherwise. Perhaps most importantly, you may never fear performing a drum solo in any context ever again!