

Telling Stories with Drum Solos

When I first started playing drum solos, I would play every lick I knew with no thought to how everything sounded together. The end result was usually less than great (picture drums being thrown down a flight of stairs). After decades of studying, I want to share some tips that have helped me to play more dynamic and musical solos. The same way songwriters use tools to tell a musical story, we can also tell stories with our drums.

Think of your solo like a song. It has a form and one part flows into another. It helps to write out the different parts so you can see how your solo progresses. And just like songwriters write more than one song, you don't have to have only one solo. You can have one that is melodic and another that is bombastic, etc. This will help with the urge to play everything you know in one solo.

Here are some specific tools you can work into your solos. This is not a definitive list but feel free to use these ideas if they sound good to you. I highly recommend you record yourself soloing. That way you can let your creativity flow without editing yourself as you play and critique your performance when you listen back. Sometimes what you actually play sounds different than what you thought you played.

CALL AND RESPONSE

Play a rhythmic figure on a part of your kit and try to answer what you played on a different part of the kit with a different rhythmic figure. Think of two drummers trading licks and emulate that by yourself on different parts of the kit.

A good way to get started is to play an interesting beat for a certain amount of measures and then play different fills for a certain amount of measures. For example, play a beat for three measures and play a fill for the fourth. Keep repeating that pattern while you work up your solo and then change to playing the beat for two measures and fill for two measures. Then play the beat for one measure and fill for three measures.

ORCHESTRATION

You can get some good ideas in general by moving what you're playing to different parts of the kit. For example, take an alternating 16th note hi hat beat and play it on the toms. Move the hands to different toms and experiment with alternate stickings to make the beat more melodic.

Besides changing the phrasing to other drums, you can also modulate the time (for example, play a 16th note phrase as 8th note triplets or play your phrase in 3/4 instead of 4/4) or change tempos for a portion of the solo.

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OSTINATOS

An ostinato is a repeating rhythmic phrase. You can play an ostinato (like a clave rhythm or a steady quarter note kick) with your feet while you solo with your hands. In essence you are accompanying your solo with the ostinato.

RUDIMENTS, POLYRHYTHMS, CROSSOVERS, AND PITCH BENDS

These can definitely add some spice to your solos. You can orchestrate variations and combinations of the 40 drum rudiments around the kit to come up with some really interesting and impressive ideas.

Polyrhythms are when you play two different rhythms at the same time. Polyrhythmic figures can add a sense of tension to parts of your solo.

Crossovers are simply when you play a figure where one hand crosses over the other. This can add a big visual appeal.

Pitch bends are when you push down on a drum with one stick while striking it with the other. The more pressure you apply with the stick, the higher in pitch it will be when you strike it. This can give you timpani like sound on the larger toms.

REPETITION, REPETITION, AND REPETITION

The way to make your solos memorable is to use repetition. Most likely your favorite songs have sections that repeat throughout. Think of your favorite guitar riff. It's most likely somewhat repetitive. So if you find a musical motif that you like on the drums, repeat it. Besides, if you repeat a mistake twice, it sounds as if it was intentional.

DYNAMICS

One of the most important things a good solo needs to have is dynamics. Make sure the different sections of your solo vary dynamically. If everything is loud or if everything is soft, the solo will lose people's interests.

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MISCELLANEOUS

Although you can change tempos throughout your solo, consider playing it in an overall comfortable tempo where everything flows well.

If your solo is part of a song, make the solo fit the style that you're playing. Sing the melody of the song to yourself while you solo and play the phrasing.

If possible, you can have other band members join you by playing percussion or just accompany you with their instruments during your solo.

You may want to get the audience involved in some way. Get them to clap along or get them to respond to a figure you just played. Keeping the audience in mind is always a good idea. Remember that they are there to see you play. Adding something visual like stick flips or playing part of your solo standing up can add a lot to your performance, if appropriate.

WATCH AND LEARN

Lastly, a great source for ideas is to watch and listen to great drummers solo. Watch drum videos and go see great drummers play live. Take what you like and experiment with it to make it your own.

I hope these suggestions help you to work out your solo masterpieces.

Stefano Ashbridge



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