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The Art Of Soloing

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The Art Of Soloing

I may as well admit the obvious: I am, *indeed*, a practitioner and partisan of that much maligned and oft-persecuted musical form, that thudding, plodding, torment of tedium, that dazzling display of passion and virtuosity—the drum solo. Much contempt has been rained down upon that time-honored institution by bitter critics and by many drummers. Why? I'm not sure I know, but I've been giving it a bit of thought.

The concept of a drum solo is like any other form of self-expression in one respect. It can be very good, and it can be very bad. One can dismiss the self-righteous and oh-so-tired accusations of "self-indulgence" and "ego-tripping" in the face of so much obvious appreciation from audiences for even a simple or mediocre drum assault. It certainly is *not only* the player who receives pleasure from this "ego trip."

Let's face it. Most people *do* like to hear drum solos. There is a definite primal fascination which the rhythmic thrashing of drum-like objects has on those who haven't yet glossed over their essential nature with too much self-conscious hipness.

It is unfortunate that the true obligatory drum solo has become a kind of *de rigueur* sideshow in the artillery of most every rock band. An uninspired and uninteresting solo can certainly be very dull. *Anything* that can be done well can easily be cheapened and bastardized, but it has always seemed to me that a concise, well-paced solo *always* elicits positive audience response. Can this really be self-indulgent? Perhaps just a little, little bit!

Not all drummers *should* take solos. I've seen and heard drummers who had excellent timekeeping, and a flair for spicing up a song with adventurous fills and inventive rhythms, but when it came to the solo spot, it was just a meandering and featureless digression. The opposite is also true. I know a musician who for many years was better at performing solos than at playing songs. This is not very good either.

The real point of it all is that some drummers *do* like performing solos. Who knows? Maybe the others are telling the truth when they claim they *don't* like to. Some drummers definitely do justice to the tradition, and many listeners enjoy them on many levels of understanding and in-

stinct. And your fellow band members usually don't object to a short breather at your expense.

And now, a few words about my own approach. I like to think that my solo is constructed like a song or a story, in that it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Over the years, I have developed a changing arrangement of rhythmic and dynamic steps, much as a writer must do. Thus the bridges and transitional sections are organized and fixed, while the individual sections themselves are loosely structured with some repeating passages. However, basically the parts are off the top of my head. There is always improvisation, and always room to stretch out when I feel particularly strong or rambunctious.

The drum solo certainly serves me well as a field of research and development in which I can explore and refine new areas of approach. I like to know how a thing works before I venture it in a song with possible disastrous consequences. Many ideas find their way out of my solo and into new songs that we might be working on. Some ideas find their way out of my solo and into the garbage.

There is also a kind of autobiographical scrapbook that I keep in my solo. Certain patterns which I spent a long time learning, or those few that I consider relatively original, give me the most satisfaction. There are some things that have been in my solo for ten years. Of course, there are things that have only been there for ten days, and I'm sure there have been many accidental improvisations that have only occurred once.

I remember my drum teacher telling me that the two most difficult things I would have to learn would be independence, and that flashy exercise in coordination known as the "double-hand crossover." Of course I'm still working on the limitless universe of the former, but how well I remember that hot summer day in my parents' garage when I finally learned the *trick* of the latter. In retrospect, it really couldn't have been all *that* difficult, but what a shot of confidence and pride it gave me. Those few seconds of nostalgia will probably remain in my solo forever.

In comparing my two recorded solos from *All The World's A Stage* (1976) and *Exit: Stage Left* (1981), it is interesting for



Photo by Jaeger Kotos

me to trace those ideas that have been maintained, those that have developed further, and those which have been replaced by new ventures. With some lack of humility, I sincerely hope that my drum solo at least represents five years of working towards improvement.

Even the present version of my solo differs quite significantly from the latest recorded one, although the arrangement remains substantially the same.

Enough of what I do. Here's what I think: To me a solo on any instrument should combine emotion and technique to varying degrees. It should possess smooth continuity and exciting dynamics, lead to a definite climax, and incorporate a variety of colors and textures. I think a touch of subtle humor is good. I am fond of my little collection of semi-melodic cowbells, with their various, tuneless "clunks" and "clanks." They have an innate kind of goofiness which lends a nice break to an intense percussive onslaught. With a little care and sensitivity, drums can be a very emotive and expressive solo instrument. So, why should the whims of fashion relegate them to the backup role from which so many great drummers fought so hard to extricate them?

Brought down to basic principles, if you enjoy soloing, if your fellow band members agree, and if the audience responds to it, *who* can possibly have cause to criticize the truth and beauty of that relationship? Go wild!

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