Bonus Report #1 – How to Create Amazing Drum Solos

During a performance you may be asked to perform a drum solo. If you have never performed a drum solo then here is a sure how-to-guide to perform a drum solo without having to prove you're the greatest drummer in the world. Let me share with you an anecdote from a personal experience of mine.

In 2006 I toured with Christian recording artist Nichole Nordeman and with the multi platinum, Grammy winning and multiple Dove Award winning band Casting Crowns. It was a tour in support of Casting Crown's multi-platinum release *Lifesong*. We were playing for over 5,000 seats a night in big theatres, churches, and arena across the midwest and east coast.

Halfway through the tour, Andy Williams, the drummer for Casting Crowns at that time had to attend his son's birthday party back in Jacksonville, Florida. He had to miss the date in Denver, Colorado. He literally asked me one week before the play date to fill in for him in Denver. I went overtime gathering, preparing, memorizing, rehearsing and charting. Casting Crowns put on a 2 ½ hour set every night, which is the equivalent of about 13-14 songs. Most of the songs contained tracks to play with while the others were to click off from memory.

I was given two brief rehearsals with Casting Crowns after their sound checks on the road. They were really quick and more like blowing through a song. I got a few questions answered before it was time to get to catering. My hands were really starting to be a source of irritation. With Nichole Nordeman I had to play really dynamically with nothing more than hot rods and brushes so my callouses and blisters were all healed up. By the 32nd day on the tour my hands had become accustomed to softer, more light hitting strokes. It was quite the opposite with Casting Crowns. I had to play a 2 ½ hour set in an arena with sticks that were literally destroying my hands and reopening my blisters and callouses.

On the day of the Denver show I wrapped up the majority of my left hand and fingers. I had to play the opening set with CCM artist Josh Bates and then Nichole Nordeman's set on my drum kit forty minutes before my set with Casting Crowns. I had been on stage prior to my performance with Casting Crowns a total of an hour and fifteen minutes. My wrapping was holding up fine and my hand seemed to feel good as well. I proceeded to play the set as I have memorized it

with Casting Crowns. I played the first half of the set with little or no hang-ups and got through to the intermission with flying colors. I walked behind stage where Mark Hall, lead singer of Casting Crowns, met me in the hallway and asked if I was ready for my drum solo? I literally gasped and thought to myself, “Oh yeah!’” There is a drum solo after the intermission every night! So I took a deep breath and said ”Sure man!”

While Mark was introducing me, I thought to myself that I had not prepared anything for this solo. I also thought that this is not a crowd of drummers but an audience who have to be entertained. That stream of thought actually helped me to relax a bit and just focus on entertaining rather than wooing. In fact, all of the Buddy Rich and Neil Peart drum solos filled my mind. I just pulled about everything that I had heard from them and incorporated them into a drum solo. I honestly cannot tell you what I played because you sort of black out when the spotlight is on you in front of over 5,000 people. I do remember I went into my ‘have fun’ mode and proceeded to play and entertain.

Most of the solos I’ve heard Buddy Rich perform always start with a theme, keep your attention, end with a bang and were always entertaining. I thought quickly to conjure up the same spirit as a Buddy Rich drum solo, although my drum solo would include a bit more of my personality and have more ‘Hack Saw’ Jim Duggan yells and Tommy Lee stick twirling.

It seemed everyone enjoyed every bit of the 5 to 10 minutes I played this solo. I do remember including a few Neil Peart elements from his Rhythm Method drum solo on every live album Rush ever put out. I also ended it with my best Virgil Donati impression of over the top cymbal tricks and triplets between kick, snare, and toms. It played out all nicely and it seemed to be good despite not having planned for it. I believe my philosophy of just entertain and be myself was the best bet. I started with dynamics, had a few different themes, got the audience involved, was flashy, and ended with a bang. It seemed to be a tried and true formula for a future time when I might be hit with a spontaneous drum solo request. Since it was so spontaneous, I seemed to have forgotten most of what I had performed. And with that, here are the best tips I can give you if you're ever told at a moment’s notice to perform a drum solo. Here it goes-

Have a theme: I admit that drum solos can be boring. I think they are even more boring when a drummer either goes too technical or not technical at all. It's really the middle ground between those two that makes a good drum solo. A theme refers more to starting with a groove and building off that.

Be Entertaining: Do not be boring! There will probably be a few drummers in the audience. More than likely, they will be normal everyday people. And those people will all enjoy some flashiness more than a stream of your best ostinato patterns or a straight groove in 7/8 time. Do things that make sense and provide energy. There are many solos that are technically amazing but would never make sense to an audience full of non-musicians or non-music students.

End with a Bang: Just like anything in life, you always want to crescendo to an ending that everyone will always remember. In drum solos the ending needs a grand finale like feel. Yes, just like a fireworks show or a grand performance at Disneyworld. There is nothing worse than an abrupt ending that makes sense to no one. Endings always need preparation to precede it. And within that prepping, it requires a loudness and busyness in volume and in playing. This is the one time you get to show off all you have in that toolbox of yours. So end with a bang!

To best reference this, go and watch some Buddy Rich Drum Solos on YouTube. Buddy was the "End with a Bang" master. I'm sure you can also find a plethora of drum solos that use this methodology. It only seems logical to give people what they want in a drum solo. After all, drums are loud and obnoxious to a lot of people. This is your one chance to win that person over with extreme obnoxiousness.

Have Fun: Even if you've never played a drum solo in your life it's important to have fun. This 'fun' attitude will at least cut through to the audience that if it's fun for you, it should be fun for them. Lightheartedness and levity have always been key to playing music in the first place. If people can escape in their hearts and minds in certain songs then I am sure they can also do that during a drum solo. Make it infectious with the smile on your face and the velocity of your limbs. I can say that most people in this life will buy anything if you carry a genuine smile on your face while selling it. It says that you believe in it and that they should also. So have fun! Really!