# Here Comes Your Solo

by Mark Shelton

“After the second chorus, there will be a solo section. Drum set, take the first eight bars and let percussion have the last eight. There’s no time to run it. It’ll be fine.”

When the directive to take a solo is given, will you be ready? Allow me to share some advice for playing a solo break on indefinite pitched percussion.

Invest time in practicing improvisation. Capture the licks that you like by transcribing them onto paper or “going red” on an audio recorder. Those chosen fragments are vital parts of your “lick arsenal.”

Study recordings of soloists. Pay close attention to percussion breaks at live performances.

Practice with a metronome. Learn to play your licks at a variety of tempos. Work on improvising over loops.

Improvise in various time signatures. Are you as comfortable in 12/8 as you are in 4/4? Venture into odd time signatures such as 5/4 and 7/8.

If you have the freedom to pick which instrument(s) to play for a solo, choose wisely! Some instruments are better than others due to volume capability and possessing timbres that will cut through the accompaniment. If it can’t be heard, you might as well not play it.

Practice improvising solos in various lengths. Can you say something in one bar? Two measures? Be prepared to “trade fours.” Do you have enough in your tank for 32 measures or an open-ended solo break? Learn to phrase so that you can land the ending on any beat (or subdivision of a beat).

Know the style and solo in that style. (There are big differences between rock and ragtime!) Your choices of instruments and rhythms should reflect the style of music surrounding your solo.

Human beings like repetition. This works to your advantage when taking a solo. Don't be afraid to restate a lick. Use dynamics to provide variety on a repeat of a rhythm or spice up a reoccurring lick by re-orchestrating the rhythm onto different instruments.
A solo does not have to be wall-to-wall saturation of sound. Space and longer note values can be a welcome relief.

Record yourself playing a solo. Give it a listen, improve it, and record it again. Keep repeating this process until you really dig your solo. Memorize your creation and keep it ready.

It's okay to compose a solo instead of improvising it. I'm giving you permission. Send any complaining purists to me. Try to make your written solo sound spontaneous when you perform it.

Your solo does not have to include displays of speed and technical virtuosity.

A solo break can be used as a transitioning device. Your solo might be the means to shift from a swing style to a straight eighth feel, change the tempo, or introduce a different time signature. Imagine those situations as you practice soloing and be prepared when a transition is required.

Develop your ability to play rhythmic themes and variations. Practice by playing a short rhythmic theme several times and gradually add slight variations. Keep the theme in mind as you continue to improvise new variations. This is a powerful tool for improvising. Experiment with stating the main rhythm of a song's melody at the beginning of your solo and going on to improvise variations. The groove from a song can also function as your rhythmic theme. Try spinning out variations using something from your lick arsenal for the main motif. Check out this video to hear a short tambourine solo using theme and variations:
https://youtu.be/4toGRMULd0w

Solo for everybody--not just the cool musicians in the band. 'nuff said.

Don't be shy. Playing with timidity communicates insecurity. Project confidence, own every note, and play musically. Enjoy your solo.

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