When it’s time to play a drum solo (usually during a song), what do you play? What ideas should I use? Where do these ideas come from? What do I do with these ideas?

Drum soloing involves improvisation. Improvisation is generally described as “making up music on the spot.” This is a good description, but “making it up on the spot” can be a disaster without some rules or guidelines. Today we’ll look at some rules that apply to most drum solos and some ways to approach drum soloing.

Some basic concepts:
1. Usually, drum solos are to be played at the same tempo as the song, so keep the tempo steady by practicing with a metronome or along with a recording (using headphones). At first, play your hihat during your solo as a reference point for you AND the rest of the band.

2. Musical ideas can come from anywhere – a snare drum rhythm, a sticking pattern, a hand/foot pattern, something you heard another drummer play, etc. Try to collect as many as you can.

In order to keep things simple, let’s use an 8 bar phrase as the basic practice length today. It includes 4 bars of “time” (the beat played during a song) and 4 measures of a solo.

1. When you first start soloing or can’t think of anything to play, just play “time” with fills:

Example 1

This means continuing to play the same basic beat of the song and adding some fills at the end of the 2nd and 4th bars.
2. The next step might be to play improvised fills during all 4 bars, adding a crash cymbal on the downbeat of each bar to emphasize where beat “1” is:

Example 2

3. Use repetition. Repeat your idea several times – this lets the audience know that you really intended to play a particular idea.

Example 3

4. A variation of strict repetition is known as a sequence. A sequence is a musical idea played at one pitch and then played again at a different pitch. On the drums, the easiest way to play a sequence is to play an idea on one drum and move it to another drum (or cymbal or combination of drums and cymbals). Using the same rhythmic idea when you repeat it will really help.

Example 4
5. Use “call-and-response”. This means to play an idea (section A) and then “answer” it with a
different idea (section B), play section A a second time and play yet again a different idea (section C),
and so on. This can also be used in long solos.

Example 5

6. If the solo is long, establish an ostinato (repeated rhythm or musical idea) and play a solo
“against” or “over” an ostinato. An ostinato is a repeated musical phrase that is used as accompani-
ment for other musical ideas.

Example 6

Ostinatos can involve only 1 limb (e.g. a hihat or bass drum alone), 2 limbs (e.g. hihat AND bass
drum), or 3 limbs (e.g. hihat, bass drum, and snare drum). Here are some common bass drum/hihat
ostinato patterns:

Example 6A - D

Create your own ostinatos!
7. For longer solos, try to add some sense of order to your solo. For example, when soloing for long periods of time, try to have several different “sections” during the solo. For example, let’s begin some ideas on the snare drum alone, then perhaps move on to the toms, play a specific beat or groove with fills, and finally end with some interesting hand/foot patterns (see Example 7).

Example 7
Snare Drum Ideas

Tom Ideas

Unusual Groove

Hand/Foot Patterns

These are excellent books to help with solo ideas:

The Art of Bop Drumming by John Riley (Warner Brothers) (check on p. 25 for ideas)
Essential Styles for the Drummer and Bassist Vol. 1 & 2 by Steve Houghton (Alfred)
(Use the different play-along tunes to practice soloing in different styles)
Afro-Caribbean & Brazilian Rhythms for the Drumset (Carl Fischer)
(Use the different play-along tunes to practice soloing in different styles)

Listening to and transcribing (notating) solos from master drummers is a great way to learn how to solo (and get new ideas). Many transcriptions may be found in Modern Drummer magazine or other music magazines. Buy the magazine, buy the recording, and learn to emulate all of the musical nuances on the recording (accents, phrasing, sounds, etc.) The following recordings are only a few recordings that feature drum solos by excellent drummers:

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<tr>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Recording</th>
<th>Drummer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miles Davis</td>
<td>Milestones</td>
<td>Philly Joe Jones</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miles Davis</td>
<td>Four &amp; More</td>
<td>Tony Williams</td>
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<tr>
<td>Max Roach/Clifford Brown</td>
<td>(anything)</td>
<td>Max Roach</td>
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<td>John Coltrane</td>
<td>Giant Steps</td>
<td>Art Taylor</td>
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<td>Duduka Da Fonseca</td>
<td>Jazz Samba Fantasia</td>
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<td>Jeff Hamilton Trio</td>
<td>Jeff Hamilton Trio Live!</td>
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<td>Bill Carrothers</td>
<td>Duets with Bill Stewart</td>
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<td>Peter Erskine Trio</td>
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<tr>
<td>Steve Swallow</td>
<td>Always Pack Your Uniform on Top</td>
<td>Adam Nussbaum</td>
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Contact Information: Prof. Terry O’Mahoney e-mail: tomahon@hotmail.com
This fundamental drum set session is to engage both the student and the teacher in playing drum set at the same time while using and playing on the same bass drum. With this concept we will explore many of the musical possibilities that this can offer.

Sharing the same bass drum is a technique that I find most helpful in working with students. With this setup as a student of mine said “you can truly feel the music communication that the other player is stating.” This concept really connects with a student’s understanding and grasping of material quicker. Another comment about the set up is that you can visually see what the other player is doing right in front of you, less than three feet away. Even if there are two drum sets set up side by side the student has to glance over while trying to read. Even sharing a crash helps the student to work on their accuracy of timing. It is a connection that I hope you can experience and try with your students. Music connection is lost when the instructor has to get up and then have the student sit down. This setup also helps if there is a space factor in your teaching room!

Our first examples come from Peter O’Gorman’s books Drum Sessions book 1 and 2 published by Neil A. KJOS music. They are fundamental texts that we use in our curriculum. There are basic building independence techniques that lead to a short music play along with and without drums. It has proven to bring excellent results with our students.

Music is written on a staff, consisting of five lines and four spaces. A clef appears at the beginning of every staff. Drum music is written using the neutral (or no-pitch) clef.

The lines and spaces on the staff represent different parts of the drumset.

A piece of music is made up of musical thoughts called phrases. A fill is a short rhythmic figure leading into a new phrase. When playing a fill, you must continue to concentrate on the time. The pulse must be felt throughout the fill.

Fill Study
The Fill Study exercises are designed to help you develop your ability to create and perform fills. The six rhythms written on single line staves are the basis from which you will create fills. These rhythms should be applied to your drumset following this four step procedure:

1. In the context of the four measure phrase provided, play rhythm A on any single surface. (A surface is any drum or cymbal, including the bass drum and hi-hat).

2. Divide the rhythm between any two surfaces. Experiment with different combinations, and use logical stickings.

3. Divide the rhythm between an three surfaces, then four, then five, etc.

4. Repeat steps 1–3 with rhythms B, C, D, E, and F.

Work with each rhythm for several minutes before moving on to another rhythm. Strive to be as creative as possible in your choice of surface combinations. Always concentrate on the time, and make sure that the pulse is felt throughout the fill.

**Fill Study #1**

Slash notation often indicates the continuation of a groove (the time) or the placement of a fill.
When creating a fill within a tune, make sure that the fill is musically appropriate and maintains the style and feel of the tune.

In **Common Ground**, use the rhythms provided in **Fill Study #1** as the basis for your fills. Play a different fill each time throughout the piece.

**Common Ground–Mini Jam**

1. In the context of the four measure phrase provided, play rhythm A on any single surface.
2. Divide the rhythm between any two surfaces. Experiment with different combinations, and use logical stickings.
3. Divide the rhythm between an three surfaces, then four, then five, etc.
4. Repeat steps 1–3 with rhythms B, C, D, E, and F.

**Fill Study #2**

Notes in parentheses may be omitted if they interfere with your ability to lead into the next phrase.
Twist of Fate—Mini Jam

In *Twist of Fate*, use the rhythms provided in *Fill Study #2* as the basis for your fills.

Our next examples are from Dom Famularo’s book *Drum set Duets*. These exercises are using two measure grooves that are different for both players. The rhythm in the exercise incorporates eight and sixteenth notes in the bass drum part. The goal and the challenge here is to lock in the rhythm with your student. From this we strengthen our rhythmic accuracy and timing. Once completed, players should switch parts to experience how their rhythm fits with the original. Then go back and play your original part again. For variety, always remember to play on different surfaces which create different sound textures. To bring the exercises to complete musical fruition consider trading fours, while using dynamics and accent inflections.
Next we will explore different groove styles while trading 4’s and 8’s and soloing with written kicks. The styles will be Rock, Funk, Jazz, Swing, Bossa Nova, Samba, Mambo, and Songo. In this we will also explore using sticks, brushes, Hot Rods, timpani mallets, etc., to create different textures. I highly recommend incorporating dynamics and accent inflections no matter what level the student is playing at. With the solo trading in the jazz concept we will be using a triplet phrasing. In the rock and Latin areas we will be using more of an eighth note feel. We will also trade on a 12 bar blues form over C. Jam Blues.

Trading “Fours”

Trading “Eights”
Trading “Fours” and “Eights” can be embellished with kick accents.

Trading “Fours” With Kick Accents

Trading “Eights” With Kick Accents
STYLES

Swing & Basie Feel

Bossa Nova

Samba
In closing I strongly feel that no matter how new a student is to lessons, we all want to play on the drum set. With a little creativity and the correct text curriculum this can be accomplished. The student will have more fun and so will you.