

Solo-ing

Getting started, Getting better

By Snake Davis

Constructing solos.

My favourite thing is "just making something up" soloing/improvising and my second favourite thing is playing gorgeous melodies on sax.

Look at approaches to solo playing:-

How do you approach it? How do others do it? Can you do it better if that approach applied to you?

What is going on when a soloist solos?

To over-simplify (a lot) there are 3 improvising approaches:-

- a) scale/chord/altered chord
- b) shutting your eyes and blowing
- c) re-stating the melody with embellishments...

b) is not enough to cover some trickier situations a) can sound a bit stiff c) is a bit limiting and sometimes there is no melody, so a combination of all three is perhaps the best way forward.

My favourite approach is to shut my eyes and blow and there is no difference in approach whether it's a live solo or a recording session.

Record Producers tell me "we hired you to put some icing on the cake"

I think of soloing as

"Instant composition"

"Making stuff up"

"Reacting"

"Spicing up"

"Decorating"

When a session player such as myself is hired to play a sax solo(s) often it's because the artist/producer is "looking for something to lift the track" a "special moment of magic" Sometimes an artist or producer will sing us melodic ideas or have a solo idea on the track as a guide on keyboard, more often they just have the more vague idea that "a sax solo might be great on this song"

Baker Street for example, was an already existing motif that the producer sang to the sax player. My Million Love Songs and all my M People lines were pure make-up-as-you-go-along, they popped out of my mind as I busked along.

How do you get better at that? Practice. Yes but how? Do loads of ear training (learn tunes by ear, know your intervals etc.) and blowing along, copying vocal lines, riffing, I recommend singing before blowing. With a backing track or any piece of music, sax in hand, la-la away until something pops out that you're happy with, then copy that on the sax.

What makes a solo great? Never, or almost never, just one thing, one aspect or element. A combination of things, nearly always including great tone and superb command of the instrument, but often it's one element which is the deal breaker.

How do you get started? Get going? Find your first note? Get a toe in the water?

Even if you have already started, try these ideas.

Some of you might need to be told the key, some will easily find it, Fiddle around, play any old thing- which note "feels safest, like home", the one you keep coming back to?

That's the tonic. That's the key you're in.

Take just one note... add octaves... Then 2 notes etc..

Take a fixed rhythm, only change the notes.

Then is it major/minor? The third will tell you whether it's major or minor (flattened, just a semitone from the 2nd).

Take the first 3 notes of that scale. Then the first 4, then 5.

Ok, so we've found the notes, got them under our fingers now how can we use them more creatively?

Most people quite quickly get to the stage where they realise they have the ability to "make something up" i.e. improvise.

The next step is 'how do I choose notes / make it interesting / worth listening to?'

At this point its worth checking my 'How to play better sax solos' notes, and youtube videos of the same title.

Helpful approaches A - Note choice/dynamics

These apply to jazz but very much to pop r+b too, I don't really differentiate, its all music.

Play the melody 100% or to start with, 1st half... then variations

Write a (singable) theme... like Careless Whisper / Baker St.

Write a catchy riffy hook (like Moving on Up) Start with 1 note varying rhythm..

Play a melodic pretty/rocky series of notes in the style and mood of the piece.

Use dynamics and space to build or shape the solo.. cresc. To Ch, dim. To M8 or mellow coda.

Try less notes graduating to more.

Try quiet graduating to loud.

Helpful Approaches B - Attitude

It's not usually enough to chug along playing musically with the track. You need to step forward, take the spotlight, shoulder up and assume the lead so that you are the main event, being accompanied by the band/backing track. Front it.

Create different moods and emotions with the way you shape your sound; rough, smooth, crying, growly, sweet.

Rhythm – edgy, funky, even bouncy, swingy, latiny.

Style - you may just be yourself, you might decide to be extra bluesy, jazzy, super sweet, melodic, laid back, souly, r+bish.

Helpful approach C - (incorporates composition!)

Now lets try writing a tune over a backing track.

We mentioned how improvising/soloing is really “instant composition” so lets take bits of melody from our improvisation, snatch it from the air and keep it. Do this with your ears and memories but sometimes I use this writing method by recording myself playing over tracks then listening back for bits of melody that I like.

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