



YAMAHA

Educator Series

WIND INSTRUMENTS



George Shelby

George Shelby has numerous C.D., Movie and T.V. credits. His latest C.D., "A Little Deeper", will be released by Morpheus Music, complete with well-framed solos. He can be reached at www.GeorgeShelby.com.

How To Practice Nothing

By George Shelby

Early in my recording career, I was called in to play a sax solo on a vocalist's C.D. It was with a "Name Producer", and I was determined to pull out all the stops and really show him what I could do. After about the third take, he said, "That's perfect!" and I headed into the control room to hear my masterpiece. As they played my solo back, my jaw hit the floor, as chunks of my solo had suddenly disappeared. I asked the engineer if parts of my solo had been erased accidentally. "Well, yeah, parts were erased. But it wasn't accidental." "I thought you said my solo was perfect," I said to the producer, with my dignity rapidly crumbling. "It was," he said, "You just kept playing through the rests."

Have you ever met someone or known someone and as you talk to them it seems as if they just keep on talking in one continuous stream of consciousness that keeps ongoing and going without ever breaking no matter how much you think they should stop and finally you just stop listening? It's the same with soloing on your instrument.

Let's go back over some obvious ground first. Performing on your instrument, and specifically soloing, should be like talking to your audience. You want to have a clear idea of what you're going to say, and have the technical ability to say it. As with most great art, sometimes the greatest stories are told with the fewest words. We're going to look at some of the reasons we lose sight of that and outline some exercises to get you thinking about nothing.

ALL NOTES, NO MUSIC – The most common mistake that beginning soloists make is thinking that just because they're playing a bunch of scales during their solo, they're saying something. This is usually because they haven't figured out what they're trying to say, much less how to say it, so they fill the void with notes. Lotsa' notes. But like anything else, what you practice early in your career determines what you'll play later. If you get into the habit of just playing and playing, as a beginning student, that habit will be hard to break later on. Right from the start of your soloing career, try to think in terms of what the overall shape of your solo should be. Start out with a simple theme, embellish upon it, embellish some more, then re-state the theme at the end of your solo. Yes, it's simple, and what you may consider at times to be boring. Keep in mind you're always trying to communicate with your audience, and a lot of licks running one into the next is not going to tell your audience much. Except that you need more work on your soloing.

FRUSTRATION – Notice me, notice me, notice me!!! Now you're a young developing professional trying to make a name for yourself in the big city. You feel like every third person in town plays the same instrument you do (it's only every fourth person). How to get noticed? I know, I'll play faster and higher and louder than everyone else, then I'll be noticed. Many times, you don't even do it on purpose, it just happens in the heat of a jam session. Yes, you'll get noticed. But you won't get hired. Trust me on this: quality gets noticed. Not the loudest, highest, or fastest. Don't misunderstand me. There are times when I play really loud, very high, and/or lightning fast. But there are just as many times when I make the audience strain to hear me, playing way down low and soft, and pulling them into my solo in the process.



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EGO – Don't you know who I am?!? Some of your biggest struggles with playing cohesive solos will occur as an established professional. All they need is a romantic two bar fill going to commercial, and you're in the mood to musically quote your favorite be-bop solo. This will not make the producer happy. Many people are baffled why some of the world's highest paid session musicians will go into a dingy jazz club on a Tuesday night, perform for twenty people, and get paid twenty bucks. Well, first off, it's fun. Secondly, it helps the creative process to perform in an environment without too many structures on what to play. Most important to your career, it helps you get that need to "clear the pipes" out of your system. When you go to your television session the next day, you have no problem playing exactly what they want on a ten second cue, because last night you played exactly what you wanted for three hours.

Okay, now that you know what to avoid, let's work on what to focus on. Space. And the proper application of it to your soloing. As soloists, we always think about the notes, and not the rests, which are just as important. So here are a couple of exercises to help you get comfortable with nothing.

THE THREE BEAT – The basis of this exercise came from Bill Greene. Set your metronome at a comfortable setting, and start playing on beats 1-3, and rest on beat 4. What you play is not as important as the fact that you break cleanly on beat 4. When you start doing this without thinking about it, start varying what beat you rest on. The most natural way to do this is to take the same lick and repeat it. Then start varying it as you get more comfortable. This is also one good way to construct a solo.

MOVE-A-LICK – This is much harder to get used to but is great for helping you conceptualize space in a solo. Put on a play-along track. Take your favorite soloing phrase, the one you know inside out, and play it starting on beat one. Now play the exact same lick starting on the upbeat of one. Then two, up-beat of two, etc. One of the great things about this exercise is hearing how the exact same notes become so different depending on where you start them. As you get comfortable putting the same phrase in different places rhythmically, you'll also start to find different ways of getting in and out of the phrases. Be patient with this one! You'll start seeing that your phrases don't have to be locked to beat one, and it will open up a whole new fluidity to your playing.

HEAR THE APPLAUSE – Imagine that you're playing the most amazing solo ever heard. Imagine that you're playing it in front of the loudest, most responsive audience ever. What would happen? Every time you would play a phrase, the audience would respond with clapping or shouting. Imagine the clapping

and shouting every time you're soloing. Yes, I'm serious. Play a phrase, then hear the audience response, whether it's there or not. There are a couple of reasons to do this. Once again, it will help you to wedge some space into your solo. The other reason is that your audience will respond when you do that. Even if it's not with yelling and clapping, they'll appreciate the space, and hear the notes you do play that much better.

Putting space in your solo is like putting a nice frame on a picture. Your solo will be that much better, because you've given it space to be appreciated in. Have fun. Or, to put a little more space in it:

Have Fun.