

The Brakes and the Accelerator

Learning to drive is an interesting experience. One of the first things you learn (hopefully) is the difference between the brake and the accelerator. Stepping on the wrong one can definitely be a bummer. So we learn pretty quickly which is which.

In improvisation, there are times to slow down the effort (putting on the brakes) and times to dig in and get going (stepping on the accelerator). And it's definitely worth knowing which is which. But remember – it's the energy, not so much the tempo, that's lowered or raised.

When to Brake

Holding back can be a good thing, especially in these situations:

- Starting a solo – concentrate on some interesting melodic shapes instead of filling all the available space.
- When you hit familiar territory – resist the temptation to follow your fingers. At worst, the easy material will rush – at best, it may still be boring.
- When you're nervous – concentrate on simple shapes and take your time developing ideas. Save the double-time material for when your mind and body are more relaxed.
- When you're playing a laid-back tune – fill up the notes and find the back part of the beat so you can sound relaxed. Rushing rhythms in a laid-back tune is one of the worst habits.

When to Accelerate

There are also times to dig in and boost your mental energy level in solos. Here are a few suggestions:

- In more difficult keys – find the color tones and arpeggios you need, and lock in on the rhythms.
- When you switch into double-time – don't just *play* faster; *think* faster.
- In developments – sometimes it's about finding the subtle differences, where less is actually more.
- In development combinations – you really need to think fast to combine developments in a way that adds creatively to your solo.
- When you play something that's physically demanding – especially if it continues on for a while.

Hang on ...

A nice way to get some wild contrast is to do what you do in real life – slam on the brakes or floor it. Slamming on the brakes usually means coming out of a fast double-time or burning line into a sudden long note. This works best if the long note happens in a more unpredictable spot (middle or end of the bar, and in the middle of the phrase). You can add expression or effects to the long note, then continue on. To “floor it” you go from a longer note to sudden double-time or burning notes.

Working Both Pedals

As you develop your solos, you'll get the hang of braking and accelerating with your energy and ideas. It can be a satisfying experience, as you control your energy levels so they help you create what you really want to.