

Session Sensei

WOODSHED RESOLUTIONS

by Scott Healy, keyboardist for *The Tonight Show With Conan O'Brien*

If I were to make just one New Year's resolution, it would be to practice more. It always feels great to spend a few hours in the shed, whether I'm working on technique, time, tunes, styles, or just noodling around, and no amount of playing with other people can replace it. It's all too easy to skip, though, and so I offer these tips as encouragement to join me in my commitment to practice more in 2010.

When? I'm not the kind of guy who insists on a rigid practice routine. In fact I feel that trying to stick to a regular schedule of anything can set you up for a major guilt trip at best, and the feeling of failure at worst. Just get to it when you can, but make an effort to plan each day so you can find the time.

Where? You may not always have a tuned Steinway B in a soundproofed room at your

disposal; you may have to make do with a semi-weighted keyboard and a set of headphones. Just make sure that whatever your situation, you have a good vibe and a clear head.

What? There's nothing wrong with practicing scales and arpeggios. Hanon's great too, but realize it's only in the key of C, and most of the rest of the world is not. I have *really* mixed feelings about metronomes – but more on that next month.

What else? Practice that tune you stumbled through last night on the gig. Work on a style you're not comfortable with. Practice your favorite ten tunes in different keys. Hack through some Bach, or rekindle a sonata. Then grab your iPod and play along with some great record. Listen to where the drummer's putting the beat, and what the keyboard player is doing in relation to



the song. These elements are universal and independent of the style of the music.

Anything more? Be critical of your playing, but not obsessive. If you do something that you like, do it again. If you hear something you don't like, work it until it improves. I've always noticed about a six month lag in musical improvement – it seems to take a while before things really sink in and become part of your automatic musical skill set. Don't be disappointed if things don't stick for a while, as you might find improvement when you least expect it.

The best part of practicing is that there's no downside. It's just about impossible to get worse, although the more critical you get of your own sound, the worse you may sound to yourself! Just be cool, and think about the long haul. ☒