

My Thoughts on Jamming

I have often likened a music jam session to a good conversation and the metaphor runs deep. ..

A music session, like a conversation can include a small, medium or large group of participants, it can be entertaining, enlightening, inclusive - or equally - boring, frustrating or infuriating. It is largely the participants and their attitude which determines the outcome.

A good conversation is, to me, an exchange of ideas which should serve as an engaging period of time with laughter, enlightenment and co-operation. It should include everyone and encourage them to participate and it should make sure that all ideas are heard and shared. Some conversationalists will be more knowledgeable than others, but that should not preclude the learner from participating or being heard and encouraged. Conversations with large numbers are prone to background noise and chatter, they can be unwieldy and unengaging. Small groups conversing can share ideas, teach each other and be more productive. Ideas gleaned can be shared with other small groups and so the learning and sharing continues. Those that dominate conversations, or continually talk on the same topic will quickly earn the reputations of bullies or bores.

So it is with jamming - a good music session should be a fun exchange of ideas - musicians listening to each other, being supportive, humorous, inclusive and engaging. There are some simple pointers that we can take on board in a bluegrass jam to help ensure this happens. Let's have a look at some of these.

1. Groups bigger than 7 or 8 start to get shabby. Try to keep the jam small, or get a good 'host'.
2. Make sure everyone is heard and is listened to – use your ears and be aware of the musicians around you and what they are trying to 'say'. I always think that a good jam is one where the guitar solos can be heard – because everyone knows to play very quiet backup behind them.
3. Don't dominate – give everyone a turn - whether it be in presenting a song to the group or taking solos within that song/tune. Be prepared to play back up or even stop playing for a while.
4. If a song is chosen, let the singer decide which key and the tempo. Singers try not to play in 'anti-social' keys.
5. If you don't think you can play the song – either because the tempo is too fast, or you don't know it, remember that it is ok to not play, or play very quietly in the background while you figure things out. If the whole session is beyond you, then find one that is more your level. Playing too fast or fumbling stuff that you don't know is not going to improve your playing anyway.

Other considerations...

Playing Tunes

Playing tunes in bluegrass is very different to playing tunes in say an old timey session or an Irish session. Traditionally, the Irish session will play tunes in 'sets' – say three tunes where everyone plays the same tune together often on different instruments. The tunes are played two or three times each then the next tune two or three times then the next until the set is finished. In an Old Timey session, there is usually a leader who will pick a tune and start playing, everyone joins in and

the tune is played over and over (and over) until the leader shouts and the musicians stop. Often tunes are selected in the same key (say A) for a period of time and then the banjo's retune and the tunes are selected in a different key (say D). Bluegrass players playing a tune will take it in turns around the circle to play the tune – often on each instrument in turn, alternating between playing the lead and playing backup. If the players are up to it the tune may go round the circle a second time and the players improvise over the chord changes. Most tunes have a traditional key that they are played in. It is rare, but not unknown, for a tune to be played in other than its traditional key.

Preparation

A jam session can be a great place to try out new tunes and songs. It can also be an opportunity to practice and smooth out stuff you already know without the pressure of say, a stage performance – so doing some 'homework' before the session is often a good idea. Your preparation could include things like learning all the lyrics to a song, learning the chord changes for a song, learning a tune or learning a solo break for a song. You may even want to write down a list of songs that you know how to play. Before a session, get ready to answer the request to 'play us a number' and have a song or tune in mind when your turn comes round. It is often harder than you may think to come up with an idea for a song or a tune when put on the spot. Whatever you do, don't use the session to do the sort of practice that you should be doing at home alone. That is not to say don't make mistakes – we all do that - and a jam is a good place to make them – jammers are usually very forgiving. But come prepared to play stuff that you know reasonably well - the other jammers don't want to listen to you practicing your scales or badly fumbling your tunes.

Remember there are no hard and fast rules that hold sway in a jam. The most important aspect of a session is to have fun, and let other people have fun. Try to make sure your approach allows that to happen. We all want to come away from a jam saying 'that was a GREAT session!'

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