

BLUEGRASS JAMMING BASICS

By Pete Wernick

THREE "MUSTS":

DO THESE AND YOU'RE JAMMING!

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1. Be in tune.

Before starting and whenever in doubt, use an electronic tuner.

2. Be on the right chord.

A. Learn the chord changes as quickly as possible.

B. As necessary, watch the left hand of someone (usually a guitarist) who knows the chords.

3. Stay with the beat. Don't rush, drag, or lose your place in the song.

IT HELPS IF YOU:

Don't read chords from a page, watch the guitar, listen and learn.

1. Recognize common guitar chords by sight even if you don't play guitar.

2. Help with the singing. Know the verses to songs (or bring lyrics) and the chords in a good singing key.

3. Suggest songs easy enough for everyone to follow.

Be aware of common denominator of ability when picking keys and tempos.

4. Know the basics of key transposing, such as when capos are used. Know the chord number system (1, 4, 5, etc.)

5. Help others be on the right chord, tuning, etc.

6. Watch your volume.

A. Allow featured singer/soloist to be easily heard. If you can't hear him/her, get quieter.

B. When it's your turn, make sure you're heard.

C. Be aware that your instrument (banjos especially) may not seem as loud to you as to someone who's in front of it.

7. Know the traditional unspoken ground rules (see below).

8. Give everyone a chance to shine. Be encouraging. Suggest songs that feature others.

TRADITIONAL UNSPOKEN GROUND RULES:

THESE RULES ARE USED WORLDWIDE!

1. Whoever is singing lead or kicks off an instrumental usually leads the group through the song, signaling who takes instrumental solos ("breaks") and when to end.

2. Typical arrangement formats:

A. When there are few or no instrumental soloists, a singer can start by playing simple rhythm on the root chord ("Mac Wiseman Beginning"), let others come in, then sing until verses run out. Or the singer can give a solo to anyone willing, following format:

B. On a song when some instruments can solo:

Break ("kickoff"), verse, chorus,

Break, verse, chorus,

Break, verse, chorus — [optional: add solo(s) and final chorus]

C. On instrumentals, the same person usually starts and ends, with solos going around in a circle to those willing. Most common end: double "shave and a haircut" lick.



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TRADITIONAL UNSPOKEN GROUND RULES:

3. Regarding solos (“breaks”):
 - A. Breaks for songs generally follow the melody and chords of a verse.
 - B. At the beginning of a song, the song leader asks if someone can play a kickoff break. Near end of each chorus, the song leader offers breaks: Head and body language (nodding) are used to offer, accept/decline.
 - C. If no one can solo, the singer just keeps singing verses and choruses to the end.
 - D. If there are more soloists than there are verses of the song, some solos can be grouped together to give everyone a turn. Or the singer can repeat verses to lengthen the song.
 - E. If there are more than enough spots for breaks, some soloists can take an extra turn.
4. If an instrumental soloist starts late, listen for whether the break is starting from the top or from a later point in the song. If different players realize they seem to be at different points in the song, try to resolve it quickly, usually by falling in with the soloist, even if he/she is mistaken.
5. When the lead singer doesn’t start a verse on time, keep playing the root chord and wait until the singer starts before going to the chord changes.
6. Sing harmonies on choruses only normally. Verses are sung solo. But in less advanced jams, people may often sing along on the verses too, even if not singing a harmony.
7. Use signals to help everyone end together: Foot out, hold up instrument, end after “one last chorus” or repeat of last line. Listen for instrumental licks that signal ending.

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by Pete Wernick

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ETIQUETTE STUFF:

1. Some key participants may have main influence over the choice of songs and who gets to do what. Be respectful of the situation. Fit in as invited. Don’t be a “jambuster”.
2. Instrumentalists, be mindful of when others want to solo or do featured backup. Give them space and take turns being featured. Don’t compete!
3. If someone is tuning by ear: First, offer your tuner. If no luck there, wait to tune and avoid any playing unless, if welcomed (and you’re sure of your tuning), offer notes matching open strings of his/her instrument.
4. In more advanced jams, often the “classic” arrangement of a particular number is followed, including choice of key, which instrument solos when, harmony parts, etc. However, if the classic version is in a key that doesn’t work well for the lead singer, the singer calls the key and the others adapt.
5. If you don’t fit into one jam, look for another or start another, or just stay and listen. (Note if there are already enough of your instrument in the group, or if the speed or difficulty of the material is out of your league.) In some situations it’s OK to play quietly in an “outer circle”.
6. Pay attention and learn from experience.

Carry extra
tuner batteries
to share!

Happy jamming!

Pete



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