

Bluegrass Jam Etiquette

A bluegrass jam is made up of a bunch of musicians who gather to make beautiful music.

Many jams are formed around more experienced players who may determine which songs are played and who gets an opportunity to solo (take a break) during the songs. All are welcome to participate, but the makeup of the jam determines the level of participation. The traditional model has the more experienced players forming a tight circle with lesser experienced players forming alternative concentric circles around them depending on their level of musicianship. Other jams are more egalitarian, forming a single circle.

The main jam commandment is:

✓ **Big ears - Do no harm.**

In other words, hear what's going on around you and make sure that your playing is not detracting from the creation of the music. The best players see and hear what's going on around them and find ways to enhance the music.

Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Make sure your instrument is in tune.
- The typical song starts with an intro, then goes to a verse, then a chorus, and then breaks are handed out by the leader, followed by more verse-chorus-break sequences, usually ending on a chorus.
 - Intro
 - Verse
 - Chorus
 - Break(s) } repeat as needed
 - Verse
 - Chorus
 - Outro
- The leader of the song determines the key based on the best key that they can sing it in. Don't complain about the key chosen ... musicians play in all twelve keys.
- If invited to lead a song, make sure it's a song you know well. The other jammers are not here to help you practice a tune you're working on, but they welcome the opportunity to make your tune into something special.
- It's OK to sit out a song.
- It's OK to *not play* during the course of the song. If you're not adding something positive to the song, it's better not to play.
- It's up to the leader of the song to determine who takes breaks and they may not give everyone the opportunity, especially in a large jam. Don't be offended if you're not offered a break.



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- Keep your eyes on the leader as they will look at you if they want you to take a break. You can always shake your head and pass on taking a break. If you don't look at the leader, you may miss an opportunity to break.
- Every instrument has a role. Stay within the bounds of how your instrument works within jam etiquette.
- Quiet down during other players' breaks. If you can't hear the break, you're probably the one who's playing too loud.
- Don't "noodle" over others' breaks.
- Guitarists: Learn the bluegrass strumming technique – boom chuck
- Timing is essential ... sometimes this means playing less notes in order not to ruin the timing.
- Don't bring a song to the jam that is too complicated for others to play or learn quickly.
- Announce the key for the song you're about to lead.
- If there are any "off" chords, or odd progressions, remind players of them before you start your song.
- It's better to do one song well at the jam than to fumble through three songs, especially if you want to be invited to more jams.
- Sheet music and lyric sheets are distracting for other players and reading from them while playing reduces the emotion and timing of the song. Knowing your songs by heart before coming to the jam will increase everyone's enjoyment of playing them. Typically, better players will avoid jams where music-stands and sheet music are common ... and we all want to play with better players.
- Players come to a bluegrass jam to play bluegrass, so try to bring bluegrass songs to the jam. Occasionally, songs from outside the cannon will be performed, but they should be done in a bluegrass style.
- Please be polite and never step in front of another player.
- If you're leading a song, don't stop playing it, even if you make a mistake. Generally, your fellow jammers will support you and help you continue past your error. Stopping a song in the middle takes away from everyone's enjoyment of the song.
- Never apologize for a mistake after the song. Those who heard the mistake realize that you didn't do it on purpose and those who didn't hear it don't need a reminder.
- Sing with the song leader on choruses only, unless the leader asks you to sing on the verse.
- End the song either by sticking your foot out, rotating your head stock, or *tagging* the ending (repeating the last line of the chorus.)

