

Dance Musicians—Making Jam Sessions Great, a guide for participants and leaders

by Dave Firestine

Greetings! Are you interested in learning more tunes and playing music with other enthusiasts? There are groups of musicians all over the world getting together to play in jams or jam sessions. In this article I would like to help you prepare to be a good participant and a good leader in these music-sharing experiences.

First, you need to find a session. When I'm looking for a session in a new location, I often start by going to a local music store. The folks working there, or hanging out there, will probably know what is going on locally. If you are looking for Irish music, you can also check thesession.org, which has a database of sessions around the world.

For the Good Participant

When you arrive at the session, listen and observe before getting your instrument out. Each local session will have its own unwritten (sometimes written) rules and etiquette standards, as well as a musical focus (Old Time, Irish, etc.). As you listen, can you feel that this is your musical family? Is this the music you play or want to play? If so, relax and enjoy, listen, learn and play what you can. If not, listen and learn, and you may be converted. The point here is that each session has its own musical environment, and as a Good Participant, you should respect that.

Part of deciphering the structure of a session is determining what kind of leadership exists. Sometimes there is a designated leader or leaders. Some sessions may have a group of experienced musicians sharing the role of the leader in a casual way. In either case, these leaders are experienced players, know the local repertoire, and have established the local session etiquette. Hopefully, they will share their knowledge and be encouraging.

In sessions without a leader, you may “go around the circle”: each person, in turn, chooses the next tune. It might be a little more difficult to discover the focus of these sessions. But even in these jams, there will be some players who take on a leadership role.

Be prepared to contribute. Keep a mental or physical list of tunes that you know. If/when you are asked for a suggestion, you will be ready. You may be shy and just want to play along, but wouldn't it be more fun to

play something you know? One common guideline in sessions is that the person who starts the tune sets the tempo, and that person has the responsibility to end it.

Once you've surveyed the scene and feel comfortable with the culture, wait until the current tune is over and there's a little lull. That is the time to pipe up with a quick “can I join you?” or “room for one more?” The addition of an extra chair can be disruptive—you don't want to encroach on another player's bowing space, and a little rearrangement might be needed. Also be aware of whether there's room for another of your instrument. Generally it's okay to have many fiddles, but two basses or drums won't always go over well. So some instruments have to do more turn-taking than others. If you do foot percussion, or play the egg shaker or washboard or other musical “toys,” ask if such additions are okay.

The first time you join a session, you should be on “guest” behavior. Once you become a regular, you'll know how things roll with this particular group and you can be more assertive in contributing.

A great session experience happens when everyone plays together with a single tight rhythmic groove. **Listen, listen, listen to the rhythm and become part of that.**

For the Good Leader

The role of a good leader is to facilitate (sorry for the corporate word intrusion) the session. For me, this means getting some good music going, and keeping it going with appropriate minimal breaks for a drink and chat. The leader often comes early to help set up chairs, to create a good physical space for the jam. They will often reserve seats for strong players who will form the rhythmic and melodic core of the jam.

As a leader, you will need to speak clearly and loudly enough to be heard. I like to hear clean starts and endings. To help this happen, I try to announce the names of tune(s) to be played and the key(s), and I will count in the start (“One, two, three, four”). Before the end of each tune, I will usually call out “one more time,” or “Home,” to indicate a change is coming. These cues are often not done at sessions, but I think it helps us to play better together.

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Dance to Cable TV

Public Access Television (PAT) is a cable television service that allows members of the public to use video production equipment and facilities and to create and cablecast their own content to the local community. Long ago we (Henry and Jacqui) used PAT equipment in Traverse City, MI to create a 30 minute DVD, "Dancing Contras: An Introduction to Contra Dancing." Over the years the PAT in Traverse City has aired that video hundreds of times; channels in Ann Arbor and Grand Rapids also aired it

Public Access Channels are desperate for content. A show that originates outside the municipality is often referred to as "bicycled," "dub and submit," or "satellite" programming." If you contact your local PAT and ask them, as a service to your community, to air our recently created 40-minute video "English Country Dancing—An Introduction," we will send you (for free) two copies of our DVD, one for you to give them to air and one for you to keep. They can view the full DVD at <http://www.upnorthmedia.org/upnorthtvsched.asp> (our local "UpNorth TV Channel 189" Cable Access Channel). So far, our video has been somewhere on the schedule every single week I checked.

Anyone can watch it online anywhere in the USA, anywhere in Europe. Unfortunately the video you see is not HD although our DVD is (1080p). The CDSS Store sells both our DVDs.

Henry and Jacqui Morgenstein, henry@henryandjacqui.com

Fall Mountain Folk Festival Successfully Turned the Pages

For some 60 years the Fall Mountain Folk Festival has taken place at Levi Jackson State Park in London, KY, originally put on by Berea College dance program, but for the past 20 years the Folk Circle Association of Berea has organized the event. After several years of declining numbers of participants, challenging financiers and a worn-out facility, the FCA board decided to make a bold move instead of closing down the event for good.

During the last weekend of September the 62nd Fall Mountain Folk Festival was held at Russel Acton Folk Center in Berea, and almost everything exceeded our modest expectations. A lot of young and very skillful dancers showed up from near and far.

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A good leader will welcome new people. Introduce yourself, ask a few questions to make them feel welcome, and learn a bit about their musical tastes and level. I don't like to scare away shy people, but if they seem like they would like to start a tune, this would be a good time to ask.

Encourage players to suggest tunes. As an experienced player, you will have many tunes that you want to play, but as a leader, it is a great thing to be inclusive, and to encourage other players. Some players are burning to play a tune or tunes, but many are reluctant to make a suggestion. With the shy folks I will often ask "What would you like to hear?" The subtle implication is that they won't need to start the tune or even play it. Another way for the session to feel inclusive is to end a set of tunes with something that most or all people know. Spank it!

A good leader will also learn and remember some of what each player knows and likes to play, to make sure everyone feels included.

One of the most important roles of a jam session leader is dealing with "problem children." Someone new to the group may be playing in an inappropriate style, or too loudly, or they may be rhythmically challenged, or all of those and more. If you can see that the jam will be seriously disrupted by someone, it is the role of a leader to deal with it. Try taking that person aside and gently tell them that there is an issue. Listen to their response, and consider their point of view before offering suggestions to fix it. If the folks are reasonable, they will try to make the necessary changes.

As a leader, you have a lot of experience with the music. The knowledge and insights you have can be shared with players. It may come in the setting, where you might say "On this next set of tunes, let's listen closely to the rhythm and see how tightly we can play together." You may take a few moments during a break to show a new player a particular technique that will make things easier. You may help set up workshops outside the session, led by local musicians or touring musicians.

Jam sessions can be a wonderful opportunity to share music with friends and acquaintances. For all participants, go out and play! Learn and enjoy.

Dave Firestine plays mandolin and other string instruments with STEAM! and The Privy Tippers, and can be found at the epicenter of Carp Camp at the Walnut Valley Festival (CA).