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Traditional Music Session/Jam Etiquette: A Primer
By Charlie Gravel

Anyone who has ever attended an organized traditional music jam or session has been challenged by the concept of *etiquette*. How does this thing work? What is appropriate, (and not)? How can I be a part of it, and still be sure I won't embarrass myself? How can I get invited back again? Well, the good news is that reaching these goals is not rocket science. Most session etiquette is common sense. But just to be safe, here's an easy introduction to get you started:

- **What is a traditional session? What is a jam? What is an open mic?**

There are no simple answers to these questions. Any informal (non-band) gathering of musicians might use one of these terms. As a generalization, folk, bluegrass and jazz musicians favor the term "jam," while Irish, Scottish and related traditional players prefer the term "session." Both are generally public, non-performance situations where musicians play together for fun, camaraderie and learning.

"Open mics" are performance situations in which an individual or band may volunteer to get a piece of the spotlight for a brief set (average 2-3 songs). This will likely involve a stage and sound system.

- **Are there rules?**

Sort of. For example, in a bluegrass or jazz jam, you can expect a tune to be "passed around," allowing players to take individual and improvisational solos. Irish traditional players tend to play in melodic unison, with little or no improvisation. These things are rarely written down or communicated, but they're important to figure out!

- **Is there a leader?**

It depends, but usually, yes. A certain amount of structure is required to keep things rolling smoothly, so it's common for a leader to emerge or be chosen. At some point, they'll generally be overthrown in a bloodless coup. This leads to splinter sessions, and more places for us all to play.

- **Who is welcome, and who is not?**

Here we find the foundation of etiquette! Everyone is welcome who makes a sincere effort to fit in, acts appropriately, and isn't completely obnoxious. Be a good session-citizen, help those around you enjoy themselves, and you'll be loved by all.

- **About playing tunes:**

- **Who chooses and starts a tune?** Usually anyone can. Just be careful. Figure out how your session works, and act appropriately. Experience will be your best teacher; you can also ask the session leader or other participants about the session or jam format.
- **What tunes?** Listen long enough, and you can answer this yourself. Follow the leads of others. Introducing new tunes to the group is good, but people all like to play things they know, too. Balance is crucial.
- **What key?** Listen and find out. Generally, you'll hear a lot of D, G and A in most jams and sessions. Often instrument limitations govern what keys the group can play in, so you need to

- understand the needs of those around you. Also, most tunes have a key that's normally associated with them, and it's important not to start them in the wrong one!
- **What speed?** A reasonable one, and that will vary based on the venue and the players. Never, ever start a tune at a tempo that you can't maintain without flubbing.
 - **How many times do you play the tune through?** This varies, too. In Irish sessions, it's often two or three runs, which may lead directly to another tune, (this is called a "set"). In other jams, it may go on until no one feels ready to step up with a solo. Sometimes there's a signal near the end, such as a raised bow or foot. Occasionally the whole thing will implode of its own accord, and you'll figure out pretty quickly that it's safe to stop playing.
- **What about singing?** Songs and singing are an important part of most musical traditions, and are sadly lacking in many contemporary jams and sessions. However, "performances" are neither expected nor appreciated, so you need to understand the difference. Definitely sit in and observe for a good while before leaping in with a song!

More Common Sense Pointers:

- Smile and be friendly.
- If you're new to the session, observe first. Watch, wait, listen and learn --- no matter how good a player you are.
- Tune your instrument! Tune your instrument! Tune your instrument! (Remember this, if you forget all else!).
- Don't start playing a tune while everyone else is tuning.
- Don't "noodle"! You're either playing, or you're not.
- Stay in the genre! (Yes, 'Stairway to Heaven' is a cool tune, but...).
- Don't talk loudly while everyone else is playing.
- Only sit **IN** the session if you're going to **PLAY** in the session. Otherwise, sit nearby and observe.
- Be aware of the skill levels, and how players at the various levels participate. Chances are, everyone gets to play.
- Ask before recording a jam or session.
- Don't videotape. Period.
- About handling other people's instruments: An easy guideline --- Don't unless it's offered.
- **Don't be afraid to ask questions.**
- Most important of all: **Have fun!** That's really what it's all about!