

# **Traditional Jamming - A Guide**

*By Jose Garcia - July 2018*

## ***Introduction***

These notes are about music jams using acoustic instruments and a traditional approach. It aims to support the activities of Jammalong in Melbourne and related activities. No two jams are the same and there are no absolute fixed jam or etiquette rules. Many jams won't explain their underlying expectations and musicians will just play music and expect you to fit in with their selection of songs and their style. In such situations, you typically need to be familiar with the songs already and confident with your own instrument playing ability.

These notes are more about how to successfully play with others than in providing absolute definitions of any playing style. There is an admitted bias that favours Bluegrass and Traditional Country Music. The information provided here has been gained from hard-won personal experience and exposure to traditional jam sessions. They are really more guidelines, not strict rules.

## ***What is a traditional jam?***

Traditional jam sessions borrow from various styles that date back before World War II, prior to the popularising of electronic instruments and synthetic sounds. All instruments used are acoustic in nature and vocals are often but not always included. For purists, sheet music is not used and traditions are handed down aurally where the focus of learning is in the interactions between those familiar with the music and those who are learning. This places emphasis on human interaction, co-operation and communication skills, particularly listening skills. The reliance of memory over written music forces an internalisation of the music being played. A certain amount of familiarity and fondness is created when the music is recalled and the music can be played with a greater degree of spontaneity and feeling.

With the invention of amplification and mass-media technology, the conventional approach to music has changed from a participation-rich, interactive activity to a product delivery model or a consumer model - where music is typically produced by a paid specialist and delivered to a mass audience that pays for the product. In human history, such technological changes and their effects represent a dramatic deviation to previous music practices.

Traditional jams are completely different in nature, in physical shape and in philosophy to current conventions; taking place in a circle and limited by the volume limitations of human voice and practicalities of group management. Traditional jams are typically held by friends or strangers with a common love of music. In the current conventional music setting, the performer is on a stage, separated from the audience. In a traditional jam

there is no distinction between the performer and the audience because they are one and the same.

### ***Approaching a jam session***

There are all sorts of jams, there are celtic, folk, bluegrass and old-time jams, there are exclusive and inclusive jams. Exclusive ones are where the participants all know each other and in effect represents a private party that doesn't appreciate gate crashers. There are also more inclusive jams or "slow" jams where beginners are readily welcomed and more time is spent in explaining the music being played. And there are all the different types in-between, with varying expectation levels.

When starting off and unsure about a jam you've just found, observe first and play quietly. Watch what's going on. In a festival setting, it might be a band who is having a quick rehearsal and not really looking for others to join in. If you are welcome, you will be invited. What style is being played? If it's Celtic music, then feel free to pull out your bodhran and play along, but if it's bluegrass - forget it! If it's folk or country, your nylon string guitar may be welcome but if it's pure bluegrass, then be prepared for some quizzing looks. If it's old-time, you might want to avoid playing guitar improvisations of the melody. Each genre has it's own set of expectations and unwritten rules.

### ***Acoustic instruments***

Celtic and other folk related styles will embrace the presence of instruments like harps, flutes and bodhrans. However bluegrass frowns upon the use of any percussion instruments because in that style the rhythm is defined by the stringed instruments such as double-bass and guitar. Some styles will frown upon the use of ukulele, autoharp, harp, dulcimer and even harmonica. In performance settings you might on the rare occasion see an electric bass but generally speaking, this is unusual and often not preferred.

### ***Preparation***

Make sure your instrument is in tune. Tune away from the group to avoid disrupting the jam, you may need to make periodical checks. Ideally you will be familiar with the genre and already know some songs committed to memory.

### ***Following***

Being able to listen and follow is one of the most important parts of successful jamming. Some of the best jams can happen with unfamiliar music and if you are good at following, you'll get the most out of the experience. Personally, I advocate that if you can't follow, you can't lead.

Find a position where you can hear the vocals and melody clearly and also watch the fretboard of an instrument you are familiar with. Typically this involves watching the left hand of a guitarist. Even if you don't play guitar, it is extremely useful to know what the basic shapes look like of chords such as G, D, A and C.

A lot of bluegrass tunes favour G, a favourite key of the banjo. A lot of fiddle tunes favour D, the favourite key of the violin. Typically many traditional music use a I, IV, V pattern of chords (as designated by the Nashville Numbering System). This is extremely useful because it helps us predict or anticipate what chords might be used. It's also useful for quick transpositions, particularly when capos are used.

*{The Nashville Numbering System assigns the 7 major keys a number from 1-7 and is useful for predicting chords used in a song, for music composition and for transposing music.}*

Avoid just looking at your instrument and instead watch the leader and others so you're aware of what's going on. Listen to the hum or the general mood of the music, paying attention to keep to the beat and not speed up which is a common fault. If you are confident in playing an instrumental lead break, look out for opportunities as they are often thrown out near the end of a chorus. Invitations are often done with a stare, but sometimes with a verbal cue. Accepts or decline invitations with a nod or shake of the head.

In classical music, tapping your feet is not considered appropriate, there is no problem with this in bluegrass or other traditional styles, provided that your tapping on a wooden floor isn't a big distraction to others. Foot tapping can be very useful in helping you feel the tempo and stay connected with the group's sound. If you lose the timing, back off and pick it up again. Don't invent your own timing.

When someone is singing softly or there is an instrumental break, lower your volume and adjust your playing style so that the soloist is not "drowned out". If there are pauses or uncertainty in any parts of the song, vamp until the song resumes or other actions are taken such as moving to an instrumental. If you disagree with an arrangement, remember that mid-song is not the place to argue. Support others and when it's your turn, others will support you. Jamming is a social activity and the best musicians know how to support others to allow the collective sound to be the best it can possibly be.

You don't need to know the song being played, you just need to anticipate changes and be able to identify and follow cues. Look out for visual cues such as stares, nods, shakes and foot raising. These will let you know which instruments are taking the lead, where you are being offered a solo and when the melody will end. Listen for verbal cues such as: "chorus", "acapella", "all mandolins", "banjo", "last line" or even your name being called out. This will let you know what part of the song is about to be sung and which instruments are being called to play. Sometimes these instructions will be whispered or mimed and if you aren't watching, you may miss it.

In between songs, avoid “noodling”, the equivalent of daydreaming very loudly. You may attract some unwanted attention.

Apart from playing in tune and in tempo, the other common problem area is volume. Don't try to play louder than the person next to you and don't play over someone else's solo. In bluegrass typically there is only one soloist at any one time and that is the only instrument playing the melody, no-one else. Everyone else does chops or vamps (vamping usually involves playing on a single chord or a very simple progression of chords for an extended period of time, in a basic manner). In a large jam with lots of instruments, you might get groups of instruments playing a break e.g. “all mandolins”. In old-time music you may get multiple instruments playing melody at the same time.

Instrument playing should have dynamics in it with at least three settings, one for verses, one for choruses which typically can be a little louder and one for solos which are the loudest and most complex in nature. Playing at the same volume the whole time not only brings a monotone quality to the music but doesn't allow for the fluctuations in dynamics that bluegrass promotes. If you can't hear others playing, then you are probably too loud.

### ***Leading***

Change of lead typically occurs in a clock-wise rotation, everyone has a turn at proposing and leading a song. You can pass if you want. Choose an appropriate song or tune that is suitable for the group. Be mindful that you want to have the whole room playing the same song/tune. For very confident groups you could launch straight into a song but usually the minimal information provided is the name of the song/tune and its key.

Depending on the group, you may provide considerably more information such as chord progressions, arrangement, vocal arrangements such as call-reply, echoes, choruses, repeats, swaps etc. Another option is to identify those who want to do an instrumental break. Further options include calling out chords.

Common major keys are G, C, D, E, F G, A and sometimes Bb. Common minor keys are Cm, Dm, Em, Gm and Am. In jams, you will almost never get anything in keys such as G# or Db. However for performance settings, these rules don't apply and the performing singer generally dictates what key is used.

If the song is familiar, you might just want to do a simple introduction or “kick off” which is typically the last few bars of the song. If the song is unfamiliar you may want your introduction to be an entire verse. As you launch into the song watch how everyone is going. Your minimal information may be insufficient and you might have to explain the chords or call them out for the verse and chorus, mimicking the melody whilst calling out the chords at the same time.

Provide cues for what is happening. Invite individuals or groups for breaks or singing roles, control the pace and rein in the “racehorses” if necessary. You might have to have check with whoever is on double-bass or guitar that they understand the tempo you want, as it is these instruments that help set the pace.

### ***Be friendly and supportive***

We are all individuals with differing skill levels, experience and personalities. Jams thrive on friendliness and respect. Everyone is on a different musical journey and we all have to start somewhere. Remember that traditional music was typically played in homes, amongst family and friends and by amateurs. The best jams are like a good train journey, you start together, stay in the same carriage and end together.

### ***On bluegrass***

Bluegrass was invented post World War II in the USA by Bill Monroe, presenting traditional country and mountain music to American society through the mediums of TV and radio. He attempted to change the previous image of this music to the general public by placing his own identifying stamps upon it. This included an enforced dress code in all his performances where his band dressed in suits, ties and hats. It shunned any traces of working-class or common folk ties in its new image. Bill Monroe sang in a high tenor voice and instruments used included: guitar, double-bass, fiddle and mandolin. In 1945, Earl Scruggs and Lester Flatt joined Bill Monroe’s band. They added a distinctive banjo sound and the addition of the dobro or resonator guitar. December 1945 is widely regarded as the time where Bluegrass was born. Bill Monroe in many ways epitomised Hans Christian Anderson of literary fame by presenting songs and tunes from prior nameless generations to a wider audience using mass media.

The style presented by Bill Monroe has since been imprinted upon the music of earlier generations, in a retrospective manner. The extent of this influence goes so far that the use of any instruments other than those used by his band are sometimes frowned upon, including instruments such as autoharps and harmonicas which were often used in the original music. It also goes so far as to identify any singers that do not have a high tenor voice like Bill Monroe to not being authentic to the music. Curiously this marks sopranos, low tenors, baritones and basses as incapable of singing songs which in previous generations were in fact sung by everyone.

The first generation “masters” in the 40s, 50s and 60s developed a style never previously played where guitar took an increasingly dominant role, particularly in providing melody improvisations. Prior to musicians such as Doc Watson, the guitar was used principally as a rhythm instrument and not used for lead instrumental work, as continues in old-time music. In the current period, instruments such as electric basses are sometimes included in performance settings but purists will often frown upon this as it breaks from the rule of using acoustic instruments only. A similar position exists in the use of drum kits, although there is a much greater opposition to percussion.

Bluegrass and old-time music share a common heritage and even today share a common repertoire. The increased use of guitar, more embellishments and improvisation and more frequent use of vocals separate bluegrass from old-time, although in practice it is sometimes indistinguishable. Loud banjos with resonators may be frowned upon in old-time sessions (compared to open back banjos). Typically, clawhammer gets used in old-time whereas Sruggs style or three-finger style gets used in bluegrass.

### ***The Dreadnought Guitar***

The most common guitar shape of modern acoustic guitars is the dreadnought. Interestingly, it's development is strongly linked with traditional music and intimately linked with the banjo. With few exceptions, the dreadnought guitar is by far the most dominant guitar shape in bluegrass music. It's deep bass registers, strong projection and versatility make it the guitar of choice for the majority of bluegrass guitarists.

At the turn of the 20th century, the dreadnought guitar was invented, pioneered by the Martin guitar company in its efforts to produce a loud guitar that could compete with the dominating sound of the banjo. It was called the dreadnought as its inventors likened them to dreadnought warships. These were massive iron ships that were considered to be technologically advanced, with enormous firepower. Amongst other developments, Martin improved upon the conventional classic guitar adding a reinforced metal rod in the neck and bracing in the body so that the body could support louder steel strings rather than traditional gut strings. Without the development of a steel truss rod, the heavier tension created by steel strings could not be used effectively.

### ***Jammalong in Melbourne***

Jammalong in Melbourne is a music group that meets monthly at Jells Park, Melbourne to play acoustic music together for fun. They meet in a public park with access to toilets, shelter and a cafe/restaurant. It is hosted by Jose Garcia who promotes bluegrass and traditional country music but allows other allied genres to be played in the sessions. It's about fun, friendship and enjoying music.

Now in it's fifth year, the group is based on the jam sessions started by Michael and Dianne Porter in Canberra called Jammalong in Canberra. This couple is absolutely passionate about bluegrass and devote a great deal of effort and resources in playing and promoting this music. Dianne Porter invented the term "Jammalong".

At Jammalong in Melbourne, we respect the traditions of the past but we especially respect the spirit and intentions of the original music-makers who were often un-schooled amateurs who never managed to record their work or reach the heights of international fame. Many of the pieces played in bluegrass style were played with home-made instruments including spoons, jugs and other odd assorted items such as washboards and even rib bones. This traditional music was played on winter evenings around a fire,

summer afternoons on a porch, in dance halls during community celebrations or in lounge-rooms with friends. Much of it was never intended to be played by a small group to an audience numbering in the thousands.

It was sung by those with tenor voices, soprano voices and bass voices and often in the same clothes worn whilst working in the day: denim, tweed, overalls; common, inexpensive and plain clothing of its time. Instruments were played with calloused hands, by the young, the old and even the inexperienced. Some music was sung whilst people worked. Some of it such as bluegrass gospel was sung in church halls. The emphasis was on playing music together, to enjoy each others company and to enjoy the gift that music can bring to communities. At Jammalong we still believe in these things.

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