

Common Bluegrass Jam Etiquette

- Tune at the jam. If feasible, arrive a little early (5-10 min.) and check your instrument's tuning. No matter when you last tuned, it may have changed since then. In order to sound like one unit (wall-to-wall bluegrass), everyone must be in tune!
- Acceptable jam instruments usually include acoustic guitar, 5-string banjo, dobro, mandolin, fiddle, bass (upright or electric or washtub), dulcimer, autoharp, harmonica. No drums or electric guitars, please.
- If you arrive sufficiently early, aid the others who may be setting up the jam area.
- The basic format of the jam is the song circle. All musicians, regardless of experience or ability, are encouraged to join the circle.
- When taking your place in the circle, consider placing yourself adjacent to a different instrument. This will aid in lending balance and variety to the circle.
- Keep your eye out - make room for new players so they can enter the circle at any time and feel welcome to do so.
- Everyone in the circle plays the same tune or song at the same time.
- The jam direction usually goes clockwise while the breaks normally go clockwise too. Nevertheless, the person starting a song may designate any order for breaks that he/she might deem appropriate.
- Practicing the song or tune you wish to play at the jam, ahead of time, has to be thought of as a good idea.
- Music stands or tablets are welcome. It may be argued that it is better to use sheet music as an aid than it is to forget the lyrics to one's song midway through a performance.
- It is totally up to each person whether to sing or play when their turn comes around the circle. Taking a pass is completely acceptable should the individual not be comfortable with "going public" yet (or for any other reason, for that matter). Passing your turn means passing for that round only -- a new turn comes up with each rotation around the circle.
- Each singer or player should announce the title of their song and the key in which they wish to do it prior to starting. Mention any odd chords that the tune contains also.
- When choosing a song, keep in mind that you're probably at a bluegrass, old time, or bluegrass gospel jam. An occasional tune outside these genres may be acceptable but please do not make a habit of it.
- Jam participants come to the jam to play songs they know with other musicians. While an occasional departure from the norm may be permissible, don't make a habit of doing tunes with too many odd chords or tunes that are more musically difficult than the musical ability of the jammers present.
- When someone is singing their song or taking a break, all others play backup. Chords and rhythm help support a solo. Only one person at a time should be singing or playing the solo, except that it is common practice in bluegrass for others to sing along on the chorus of a song if they wish. On occasion, everyone will play the melody or sing together but this will usually be indicated at the beginning of the song.
- 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.
- When a person does a song, he/she should work toward ensuring that all those who would like to take a break have the opportunity to do so. This can be achieved by repeating the chorus at the end (adds one

break) and instructing someone else to “take it home” (adds a second “break” or solo). If the tune is an instrumental, the leader may simply continue to designate players to take their break until all have done so.

- If a player falters during a vocal or break, he or she is allowed the opportunity to recover. Other players keep the song going while the breaker tries to recover - - a “miss” is never a strike-out at the jam. If you wish for someone else to take over your song, simply give them a nod or call out their name.
- Timing, the beat, is everything. The soloist always sets the timing, whether it is the person singing the song or the individual taking the break. Listen to that person and follow them. If you can’t hear them, you may be playing too loudly.
- Conversations between songs are to be kept short and must be conducted at a low volume. Avoid excessive “noodling” on your instrument.
- Listen, listen, listen: To yourself and the other musicians in the jam. This will help you keep in time and sound tasteful. Make sure you can clearly hear the solo or vocal. Again, if you can’t, you’re probably playing too strongly. Remember to play as one cohesive unit and listen for the overall tone. When you achieve this, the natural, innate energy of bluegrass will take over and lead you to greater musical heights.
- The person who starts a tune ends it. A good way to indicate that the tune is ending is simply to put a foot up. Other signals may also be used, e.g., stating “last time” or “one more time” for all to hear. On occasion, the leader may appoint another to end the tune by instructing him or her to “take it home.”
- Many jam locations can accommodate a very large jam circle, but it can be difficult to hear what’s going on and stay in time when the circle gets up above 20 pickers. If it becomes necessary to form an additional jam circle, please ask a jam host about the availability of a room for an additional jam circle.
- At the conclusion of a jam, all participants should pitch in to clean up and rearrange furniture.
- Remember to be kind, considerate, and encouraging to your fellow musicians. Don’t take the music so seriously that it loses its joy and spontaneity.