

HOT CLUB JAMSESSION DO'S & DON'TS

Excerpts from Melvin Könings's jamming manual - thanks Melvin!

When playing in a jam session, there are some important rules to the game to keep in mind. Although most jams look quite informal, there are certain rules, a kind of jam etiquette which ensures that things go smoothly, every player gets to shine, the audience is entertained. But also that the music becomes something greater than the sum of its musicians and their egos, due respect is given and no-one is insulted or offended and everyone has fun and walks out at the end of the night feeling good.

Tune your instrument

Really. Do it. There's nothing worse than playing out of tune in the first place.

Choosing the tune together

Usually, deciding the tune is something done democratically. Someone calls a song and the other may or may not know how to play it. Ideally, the jam players settle on a tune that everyone knows. But if you don't know the song, respect the others, wait and listen.

Number of instruments

Everybody can join in, but try to limit the amount of instruments per song. Keep to a maximum of 3 guitars and 4 violins - if there are any more, take half of the group to another room and start a new jam! That way, everyone gets to play more.

Volume: always change dynamics

Make sure that whatever you play is in balance with the rest of the band. Hot Club music should always change dynamics when a chorus is over or for instance when changing to the bridge of a song. Look at each other and see if you intensify the music or whether you want to lighten up. Always listen to the bass very well, follow the two beat feel or the four beat feel.

Communication and cues

When jamming, constantly look at other players, their eyes and their body language. There is so much, musically, that you can make happen this way. Breaks, modulations (sometimes yelled and the end of a song section), solos, vamps, all these things are only possible when the players make eye contact regularly.

Solo length

One of the most annoying mistakes made by musicians in jam sessions is to take too long solos. Please keep to the basic rule of two choruses per musician in fast/short songs, one chorus per musician in medium and up songs, and sharing choruses in slow songs (ballads): either go half or alternate As and the bridge.

Listen and look

Listen to what the other musicians are playing/singing at all times. This allows for REAL MUSIC to happen. And make yourself heard during the song, there's no shame in complementing fellow musicians on their efforts. Stop looking at your instrument all the time. It will hurt your neck and it bothers your ability to listen. Look at your fellow musicians and listen what they are doing.



The level of the jam

When you encounter any session, first check it out for a while. It'll be clear very soon if this is your session to join in or not. Every jam at any given moment has its own level at which the majority of the jamming players can function. In case the jam's level seems below your own abilities, jump in and encourage your fellow musicians, let them shine and explore their music.

Respect your fellow musicians

Most of the etiquette on jam sessions comes down to having a certain amount of respect for the abilities, but more importantly, for all emotions of the other people involved in the session. Keep in mind that they might feel just as happy/unhappy/scared/hyped/out-of-place or whatever as you do. Be Mature. A jam is supposed to be about mutual respect for all the players regardless of ability, and not just a cutting contest.

Always explore!

You can focus on any mistakes of your own playing during and after you're done jamming. But don't worry!! A jam session is also a place to make mistakes, to mess up the chords or the form. It happens to everyone and it's no big deal, exploration leads to new experiences! After playing 10-20 jam sessions you will have learned more about music, about communication and about yourself, than you could have learned by playing 20 normal gigs with your own band, or practising for a whole year at home!

When you're in, you're in!

Always pay attention when you are playing in the session! Don't let your mind wander off into space, therefore missing the end of the bass solo, or worse, forget where you are in the form. Stay focused and everything will be fine. Sing along the melody in the back of your head while other musicians do their thing. Also, stay involved in between tunes: listen and talk on which song to play next. If you are tired, simply thank the other musicians and leave the music circle.

Try to arrange the song on the spot

Of course the easiest way to start a song is to count off and start right away with the melody. But why not try to arrange the song on the spot and to start off with a pedal of 8 bars on the dominant chord or some turnarounds. Or start with the last 8 bars of a song or start on the bridge. Improvise, especially when you're advanced yourself and when your guidance can help inspire fellow musicians.

Never stick to the stage

Playing more than three tunes in a row is more than enough at a jam session. Just handover your turn to others and join in later. Recharge your battery, enjoy others, listen to inspiration.

Know the repertoire

Hot Club jam sessions tend to have a rather basic repertoire. Try to master at least 10 songs at home before seriously entering a mid level jam session. There are about 40 basic songs and a couple of hundred other hot club songs. Try to know all chord changes by heart and you must be able to look up from your instrument. If you are more advanced, try to really understand the chord structure of the songs you know well and play them in different keys.

