



## Jamming Tips

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# Bluegrass Jams

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There ain't no rules BUT:

## Starting a tune / song

The person who starts the tune should (if possible) tell everyone

- what the name of the tune / song is
- what key the tune is in
- a brief resume of the chords (if they vary from standard chord structures). This is really important for the rhythm instruments (guitar and bass) as a wrong chord sequence will probably screw things up.

Start off little bit slower than you can play it, as it will inevitably speed up. [You don't want to just play the tune once at your fastest speed to find that the next time it comes round it's beyond you and you have to dip out].

## *Dishing Out the Breaks*

Breaks are instrumental portions of a song that are given to one person at a time so that only one instrument is playing the melody or improvising the lead at any one time.

For songs the breaks are usually played over the verse of the song (although sometimes the person giving the break can tell the person doing the break to do it over the chorus chord sequence). If two breaks are given back to back the second break is usually over the chorus chord sequence.

The breaks are often given out in a circle, so it becomes obvious who is going to play next.

The person starting the tune is usually responsible for dishing out breaks. When giving breaks either say their name or instrument during the second half of the chorus (or just before the break starts). This also can be done with eye contact or just nodding toward someone. If you want the break nod back or say something like "yes, I'll take it" or not by shaking your head or saying "no, I don't want it". *Maintain eye contact.*

Ways to dish out breaks include:

- Feature a single instrument. Let the fiddle (for instance) take *all* the breaks in a particular tune and let everybody else work on creative fills.
- Alternate instruments. Its just plain boring to hear four banjo breaks one after one another, mix the instruments up so that no two of the same instruments play back to back. It can help if no two banjos (or guitars etc.) are sitting next



to each other, so if the natural circular break giving pattern emerges then alternate instruments will be automatic.

- Giving just your friends breaks (only joking!!!!).

### ***Following***

Listen for the key if nobody has said what it was. Look for the guitarist's chords to get chords sequence. Wait to be asked for a break (or just ask for one if you have a mega break worked out for this number). Maintain eye contact.

### ***Finishing It***

The person who starts it should finish it (although not always). Good signals for ending a tune song are:

- leg raising
- saying "end it here" or equivalent
- saying "last time" or "one more" before the last time

However, often players will just sense that the tune should end by listening to type of emphasis in the playing of one or more other players and everyone stops without any signal. This can and does often lead to disaster though.

## **Miscellaneous**

### ***Tuning***

The jam may not necessarily be in concert tuning (although this is less common these days with loads of tuners about). Don't always assume that a jam is always in concert pitch, but tune to them rather than a tuner if they're not. [This can be an interesting problem when flitting between different sessions at a festival]

### ***People Joining a Jam***

A circle seems the ideal shape for a jam. If people join the jam, make room for them in the circle.

### ***Etiquette***

Don't play too loud in general. Don't play too loud over people's breaks. This is especially true for guitar breaks (as they are quite quiet). However playing too loud over anybody's breaks is bad form. Oh, and did I mention not playing too loud?



# Practising

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Tone, timing and taste are all important, don't sacrifice any one for the others.

## *Learning tunes*

**Tab:** Tab is always a good way of learning new tunes. However, initially even the simplest tabs can have some very tricky passages that will possibly trip you up. This is fine when you're on your own but when in a jam session nobody pauses when you trip up and it can be a problem. Sometimes people get "addicted" to tab. By this I mean that when they make a mistake they have got no overall sense of the tune and so have to wait to the beginning again to start from scratch. Don't be afraid to simplify things. It's always good to practice exactly what people like Earl Scruggs played, but a simple piece played well is much better than a complicated one played badly.

**By Ear:** There is no substitute for figuring out tunes by ear. Initially you should learn the chord structure first, then learn to "sing" the melody on top of it to get the whole tune in your head before trying it on your instrument. Finding the melody notes is usually fairly easy for traditional bluegrass songs and instrumentals as they will be on or around the notes in the scale of the key. Playing just the melody notes is good practice but doesn't always sound great on instruments like the guitar or the banjo as their notes do not have much sustain (unlike the fiddle). For the banjo, the idea is therefore to include as many melody notes whilst keeping a general rolling pattern of notes. There is no formula for this but a good introduction is given in the definitive *Bluegrass Banjo* book by Pete Wernick. For the guitar, the idea is weave the melody notes into other notes comprised of licks, fills and sundy patterns nicked from other tunes, songs (and friends!).

Everyone has strengths and weaknesses! Some people have an innate sense of rhythm, but just can't play fast. Others have great tone, but can't figure out melodies. The trick is to identify your strengths and capitalise on them, whilst trying to conquer your weaknesses.

Try to find out what simple chords look like on other instruments. The best instrument to get the chords off is the guitar, although it is possible on the banjo and mandolin as well.