



Rules of the Jam

(not to be confused with "Rules of the Peanut Butter")

Order Among Musicians

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Impetus

On my best day I am an ordinary musician. It has been my great good fortune to play with other musicians who are much better as singers, instrumentalists, or both. Despite any musical shortcomings, I have been able to run a well attended and fun jam over the years when those with more technical talent could not.

Many times I've been asked "What makes a jam work?". More commonly I've had opportunity to see loosely structured bar gigs, open mic nights, and all-out jams fail miserably. The reasons for such failures seem so obvious that I either have to walk out or get up and fix it.

Recently the question came one more time. To avoid scratching these things out in one more email I thought I'd render them into a proper document and post them on the ParkJammer site.

Read on.

What Is A Jam?

A "jam" has a range of interpretations. By and large, it implies:

- A mix of musicians playing tunes without a fixed set list.
- Some songs are commonly known while others are known by a single musician and everyone else must follow along constructively.
- If an audience is present then it is typically composed of people who like an unstructured, participatory format and the social environment that goes along with it.

A jam typically has a core of regular musicians who set the musical stage and then invite others to add a voice or instrument or to swap in for one of the core members.

Note that this is different from a "round". In a round, a set of musicians join up, often facing one another in a loose circle (hence the name). One musician introduces a song or two and performs them. Perhaps one or more of the others joins in. Then the musical hot potato is passed to the next musician. Essentially, it's a sequence of solo performances. In contrast, a jam encourages several musicians to play together.



What Is A Good Jam?

A Simple Definition: Good Music

A simple definition of a good jam might be:

Defining A Good Jam

- Audience members were happy and stayed for many songs
- Musicians create enjoyable music with few breaks of any kind and have fun doing so

Simple Foundations

- Solid technical musicianship
- Well chosen songs (popular covers or very well done originals)

One might think that if the foundation elements are achieved a good jam will result. Unfortunately there are other less obvious requirements. Some musicians fulfill these additional requirements naturally or instinctively. Others miss them and the result is a poor experience for everyone.

Typically people listen to and participate in a jam for the **whole experience** and not just the music. A sunny day in a park, a warm and welcoming living room in someone's home, or a friendly neighborhood pub become much more social environments in the presence of music and musicians that occasionally include audience members. It gives people something to talk about, to compliment one another on, and provides an opportunity for some to gain a little local recognition.

A Better Definition: A Managed Experience

It is more likely that a "good jam" will occur if one focuses on **experience management** rather than simply making music. This implies that someone actively "manages". In fact, this is the key to a good jam; managing the musicians and the audience so as to create a great overall experience. A more complete definition of a "good jam" might then be:

Defining A Managed Experience

- 1) Audience members enjoy the experience enough to stay for many songs
- 2) Audience members contribute to the experience through energy (applause, participation) and resources (tips or drink purchases if relevant).
- 3) Audience members return regularly
- 4) Musicians manage to have fun playing while putting the music first (rather than their personal ego or agenda)
- 5) Musicians come back regularly (directly related to the audience coming back regularly)

Detailed Foundations

- 1) Songs are chosen that the audience responds to. You have to read the audience to determine this. High energy, low energy, rock/pop/country/alternative, covers/originals, etc. But you can't throw things at the audience they don't want to hear or they will leave... or they won't come back in the future.
- 2) The musicians individually know whether they can or should contribute to a song and when they should not. If they can not contribute, they quietly sit the tune out so as not to get in the way of the song. If a song is out of their vocal range or technical capability they don't screw it up by diving in.
- 3) The musicians are generous enough to try to share the spotlight and not advance a personal ego or agenda.
- 4) Originals are not forced down anyone's throat unless that is the nature of the jam and the audience.
- 5) The experience is consistent (and therefore predictable) from event to event

An Anecdote

I've run successful jams because of my management ability and not because of my musicianship. The seeds of this ability were born through observation of a very successful weekly jam that ran for years at a pub in Toronto. Hundreds of musicians and thousands of audience members enjoyed the jam over many years. A large cadre of regulars not only attended the jam regularly, but followed it to mid-week destinations in other pubs. Several musicians who took part in this cauldron of well organized mix-'n-match music went on to bigger things musically and jam audience members often supported these new endeavors.

More impressive yet was the fact that the biggest and best jam happened late on a Monday night, a traditionally terrible day of the week to draw people out of their homes into a pub. So it had something special.

Of the many people involved in the jam, it is likely that only a handful ever figured out why it succeeded. Others tried to run jams at other bars and could never build an audience or sustain what they managed to build.

Leading the magic jam was David Hines. While the jam was successful and the audience happy, there were still occasional muttered complaints by some musicians. You might occasionally hear whining like:

- David choose in a different order than when they arrived on the scene
- He doesn't let me do the songs I want
- He's so controlling
 - "We'll do that song a bit later"
 - "I'll get another person up to do his song right now... please wait a bit"
 - "If you can't play the whole thing, don't play at all"
- Who's this for anyway? If you don't keep the musicians happy, the jam will fail!!!

But the proof is in the musical pudding. Besides the regular audience, even the complaining musicians **kept coming back!** That the whiners themselves kept returning proved the pecking order. The truth is:

- ♪ Musicians need an audience more than an audience needs musicians
- ♪ If the audience is served and regularly returns, the musicians will be drawn to it like moths to a flame

Dave served his audience first and in so doing served everyone from audience to musician to bar owner. It wasn't a good jam... it was a GREAT jam!!!

An Acknowledgement

After scratching this document out, David Hines took the time to look it over and clarify some of the rules as well as adding a couple I had not articulated. In particular, rule #12 (Educate Everyone!) was a glaring omission. Everyone (self included) needs a rule refresher every now and then. If you can't state it clearly then you can't teach it and you can't repeat it.


In particular, Dave's note about one's responsibility as the jam leader sums it all up succinctly:


"A jam is like a toddler: it must be given enough freedom of action to delight and surprise you (which it will), but not enough to wander onto the highway or fall into the pool."


That's about as concise and accurate as you can get... and it might well describe all good management everywhere!


Rules of the Jam

While I'm sure Dave never formally noted his rules but I couldn't help observing them in action. In my own jam efforts I have employed them, expanded them a bit, and had opportunities to articulate them to many people. So for posterity, here they are:

 Rules Of The Jam	
Rule	Impact of the Rule
<p>01- Be strong! Enforce the rest of the rules!!!</p>	<p>You'll take a few complaints on the chin but you will end up with a consistently good experience that musicians, audience members, and money will all return for.</p> <p>A common challenge is the free spirit who things that a jam should be totally unstructured and free to wander where it will. Such a jam would be fun for a few people... once. A structured jam will be a good experience for many... consistently.</p> <p>A consistently well run jam that is well attended is good for everyone. If you care about the jam, if you love music, you too will appreciate a little structure.</p>
<p>02- Keep the music going! No unnecessary breaks! If after 30 or 45 seconds there's no music playing, pick a song and get going! Even if it's one instrument and one singer, silence is your enemy!</p>	<p>Songs flow from one to the next and maintain audience energy. Musicians see this and feel the pressure to be prepared and "get going" when they get on stage. Give a room 60 seconds of silence (for any reason) and people will begin to drift away.</p> <p>Don't stop for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ instrument tuning... ▪ a musician stalling while trying to figure out what tune they want to perform ▪ a broken string ▪ a drunk trying to sing into the mic ▪ any reason!
<p>03- Balance the mix!!! Make sure that there is a decent mix. The goal is to hear all the parts; lead, rhythm, melody, harmony. This is independent of the absolute volume which could be high or low.</p> <p>The goal is to ensure that all the parts are contributing to the net sound in a complimentary way.</p>	<p>This is an art form as much as a technical pursuit. Like surfing or skiing it requires constant attention and adjustment. Different songs and different musicians have styles that may require adjustments to the mix throughout the jam.</p> <p>Remember, it's not what <u>you</u> hear while playing, it's what the <u>audience</u> hears while listening that counts. Set the mix while listening from the audience perspective, not while under the monitors.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ if a singer is quiet, amp 'em up ▪ if they are awful, help it out by bringing up the supporting harmony or lowering their mic a bit (discreetly of course) ▪ if there are three rhythm guitars and one lead, bring the lead up or the rhythm guitars down ▪ etc

 Rules Of The Jam	
Rule	Impact of the Rule
<p>04- Perform entire songs!</p> <p>Don't allow or encourage people to play or sing a song if they only know part of it.</p>	<p>Someone who knows the first few measures of "Stairway to Heaven" or "Blackbird" should be beaten with a cheap foreign guitar.</p> <p>People who can say they know a song but can only sing two lines of the chorus should return to the bagging groceries at K-mart and work to expand their knowledge with Sesame St. reruns.</p>
<p>05- Finish what you start!</p> <p>Presuming a person knows a song, if it encounters a problem, do not stop and try to do it over.</p>	<p>Do not allow a "do-over" when someone says:</p> <p><i>"Oops... I made a mistake... can we do it over?"</i></p> <p>Once you start... barrel through, get done the best you can, move on, and do better next time. A jam is not a practice! The audience wants a song to sound like a song, not to hear a garage band mucking things up.</p>
<p>06- Know and deal with your limitations!</p> <p>If you can't sing like Steve Perry or Don Henley or Melissa Etheridge... then either don't sing that song or adjust the range (key) and style to fit.</p>	<p>Grinding the life out of a well known song is often like fingernails on chalkboard to both the musicians and the audience alike.</p> <p>Often there is a key or a style of singing that can allow even the worst performer to manage a song acceptably. Figure it out... but do it off stage or pick another song!</p>
<p>07- Recognize a problem and get out!</p> <p>If it all goes wrong in a song or a set, admit it, end it, and quickly move on.</p> <p>Always keep a handful of tunes in mind that you can do well even drunk and in the black of night. Under pressure, quickly pick one and do it while you figure out how to get the jam back on track.</p>	<p>For jammers, let them know you can figure out a solution for next time... but <i>do it off stage!</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ this means "admitting the reality" ▪ if you can't sing harmony... don't ▪ if you can't play lead guitar... don't ▪ if you don't know all the words... don't <p>THIS IS NOT BAD!!! it helps you choose the stuff you do well until the other things improve! And, you don't scare the audience away in the mean time.</p>
<p>08- Group songs of similar energy levels!</p> <p>Keep a few high energy songs together and then a couple of low energy songs (ballads).</p>	<p>Constantly shifting between upbeat and downbeat music is jarring and will be disconcerting to an audience. It is more effective to choose songs (and the appropriate musicians) that are high energy, play a few together, and the throw in a couple of lower energy tunes to create some balance.</p>

 Rules Of The Jam	
Rule	Impact of the Rule
<p>09- Limit performers to two or three songs!</p> <p>Neither the good, the bad, nor the ugly should hog the limelight for too long.</p> <p>The stars will still manage to shine and the rest still know they'll not be the last one picked in the school yard.</p>	<p>No matter how good any performer is, remember that it is the overall jam experience that is important. Giving too much limelight to one performer can annoy other musicians. It can also encourage poorer musicians to expect the same time on the stage, something that will surely kill your audience.</p> <p>Instead, tactfully find ways to invite the better performers back a little more... or allow the audience to demand it (much more effective).</p>
<p>10- Stay away from original songs!</p> <p>Serve the audience, not the musicians! The audience will more likely respond well to songs they can sing with or have a personal relationship with. Unless you have an ear for picking success like a top music producer, stay away from them.</p>	<p>If it is a songwriter's jam where the purpose is to hear new music, this may be fine. Otherwise:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the musicians better be damn good ▪ the song better be damn good ▪ the musicians better be famous so they can suck and the audience won't mind so much
<p>11- Know Your Master!</p> <p>Your customer is... everyone! You only know if you've done a good job if your customers are happy.</p>	<p>The first tier is always the audience. Their presence and pleasure drives the energy in the room, the fulfillment of the musicians, the money in the coffers, and the bar staff.</p> <p>But remember that the jam has to serve as many of the entire constituency as possible. There will always be a few you can never please so accept it and move on.</p>
<p>12- Educate Everyone!</p> <p>Tell 'em the rules. And keep tellin' 'em!!!</p>	<p>People can't follow the rules unless they know what they are.</p> <p>Musicians need to know that they need to be prepared. One you start something, you finish it. That it's a shared experience and no one person will dominate. That you should choose something within your capability. That it's OK to admit when you aren't adding value to a song and sit back and have a drink.</p> <p>The audience needs to know that it takes energy and guts to get up and put oneself on the musical line.</p> <p>Those who are great need to be appreciated for their talent. The not-so-great need to be appreciated for representing the everyman, having the guts to get up, and for getting better over time.</p> <p>Tell 'em to clap, tell 'em to tip, and tell 'em the rules, and tell 'em often!</p>

 Rules Of The Jam	
Rule	Impact of the Rule
<p>13- Be sober!</p> <p>A drink or two can grease the night. But being sloppy will lose an audience and encourage others to take things less seriously.</p>	<p>Being sober (or at least not being drunk!) increases the likelihood of creating interesting music and diminishing ego tensions between participants. While you may have less control over the audience, this rule is particularly true for musicians. A sloppy song doesn't impress the audience.</p> <p>Better and more consistently produced music creates a better experience for everyone, increasing the likelihood that people will return in the future.</p>
<p>14- Be prepared!</p> <p>Shit happens. So do your best to have a few extras on hand to help deal with 'em when they do happen. It reduces tension for everyone and helps keep the music going.</p>	<p>You're going to need help occasionally with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ broken strings (bring extra) ▪ bad equipment (check it out ahead of time and have a fallback if possible) ▪ drunks or people with bad attitudes trying to commandeer stage time (have a non-musician or staff member engaged to address this so musicians don't have to) ▪ forgotten lyrics or un-remembered songs (get a lyric book and/or a song list to help remind everyone what can be performed... silence while figuring it out is bad)



Rules in Summary

This may seem like a lot of information. Really, it renders down to:

- 🎵 Serve the audience what they want and you'll serve everyone else in the musical food chain
- 🎵 Put the song first, not the ego of any one musician. This means admitting what people do well and do not do well and letting people participate as appropriate.
- 🎵 Be prepared to keep the music going in spite of distractions
- 🎵 Be strong enough to enforce the rules

What Do You Gain?

It's a sure bet that every will gain from a well managed jam experience. Those gains include:

- 🎵 More audience
- 🎵 More musicians
- 🎵 More fun
- 🎵 More gigs
- 🎵 More money

Enough babble. Even if you don't choose to employ them yourself, take note of them when watching either a great musical experience or a terrible one and see which rules are being employed or broken.

In particular, **watch for rule #2: "Keep the music going!"**. Having the most impact, it is also the most commonly violated. If you serve this rule alone the chances are you will be forced to serve all the others.

Play on!