

## ***Preparing for your first jam session***

### **Rich Stillman, Banjo Camp North, Spring 2013**

*You've all been there, or you will. I have.*

That first jam session. You've practiced, done your homework, sound killer in the living room.

Are you really ready? Will you feel in control? What do you need to do?

Here's the bad news: The tunes you learned note-by-note from tab won't get you ready to jam. Even classical players who can play complicated music can't jam without learning jam skills.

And the good news: Jam skills are easy to learn. They're just not things you usually practice.

The most important skill to learn is timing. If you're not used to matching other people's beat, you'll find it's easy to get out of control. That can lead to panic, which makes things worse.

So what do you need? First, you need practice playing in time with others. You can do this in several ways:

1. Play with a metronome. I know, everyone hates the metronome, but it's the best way to get used to adjusting your time as you play. Here's a handout explaining how to get the most out of your metronome practice time.
2. Play to CDs or other recorded music. Most bluegrass is recorded without a click track or other time enforcement, so it will naturally vary in tempo a little bit. This gives you experience at micro-adjusting your time, which you'll have to do in a jam session. It's also more fun than playing with a metronome. Practice playing through the tunes without stopping, and "catching up" with the chords if you make a mistake. This gets you used to uneven timing, and it gives you practice recovering from mistakes without getting lost, another important jam session skill.
3. Find a friendly guitar player. This could count as your first jam session, except you can start and stop with one person much more easily than you can with a whole group. Try, however, to keep the tune going unless you really crash and burn. This will get you ready for jam sessions, where tunes rarely stop till they're over.

These techniques will give you far more confidence when you join your first session. You'll know that you can keep time, adjust for other people's variations and your own, and recover if you make a playing mistake. You'll feel more in control and your first jam experience will be much more positive.

## ***What to do at your first jam session***

The first time you play your banjo in a room full of other musicians can be bewildering. Here are some tips:

1. Start out just vamping chords quietly. If someone offers you a break, pass up the opportunity for now. Your first goal should be to "lock" your rhythm and chord changes with the session, the same way you locked in with your metronome or recordings at home. Keep in mind that some jam sessions have rhythm problems of their own - you may not be able to lock in, and it may not be your fault. But try.
2. Once you feel comfortable keeping time, try simple breaks - maybe just the same lick over and over, changing the chord along with the tune. If the session chooses a song you know (or if they give you a chance to suggest one), go for it!
3. Don't overplay. Stick to songs and licks that you know well. About half the stuff you can pull off in your living room will fly out of your head the moment there's another instrument in the room with you. Keep it simple, and you'll play better, with more confidence, make fewer mistakes, and enjoy yourself more.

Remember that a jam session is a group activity. **The most important skill to develop is the ability to listen.** Listen to the music around you and to the way your playing is fitting in. Adjust your playing so it complements the group, and quiet down if you're having a hard time.

Try not to stop playing if you can figure your way out of the trouble you're having, but do stop if even your quiet playing is throwing off the group's cohesion. You may need to woodshed a little more to be ready to play in a group. But if you can stick it out, every session you play in will give you important experience and help build confidence that you know how to make your playing work with others. That's what it's all about!