Mud City Old-Time Jam: Basic Info

What Is An Old-Time Jam?

This is a welcoming space for folks to come together and enjoy playing and listening to traditional old-time music. Whether you're a seasoned player or just curious, it's a great place to meet others, learn new tunes, and share making music together!

What Is Old-Time Music?

Old-time music is one of America's original folk traditions — the music that came before bluegrass, country, and modern roots music. It's the music that folks play for themselves and their friends in living rooms and back porches and at festivals like the Willamette Old-Time Social, the Oly Old Time Festival, the Portland Old-Time Gathering, and the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes. It's much less performance-oriented than bluegrass. Everyone plays together, without breaks (solos), which creates a driving groove that is really designed for participation, not just observation… perfect for square dancing!

What Instruments Are Welcome?

Fiddles, Acoustic Guitar, Banjo, Mandolin, Upright Bass, Mountain Dulcimer... these are all traditional old-time instruments. Electric instruments and drums are best suited for another type of jam.

What If I Don't Know the Tunes?

That's completely okay — old-time music is largely learned by ear, so deep listening is key.
Hang around the edge of the circle and try to pick things up as the tune goes around. The more you listen, the more you'll absorb. Bring a recording device if you like, and ask if you'd like access to recordings to practice at home. Learning on the fly is part of the tradition — and one of the best ways to grow as a player!

Basic Jam Etiquette and Guidelines

Tune up! If you don't have a tuner, ask to borrow one from a neighbor. Try to limit noodling between tunes, especially if someone is trying to recall a melody or start a tune. Welcome new players, but try to keep the core of the circle tight so everyone can hear. If the jam gets large, concentric circles work better than one big one.

How Old-Time Jams Work

Old Time jamming is a bit different than Bluegrass. In old-time, the group sits in a tight circle so they can hear each other better, and pick a key to play in. We stick with that one key for a good while so the banjos don't have to retune all the time, and also because many of the fiddle players are cross-tuned, depending on the key. We usually use standard fiddle tuning for tunes in G and C, but there are many other fiddle tunings; AEAE (for A), ADAE (for D) or GDGD (for G), etc.

Starting or Suggesting Tunes

Experienced players often guide the jam and keep the energy flowing. If you'd like to suggest a tune, feel free — you can either start it yourself or ask someone else to kick it off. If your version has an unusual structure (not standard AABB) or tricky chords, just give the group a heads-up so everyone can follow along more easily. If there are lyrics, go ahead and sing them. Others will keep playing the melody or harmonize with you — the idea isn't performance, it's participation! Belt it out!

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