

Black Rose Jam Practices and Etiquette

Background, Philosophy, and Goals

While good jam etiquette is often a lot of good manners and common sense, it helps to have explicit information on how to make a jam work well for everyone.

You would expect good etiquette to be somewhat universal. Learning etiquette from other sources is certainly a good starting point. Sources to learn jam etiquette include:

1. [The Ten Jammandments](#) (co-authored by Black Rose founder, the late Charlie Hall)
2. Wernick Method [Bluegrass Jamming Basics](#).

If all of the above is too much to digest, here are three overall guidelines that guide a lot of jam etiquette:

1. Be *considerate* of others
2. Play with *good rhythm*
3. Be a *good listener*

Ultimately, we want a jam that is enjoyable, challenging, and fun for everyone (regardless of skill level or instrument). Examples of goodness in a jam, i.e. a pleasing jam song, include:

- A song that is part of a shared history.
- A song that tells a story or touches on a shared feeling.
- A song where we find a shared rhythm that is very tight and consistent.
- A song where we learn and fix and improve together as the song goes along.
- A song that is a discovery. Always great to learn a cool new song!
- With other singers, building a 3 or 4 part harmony together.
- Hearing other jammers excel at soloing, singing, or balancing the sound of a jam.
- Over time, having your fellow participants improve

All of the above are *group successes* as opposed to *individual successes*, different from when you are playing by yourself at home mastering a new lick or memorizing a song. Good etiquette helps us succeed *as a group*.

Also, jam goodness can differ from music performance goodness. In jams, we accept mistakes, e.g. a poor solo or an imperfect harmony. Etiquette may help us fix these issues as we go along. On the other hand, a performance would have different priorities that include having the best sounding song for a paying audience. Jams allow for a less polished sound as we prioritize learning how to play a song together.

Black Rose Jam Etiquette Differences

Black Rose jams have similar etiquette to other jams, with some difference in emphasis.

- **Welcoming.** Black Rose jams should always welcome new-comers, and that may mean we are softer on enforcing etiquette. We are forgiving of those who are still learning. Beginners and new-comers may be more comfortable with music sheets, so...
- **Printed music.** Historically, many Black Rose jams tend to share music via paper or online songbooks. It is recognized that people learn jamming faster if they are maximizing their *ear training*. Even beginners *should* be learning a song by listening (although they may not know that yet!). So, in *any* jam, a few songs will be communicated orally, and 2 jams (Festival Bluegrass and the ABAJS) are exclusively oral.
- **Musically diverse.** Black Rose jams are not just bluegrass jams, so different jams may have different conventions regarding what songs are allowed. Different jam themes may have different musical notation. (Example: Our Hootenanny uses music with the notation of the *Rise Up Singing* songbook.)

Etiquette Specifics

Definitions:

- Jam Leader - The person designated by the Black Rose to run the jam session overall.
- Song Leader - The person leading a particular song. We take turns leading songs.
- Song Participant - Someone playing along with the song. Responsible for quickly learning the song's chord changes and melody, even if an unfamiliar song. Song participants are good listeners and good followers.
- Soloist - Someone playing a solo. There is 1 soloist at a time unless explicit other arrangements are made (like song leader says "all the mandolins" or 2 neighbors in the circle agree to do a harmony solo).
- Break - Synonym for "solo".
- Lead - Also a synonym for "solo"! "Take a lead" (more common in jazz) means the same as "take a solo".
- Guitar Billboard - The guitar player during a song who knows the chords and commits to playing recognizable chord shapes ("cowboy chords") throughout the song.

Here are a few specific items to clarify.

- All Black Rose jams are public jams, open to all comers. Meanwhile, that assumes each participant behaves appropriately, and is open to changing their behavior as needed.
- We encourage you to arrive early (10 minutes before start time) so that we can start on time.
 - If you arrive late, wait (quietly!) until between songs before you join the circle.
- Sit in a circle. We expect a tight *circular* circle. If someone joins after the jam has started, expand the circle to make room for the newcomer. It's okay if newcomers or listeners are outside the circle, but someone outside the circle **must** play quietly given that their instrument is probably projecting at someone in the circle.
- Introduce yourself!, especially to your neighbors in the circle.
 - The jam leader may also "do names" as part of the introduction to the evening's jam.

- Each jam has a designated jam leader. The jam leader is the one person to dive in, with a soft touch, if things are off track. Our jam leaders should have a “soft touch”, i.e. they only correct things if absolutely necessary. Better if they encourage the current song leader to address what needs addressing.
 - Better if participants ask the jam leader questions about etiquette rather than having the jam leader overtly correct misbehavior.
- Silence your cell phone. Leave the room if you want to have a phone conversation.
- If you think someone’s instrument is out-of-tune, ask *everyone* to tune their instrument (so as to not embarrass the out-of-tune people).
- Song selection progresses around the circle. With that, everyone gets an equal chance to pick and lead a song. It is okay for someone to “pass”.
- Be thoughtful about your song selection. Some criteria:
 - Does the song fit with this particular jam format? (If the jam has a songbook, the songbook is a good guide to find acceptable songs.)
 - Does the song have a limited number of chords? (Especially if the song is explained orally?)
 - There are many great, fun songs with just 2 or 3 chords!
 - Does the song have common chords? Best if a “guitar billboard” can show the chords, and the chords are common recognizable chord shapes.
 - If the guitar has to capo to a key outside of C, G, D, A, or E, will other instruments be able to adapt?
 - If using a capo, be clear about the actual key vs. the guitar chord shapes we’ll see.
 - Will people be able to know (or learn and remember) the chords once the song is rolling along?
 - Will the song let everyone shine (through solos and harmony)? If, when the song ends, you realize you were the only one shining, then the song might be a *performance song* and not a *jam song*.
 - Do you know the melody? Can you clearly project the tune to all in the circle? (Instrumentally or by singing.)
 - Are you practiced in playing the song? Have you learned the song well enough to keep on the rhythm and consistently move through the chord progression?
 - Does the song fit with recent songs that have been played in the jam? OR
 - If the jam feels stale, perhaps pick a song that is new and fresh? New songs are always encouraged.
- When it is your turn to be “song picker”, announce the name of the song and the key.
 - Also announce the time signature if it is not 4/4 time.
 - Announce anything unusual about the song.
 - If the chord progression is not common, explain the chords orally and check if everyone is ready.
 - Better to use the chord numbers (Nashville numbering) than the chord letters. A reason: all the letters sound the same (B,C,D,E,G all have the “ee” sound). We also expect jammers to know the 1, 4, and 5 chords for common keys.

- A great way to explain the chords: sing the tune, but say the chord numbers instead of the words of the tune.
 - Plan your kick-off. The kick-off is the chance to get everyone playing at the same tempo.
 - Finally, be thoughtful of how long of a time between songs... the longer the delay, the fewer the songs we do at a jam!
 - Do not over-explain the song! Some parts of the song are learned as we go along.
 - A part of teaching the song is actually singing/playing the first verse and the chorus.
 - If people are still learning the song, sing more of the song before handing out solos.
 - If you want to pass out music, do so before your turn to pick the song, i.e. at the start of the jam.
 - When leading, your voice and instrument need to be heard clearly! Sing and play loud! (Some larger Black Rose jams have amplification to pass around to help with volume.)
- When you are the song leader, do not create a “power vacuum”. Either boldly assert each aspect of the song, or clearly delegate a piece of the song leadership. Things you can delegate:
 - Singing the song
 - Passing out breaks
 - Kicking the song off.
 - However, avoid allowing someone (the kickoff person) picking a speed you do not want (too fast or too slow). That is the danger of someone else kicking off your song!
 - It is super easy to use a “Mac Wiseman” kickoff (vamp on the I chord).
 - Note: You might also identify the player that is the “guitar billboard”: a guitar player who will only play “cowboy chords” (common guitar chord shapes) for others to see.
- Let the current song picker direct the song!
 - Let the song picker select a key that works for their voice. We don’t need to match the key of a known recording of the song.
 - It is up to the song picker to delegate pieces of leading the song *at their discretion*. They may delegate the singing, the order or the song, the kickoff, when we have solos, or all of that. But it is ultimately their choice to delegate.
 - If you are sure the song leader wants constructive advice, you would still avoid giving advice *during* the song.
 - There can be only 1 leader, or we risk having the song go in 2 different directions.
 - We want to encourage all levels of players to be better song leaders. Support the song leader, and let them learn from their mistakes.
- Solos (also called breaks) pass to the left (clockwise if viewed from above). Avoid handing out solos in a non-circular order.

- If we assume a circular order, we do not need to talk about breaks/solos before the song starts, so a quicker start to the song!
- The song leader (or delegate) should plan the pace of solos to match the number of song verses. (E.g., if 6 soloists and 3 after-chorus spots for breaks, then 2 soloists go in each break spot.)
- One special case: It is okay to call breaks “by instrument” *if* there are many beginners in the circle.
- Make sure the person to your left knows if you are not taking a solo. The reason: they can then start their solo on time! Much easier for them to do a good solo!
- Encourage new songs! We want to hear new stuff! And we want to develop the ability of the group to play a previously unfamiliar song (assuming it is explained well).
- Song participants should be good listeners and good followers.
 - Do not play your instrument while a jam leader or song leader is talking to the group. I.e. no noodling while someone is talking to the group!
 - Be supportive of the song leader.
 - Don't talk a song leader out of their chosen key. We only help the song leader select a key if the advice is welcome and not confusing.
 - Song key is best chosen to match the current singer's voice. This takes priority over having the song key match some past recording of the song.
 - Don't stop a song unless you are the song leader or *maybe* the jam leader.
 - If offering advice, make sure the song leader is receptive. Do not advise or direct *during* the song.
 - Balance your volume to be quieter than the song leader or the current soloist.
 - Do not solo if it is not your turn. You may be tempted to use someone else's solo to practice your upcoming solo... but that is poor etiquette no matter how softly you play.
 - Do instead play rhythm and correct chords during someone else's solo.
 - During a bass solo, we play a single chord on the 1 beat.
 - If your turn to solo is coming up, and you do not want the solo, make sure that is communicated to your left. (And secondarily communicated to the song leader or their delegate.) Eye contact affirms that you want a solo, shaking your head says you do not. Do not be the participant who creates confusion on who the next soloist is, or causes a late start to a solo.
- Setup and close of the jam... the quicker we can do this, the more time we have for music!
 - Help with setup of the room is appreciated. Same for when we are closing up the jam.
 - Please return the room to its original state. Some venues want the chairs back to their exact original location. Also return any moved music stands to their original location.
 - Please make your jam donation before the jam starts or immediately after the final song so the Jam Leader can do the accounting in a timely fashion, especially for jams at All Souls.

