

Jam Sessions

What Are Jam Sessions?

A jam session is a gathering of musicians with the intent of playing music with one another. The music they play can be fully improvised music, standards, cover tunes, or any combination thereof.

Why Are Jams Important?

Jams are one of the best means of immersing yourself in jazz music. Playing with experienced musicians gives a tangible idea as to “how the music goes”. It’s also a great way to get to know musicians, especially if you are new to a city or area.

Jams can serve as a way of understanding the environment and vibe of the musical scene that you’re in. They are also really good for assessing where you are as a musician. Some would consider jams the real school of jazz.

Best Practices:

Come Prepared With Tunes To Call

- It’s always best to have a few tunes prepared ahead of time to call at a jam session.
- Ideally, have tunes prepared with different feels and tempos.
- Call a tune that people will likely know.
 - Calling an obscure tune can lead to indecision on the bandstand. While it’s great (and encouraged) to learn tunes beyond what is most often played, it’s best to call relatively well-known tunes while on the bandstand at a jam.

Do Your Homework

- Take time to shed the tunes that you want to call.
 - Know the melody, changes (harmony), form, and how to improvise over it.
- Know the style/tempo.

Be Ready To Count off

- The way you count in is the way that the band is going to play it.
- Have in mind the tempo that you want to count off at.
- For swing tunes, count off snapping on 2 & 4.

Rules For Calling A Ballad

- Generally, it’s not the best idea to call a ballad at a jam because the forms go on for so long. It can very quickly become an over-extended tune.
- If you do call a ballad, be prepared to take the melody out from the B section.

Usual Soloing Order

- Though there is room for variation, the most common order of solos is as follows:
 - Horns
 - Piano/Guitar
 - Bass
 - Drums
- The drum solo can either be solo drums, or it can be trading fours.

Trading Fours

- For trading fours, the first soloist will take the first four, then the drums will take the second set of four. The player that plays in the non-drum four will rotate in the order in which the solos happened. This continues until the one of the musicians plays the head out.
- Bass is usually not included during trading fours.

Moving Around Stage

- This applies mostly to horn players and singers players.
- When you are not soloing/singing, it's good etiquette to step aside so that it is apparent to the audience that the focus of the music is shifting to a player other than yourself.
- Conversely, when you are soloing or playing the head, it's appropriate to go to the forefront of the band.

Don't Just Hop On To the Bandstand

- Don't invite yourself on stage.
- Talk to the band/sign up.
 - Often, there will be a sign up sheet for those who would like to participate in the jam. Be sure to sign up on the sheet once the house set is over.

Know How You're Going To End The Tune

- It is crucial to know how you're going to end a tune before you start. A tag is the default and most common way that most standards will end. Know ahead of time how many bars you're going to use for the tag, and play it confidently once you get to that part of the tune.

Don't Play On Tunes You Don't Know

- Even if you think that you can fake it, don't try to play on tunes that you don't know. It's best to sit out, take note of the tune, and learn it for the next jam.

Don't Solo For Too Long

- Keeping time management in mind in general is a good thing to do, especially if you call the tune.
- For the most part, taking one or two choruses is more than enough to say what you have to say. If the form is relatively short (12 or 16 bars), then there may be room for more, but it's better to keep it short and sweet rather than to go on too long.

Don't Stay On The Bandstand For Too Long

- Once you've played a tune be ready to get up and let the next musician play. For this, you can gauge the room. If there are a lot of players, then you will likely only play one or two tunes. The host may, especially if you play well, ask you to stay on and play more.

Watch The House Band

- It's highly encouraged to go to a jam early enough to see the house set. It's a great opportunity to watch experience musicians play, and it shows your support for the musicians and venue.

Support The Venue

- These venues provide space for musicians to get together and play the music that they love. As much as possible, via buying food/drinks, try to patronize the establishment that is hosting the jam.
- Some places, especially ones that are 21+ have drink or tab minimums.

Other Things To Consider:

Observe First

- Going to a jam as an observer first is a great way to get familiar with the environment and begin to learn how things usually go.
- Things to take note of include:
 - What tunes are they playing
 - What are the level of players
 - How are the players interacting with each other

Get To Know People

- Take the time during and after a jam session to talk with people, including those in the house band. Be sure to talk to everyone with respect.

Actually Improvise (don't excessively quote solos/tunes)

- As hip as it may be to quote solos and tunes, it's best to make sure that your solo is mostly improvised.

No Vibing!

- Vibing is what we call the sort of passive aggressive behavior that musicians often have toward one another. It's characterized by making players feel small or implicitly belittling someones playing or knowledge of the music.
- Under no conditions should you vibe another player. This includes if you are talking to someone else about a player. While you may not enjoy everyone's playing, it's best to keep talk positive.

Serve The Music First

- When you go to a jam, it's not about chopping out. It's about making the music sound and feel good. The idea is to have a musical conversation with the other players.
- Play so that you're making everyone else sound good too.
- Leave your ego at the door.

Notes for Singers

- Know your keys
- Learn the tune while observing
- Try to figure out the changes
- Know what intro you want (e.g. last 8 bars, a vamp)

- Glossary -

House Band – This is the band that plays a set at a venue before the jam session. In other, but still musical, contexts, it's the band that regularly plays at an establishment (e.g. recording studio, late night shows).

Jam Session – A jam session is a gathering of musicians with the intent of playing music with one another. The music they play can be fully improvised music, standards, cover tunes, or any combination thereof.

Set – A set refers to a performance of about 45min – 1hr of music. For example, when playing at a venue, a band can have a 1st set at 8:15pm and a 2nd set at 9:30pm. Lengths of sets can vary.

Chopping Out – This refers to when a player plays like they are trying to play everything they know (usu. fast and loud). Often, players do this instead of playing to serve the music. Don't chop out on the bandstand.