

Session Etiquette

For when you are ready to leave the Slow Sessions and Venture out into the Big World

No matter what type of Session you sit in on, Bluegrass, Old Time, Sing-Out, Traditional Irish, Acoustic Rock, Campfire Folk, etc. there is a certain way that things are done. Good Session Etiquette is your friend and will get you invited to more musical gatherings. It will also help you be a welcome guest when you visit a new Session.

1. Keep it pure.

If the Session you are joining is an acoustic session, be prepared for the cold shoulder if you show up with an electric instrument. If the Session is a Sing-Out Folk Session, showing off a jazz lick on your instrument will not be well received either. Likewise, playing an Eagles piece, or a country tune that you just wrote, at a Bluegrass Session, isn't a welcome contribution. Respect the genre. People attend Sessions to learn and share a specific style of playing. No one came to the session to hear you perform, everyone who is there wants to learn, play nice with others, have a good time, and be a part of preserving an historic musical form.

2. Follow the Leader

Sessions usually have a leader who has planned out the tunes for the event. If the leader asks for suggestions and you request a tune, you become the leader for that tune and must lead the tune strongly and, if it is a Bluegrass Session, be able to play a solid solo break during the tune. (Old Time Tunes are played at Bluegrass Sessions, but this Session does not play in Bluegrass style.)

3. Lay back until you figure out the groove

Every session has a personality, speed, and organized way of doing things. When you are visiting a Session for the first time, lay back and follow what others are doing until you understand the vibe. Oftentimes I will sit outside of the circle the first few times I visit a Session where I don't know anyone. If they ask me to join the circle, I play lightly and follow the flow of the group.

4. Bringing friends

You may have family or friends who want to come to a Session with you. That is a welcome thing. Every session needs pickers (the players) and gridders (the listeners). If you need to talk with your visitors during a Session, you will want to leave the circle and then return when you are finished talking. Also, invite your visitors to sit a distance from the circle as they enjoy the Session so that any conversations, they may have, do not disturb the players.

5. Noodling

Noodling between tunes is disrespectful. The leader of the next tune may be thinking about the tune and how they will lead it and can't concentrate on the tune they are about to lead if someone else is noodling.

6. Old Time and Irish formats

Tunes usually have an A section and a B section. It is customary to play the A section twice and then the B section twice. The tune will continue in this fashion for many repetitions until the leader indicates that you are coming to the end. The signal that you are on the last time is often the leader sticking a leg or a foot into the circle. Watch the leader's foot and leg movements.

7. Doing business inside the circle

As you get better and others around you get better, you may hear of opportunities to play at gatherings or events. Talk inside the circle about business opportunities, that aren't available to everyone there, is considered bad form. Also, talking to the person next to you for long periods in the circle isn't a good thing.

8. Don't bring smokes, drugs, or alcohol to a Session

I can't tell you how many people have been asked to leave circles and never come back because they thought it was okay to bring smokes, alcohol, or drugs(weed) into a Session. A Session is not a place to kick back and have a beer or light up. Capped water or soda bottles, and snacks, are welcome in open Sessions. Keep them under or close to your chair or on a table away from the circle, so no one can easily knock them over. If a Session is in a pub or a restaurant don't bring in your own food or drink (yes, I really have to say this.) It is expected that you will support the business if you are financially able by, at the least, buying a soda at the break or after the Session.

9. You alone are responsible for the safety and protection of your instrument

Session players know that they are responsible for the care of their instruments. You take a chance whenever your instrument travels with you. You are responsible for protecting your instrument – not the Leader, not the guy next to you, not the bartender, not the owner of an establishment, not the event director, not the city, only you. You are responsible for your instrument's safety and no one else. Many a fiddle and guitar has shared a bathroom stall, or a port-a-let with its owner (I even saw a bass player take his standing bass into a port-o-let at a big event.) And honestly, it will be a rare Session player that has pity for you if you are careless with your instrument and leave it propped against a wall, or on the floor, and walk away.

Sessions are meant to be a place where musicians can learn from one another and have fun. It's how our grandparents got together with friends back in the day. Simply be courteous of others, respectful of the circle, responsible for yourself, and you will always have a great time.