

# Jamming 101's 10 Jammandments

(By Sid Lewis and Jamming 101...www.jamming101.com)

## **Jammandment I:** "You shall always tune first, and tune away from the jam"

Due to the exceptionally twangy, strummy, often out-of tune nature of bluegrass and folk music, the least annoying one can strive to be the better. And few things are more annoying than an oblivious banjo picker struggling with his 5<sup>th</sup> string right next to your ear. Or, the happy strummer next to you who is frighteningly out of tune but charges on undaunted. And we've *all* seen those two!

It is a true fact of folk music: we spend half the time tuning, and the other half playing out of tune. If we except this, and make a point of tuning a polite distance away from ones fellow jammers, this pain is lessened.

Think of tuning as the musical equivalent of going to the bathroom, and you'll have the right perspective (We all should do it, but not next to your friends!)

So, get a tuner and use it religiously...

## **Jammandment II:** "You shall approach all jams with PATIENCE, POLITENESS and PREPAREDNESS (the 3 P's)"

Much of the mistakes beginners make happen before their instrument ever leaves its case! And the primary offender is simply *lack of preparation*. As in any sport or game, it is advisable to be at least vaguely familiar with the rules before jumping in the middle. This is the path of **preparedness**, and includes many hours with ones nose buried in a tab book\*, or trailing their mentors around like a hungry puppy...also think of it this way: if you know the song, you'll have a funner time (as will everyone else)

Then comes the second obstacle: the enthusiasm of ignorance! We know that a little knowledge is dangerous thing, and by the same token a 2-month fiddle student can wreak havoc in a short amount of time. How to get around this obstacle? Only one way: **patience**. Don't beg for solo's, don't elbow into a jam before hanging out for a bit, be patient! All things in good time, including your turn to shine...

The other P, **politeness**, is too often taken for granted. It's amazing how far "can I sit in?" will get you, or selflessly sitting out a song you don't know. Begin and end on a good note (we mean both), and you will always be asked back.

## **Jammandment III:** "You shall recognize and respect the Jam Leader"

All good jams have someone, or a few different folks, in charge of "conducting" the circle. It may be obvious, like the large bass player in overalls bellowing out the changes, or very subtle, like the hot-picker jams directed with barely noticeable nods and glances. In any case, it is paramount that the newcomer to the jam seeks out these people and keeps an ear on them. Nothing is more frustrating than an over-enthusiastic (and often inebriated) guest who attempts to take over the circle and starts dominating the song choices or solos. A jam is nothing more than a small, spontaneous orchestra, and they both need some conducting

## **Jammandment IV:** "When *you* are the Jam leader, ye shall always give everyone a chance"

At heart, all one really has to remember when conducting a jam is just be *Considerate*. It's that easy. Consider the newcomer and allow them a turn; consider others who want to lead a song; communicating slowly and clearly...consider taking a break and having a drink!

The hottest pickers all had to start somewhere, and that start was usually being invited to sit in by considerate jammers when they were unknowns. And ironically, the best pickers will often not solo unless asked, exercising their incredible modesty and restraint. Therefore it is the sacred duty of any jam leader to give everyone the circle a shot at a lead

(unless they have previously expressed mortal fear of this...!)

**Jammandment V:** “ye shall know your level, and play accordingly”

Although we encourage everyone to always challenge themselves, and sometimes this may mean playing “over your head”, this is never to be done at the expense of the jam. There is a time to jump in, and a time to stay out of the way. And the key to knowing when is simply know which level (icon for 5 levels) you can function on, for each song. Say for instance you’ve done months of penance over your tear stained copy of Blackberry Blossom, and someone at the slow-jam calls it out. Go for it! Now you can shift from Level 3 (chords) to Level 4 (melody). But later on when you stumble into a much faster jam at a Sunday BBQ, you are much wiser to hunker down on Level 3 avoid the trauma of trying to play the melody at those tempos. (yet). The same holds true for the hot picker at slower session. Don’t spray notes all over just because you can. Take this as an opportunity to play simple and sweetly, as well as a chance to help others along. A picker is only as good as their attitude!

**Jammandment VI:** “You shall know the Jam Family Tree, and play accordingly”

This Jammandment prevents musical wars from occurring. Such scenarios as someone bellowing out an endless Dylan song at an Irish session, or a newcomer subjecting the jam to their original ballad featuring 13 different chords, can bring any jam to a grinding halt. Jammandment VI guards against this by asking us to understand the various styles of music, and have the respect to learn the etiquette of each before trying to play it. This entails knowledge of the family tree of jam sessions, the Jam Family Tree. (icon for 5 levels)

The Jam Family Tree is essentially a genealogy chart for the most common types of jam sessions we encounter. Beginning with the beginner’s “slow jam” and leading all the way up to the advanced jazz jam, at the top of the tree, this illustrates the importance of recognizing the different styles of music in jam sessions *and* respecting them. Not to say that one cannot be creative in their approach, but it is important to play in accordance with each jam’s unique musical rules and etiquette.

**Jammandment VII:** “Ye shall play backup first, and lead only when it’s your turn”

A derivative of Jammandment II, this has to do with respect for the musical organism of the jam, as well as basic musical self-control. We’ve all felt the excitement when the jam leader calls a tune we know, and inside of us a 6 year old begins jumping up and down and yelling “I know this one! Let *me* play” Too many lead players without self-control sounds like the Guitar Center on a Saturday afternoon! Nothing but cacophony, and an occasional decent Stairway To heaven. Being “asked” to take the lead may not happen right away, we must remember. There is a complex and unspoken system of rules governing newcomers to jams, and being patient is golden at these times. Also, the way you may be signaled is quite varied, from the “take it, Jethro!” to the barely noticeable nod. Remain aware, polite and patient and all things will come to you!

**Jammandment VIII:** “You shall not sing unless you know the words”

Singer, listen up: if you forget the lyrics, let someone take a solo and then catch it the next time around! And unless you are one of the few lightening-quick wits, trying to make up new words on the spot is usually suicidal, although sometimes amusing as well. And although it has been said that in folk music one can get away with just singing the word “watermelon” in a pinch, Jamming 101 endorses chuckling and letting someone else take the lead until your brain returns. Also, singing is best with one voice, unless the voices are in harmony. Unison (more than one of the same note) works fine in chanting and some rock music, but in most jams harmony is expected when more than one is singing. It is highly recommended for anyone who aspires to make “notes with their neck” to learn the art of vocal harmony; take *lots* of showers (while singing).

**Jammandment IX:** “You shall be respectful of “civilians”

Enthusiastic jammers often become blissfully oblivious to their surroundings. This is just fine, except when suddenly those surroundings include orange vests or loud knocks! Even the most accomplished picking session can get old to the person trying to sleep in a nearby tent, at 5am. Jammers can avoid problems by letting neighbors know ahead of a big Sunday afternoon BBQ and pickathon, or ending a late nighter *before* the bottles fly. After all, “civilians” are also audience, and even the hottest jam is not as fun without applause...

**Jammandment X:** “Remember that we jam for FUN, FREINSHIP and SELF-IMPROVEMENT”

For all of you lucky folks who enjoy music as a hobby (and are smarter than to make it a career!), good times and new friends are only a strum away.

Often however, when the jammer loses the humility of beginner-hood, other motives can soil the jam. The big culprit is usually the ego (“*I* want a solo...bob is louder than me...Mary thinks she can run the jam”). The antidote is to stay patient, humble and friendly! No amount of skill can mask rude behavior, and the pleasant picker is always asked back. So, create FUN, make FRIENDS, and keep IMPROVING. Remember, it’s always funner to pick songs, not fights!

\* or, by downloading free tabs from the instruction page!