

Bluegrass Jamming Protocol and Etiquette (Jam Busting 101)

Bluegrass music attracts some of the most loving and joyful people I've ever known. Much gratitude goes to the Denver and front-range community for your participation and guidance in my development and for your contributions here - you've provided a wealth of insight and information that I've attempted to summarize for folks who are passionate about making better music with the best of friends.

This material is primarily for those who are unfamiliar with the rules, especially folks who may be a bit intimidated by the thought of real live jamming with real live people in a real live place, but pickers at every level can be reminded how we show up and how our behavior affects others, so I included some important notes that experienced musicians will find helpful as well.

We all make mistakes. We've all had our awkward moments in a jam. But pickers are usually forgiving if you respect the music and if you're willing to accept advice and make adjustments. Hopefully this material will make the journey a little easier and more fun.

There's always something to learn. What a joy it is that we get to play music together along the way!

Circle Up! Let's pick!

Jim Cloud

Resource Materials

- *How To Lose Friends and Alienate Pickers* - Clevis Carnegie
- *That's Not Bluegrass* - Collaborative Works of Naysayers and Elitists
- *Nobody Likes You* - Dr. Fill
- *Your Father Was Right ... You're a Loser* - Toni Robyns
- *Controlling Behavior; The Passive – Aggressive Method* - Sister in Law (1980-2013)
- *Fight Club; I am Joe's inflamed sense of rejection* - Chuck Palahniuk (1996)
- *Great Reasons to Play Banjo* - Nobody (ever)

Getting Started

Bluegrass music influences complementary genres as artists express and sometimes experiment with various musical tastes, but there is a protocol specific to the tradition of *acoustic bluegrass* music in an open jam. And it matters.

A different protocol may apply to old-time jams, Irish jams, and more forgiving rules will apply to beginner bluegrass jams but *everyone should develop good habits* and understand the sometimes subtle nature of proper etiquette in order to enjoy the collective experience and to prepare for participating at higher levels.

This material focuses on the protocol of *intermediate* and *advanced* bluegrass jams. The information is in four sections, the content of each being progressively more thorough.

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*If you practice, you get better
When you get better, you play with better players
When you play with better players, you play better music
When you play better music, you want to practice more
When you practice more, you get even better*

(source unknown)

Section I

Jams and Jam Busting

An open jam is typically made known publically and is available to anyone who can play/sing in the bluegrass style. Beginner jams are usually noted as such, and they are a great starting point for the inexperienced. These jams are less intimidating, have fewer implied restrictions and are typically run by experienced pickers who offer encouragement and advice.

If a jam is *not* noted as being for beginners, you can assume that some or all of the participants will be at an *intermediate/advanced* level. These pickers will assume that you have knowledge of the music and that you can play common chords in the context of songs, maintain tempo in common bluegrass time signatures and, most importantly, they will expect you to honor both the music and the musicians by following protocol.

What's a Jam-Buster?

A jam buster is essentially a tune, person or behavior that disrupts the flow of a good jam.

- **Tune:** The *tune* can indeed bust a jam if it's too complex, if it's unknown to most musicians in the circle, or if it simply doesn't fit in the bluegrass style.
- **Person:** A *personality* can bust a jam. Bluegrass lovers are some of the best people you'll ever want to know but some folks just aren't likable in some settings, including anyone who refuses to learn and play by the rules, and advanced musicians who become complacent or entitled. It's doubly frustrating when it ruins someone's experience.
- **Behavior:** The most common reason a jam is busted is because a participant *doesn't observe protocol and no one speaks up to correct their behavior, or the offender isn't receptive and refuses to make the adjustment.*

Jam busting behavior can be fixed. (See Sections II and IV)

What Does a Busted Jam Look Like?

Sometimes it's obvious, but it's often very subtle. Those who were previously fully engaged will seem distracted. Eyes may roll. Looks may be exchanged. Pickers will leave the circle for an extended time. Some may not return. Don't overthink it, just be observant and ask someone for feedback if you aren't sure of your impact.

Section II

The Basics - For Beginners

- **Respect The Tradition** Good bluegrass seems fluid, even easy. There's a reason for that. Follow protocol and do your part to make it better.
- **Observe** Visit intermediate/advanced jams simply to observe how pickers engage with the music and with each other.
- **Get Involved** There's no better way to improve than to participate.
- **Respect The Jam** If the skill and speed of a jam is consistently beyond your capability, leave your instrument in the case.
- **Find Your Crowd** There are pickers at every skill level. Find folks who are comfortable with your ability while challenging you to improve.
- **Invest In A Quality Instrument** Get the best instrument you can afford and, for some instruments such as the guitar, something suited for bluegrass and jamming. A quality instrument will project sound and tone with less effort, making it easier to hear and more enjoyable to play.
- **Use The Right Equipment** An electronic tuner, a capo (as applicable) and a proper bluegrass pick are essential
- **Relax** It takes courage to step into a circle. Those who embrace the discomfort will do so in pursuit of the ultimate joy of getting it right.
- **Be Patient** It takes time. Enjoy the ride.
- **Accept Criticism With a Smile** It might sting a little but be thankful that someone cares enough to help. Consider it a gift.
- **Adjust** If someone corrects your behavior, make the adjustment. If you need help doing so, ask for clarification.
- **Steal Shamelessly** Most pickers are happy to offer advice, tips and resources. Observe technique. Listen with intent. Ask questions.
- **Take Lessons** The fastest way to improve. Experienced pickers offer options. Ask for referrals when you go to jams.
- **Attend Jamming Classes** Experienced pickers lead classes that will help you gain confidence. (See *Addendum / Resources*)

For The Experienced

- **Welcome Everyone** Everyone belongs. And it's not a competition.
- **Extend a Hand** Teach. Advise. Openly acknowledge development.
- **Follow Protocol** New pickers learn through your example.
- **Say Something** Speak to those who may be clueless about their behavior. How else can you expect them to change/improve? Silence = lose/lose.
- **Be Gracious** Instruct new pickers with intent and compassion. Don't use blatant sarcasm. What might be funny to you can be fatal to new pickers.
- **Acknowledge Improvement** Encourage those who adjust and improve
- **It's Not About You** Don't dominate. Make sure everyone wins.
- **It's Not Band Practice** Don't bring your mates and take over the jam.

Section II (cont.)

Dos and Don'ts

- **Learn Protocol** Jamming protocol is essential. Learn the subtleties and enjoy the experience. (See *Section IV - Protocol*)
- **Observe Etiquette** Pay attention to dynamics and show respect.
- **Learn the Nashville Numbering System** It's essential, it's simple, it's widely used and it complements theory. (See *Addendum / Resources*)
- **Use The Proper Instrument** Some instruments detract from the experience. Stick with those that are commonly used for bluegrass.
- **Practice** “Do you practice with that?” is not a question you want directed your way. You don't need to be an expert, but be proficient.
- **Pay Attention** There's a lot going on. Don't miss important cues.
- **Direct the Tunes You Call** Don't expect others to read your mind. Give verbal and non-verbal direction to others as the tune progresses.
- **Communicate with The Tune Caller** Make sure they know your intention regarding solos/breaks, especially if you intend to pass when it's your turn.
- **Communicate with Other Pickers** Keep things flowing. Inform the next picker if you don't intend to play a solo.
- **Include Everyone** It's a circle of friends. Song selection, solos/breaks and vocals are all opportunities to share the experience.
- **Women In Bluegrass** The feminine influence is rich in bluegrass, yet women are sometimes marginalized in jams. Include everyone equally.
- **Song Selection** It's not singer-songwriter. It's not jam-grass. It's bluegrass. It doesn't have to be straight. It doesn't have to be traditional. But it needs to fit.
- **Volume** Many inexperienced pickers play too loudly. If you play aggressively or if you can't hear the instruments of the pickers on either side of you, you're probably too loud. Be especially mindful of volume when others are singing or soloing.
- **Don't Drag** This is another common newbie mistake. If you can't keep rhythm at tempo, don't participate on that tune. If most tunes in a particular jam are too fast, step out of the circle and simply observe.
- **Don't Play Over Others** A few complementary grace notes add depth but make sure vocals and each picker's instrumental breaks are clearly heard and fully respected. Wait for your turn to solo.
- **Play the Melody** Creative solos are great but begin and end on the melody and make sure the listener gets a sense of it along the way.
- **Know the Tunes You Call** Don't rely on sheet music or electronic devices. Knowing the music allows you to focus on directing the tune.
- **Be Humble** Pickers are there to make music together. The fastest way to bust a jam is to make it about you.

Section III

Bluegrass Instruments

Acoustic instruments customarily used in bluegrass music:

- **Fiddle**
- **Bass Fiddle**
- **Banjo**
- **Guitar**
- **Mandolin**
- **Dobro**

Few other instruments fit. It's about tone. Some instruments are too harsh, some are too loud and some are simply distracting.

Optional Instruments

- **Harmonica** Sure, it's fun and can add a great bluesy dynamic to the music. Follow the rules and you should be fine.
- **Autoharp / Dulcimer / Ukulele** These are complementary but can easily be overwhelmed by the volume, style and speed of bluegrass jams. Pickers at an intermediate/advanced jam may not offer you the opportunity to play solos/breaks.
- **Accordion** Here's a plug for a different take on bluegrass ... Bill Monroe once had an accordion player in his band. It's true. And it can work ... in the right hands. See *What's a Jam Buster* if the thought of doing a polka tune crosses your mind.

Not For Bluegrass

- **Pedal Steel** It's not practical or fitting. Play dobro instead.
- **Keyboard** It's easier to carry than a piano, but don't.
- **Juice Harp** Only on whimsical tunes. And there aren't many in bluegrass.
- **Tambourine** Incompatible and distracting.
- **Wood Saw** It works in some settings if you know what you're doing. Few do.
- **Tap Shoes / Clogging** Bluegrass definitely involves foot tapping, but it's not a dance; leave those shoes at home.
- **Bongos / Djembe** We're not beat-nicks and it's not a drum circle.
- **Wind Instruments / Horns** As my uncle used to say, "they ain't no spit valves in bluegrass".
- **Clappers / Slappers / Shakers** No. Just no.
- **Kazoo / Tin-Whistle** If you have to ask ...
- **Jawbone** Does anyone do that?
- **Hand Jive** ... or that?

Section III (cont.)

Percussion

Many bluegrass lovers don't play melodic instruments but they have an itch to participate. Sadly, some of these folks turn to percussion.

Pickers generally consider percussion instruments to be questionable (many say unacceptable) in an intermediate or advanced level bluegrass jam.

Why Not?

- It's not needed. The tempo in bluegrass is established and held down by the bass, the guitar provides rhythm, and the off-beat is maintained by the mandolin and sometimes the fiddle and banjo.
- It's distracting. The timbre and volume of most percussion instruments aren't complementary to bluegrass.
- It's disrespectful. Honor the music, the tradition, the jam and the blend of acoustic instruments

If You Must ...

- **Spoons / Washboard** You might get away with it on an occasional tune. Some won't tolerate it, especially if it's loud. Wooden spoons made for the purpose are safest. Use brushes on the washboard. Watch for objects aimed at your head.
- **Cajon** Perhaps the least offensive of percussion instruments at a bluegrass jam but you may be overlooked on solos.
- **Snare** Best to use brushes. Volume matters. Don't expect to be popular or play breaks.

Section IV

Jamming Protocol - The Details

Jams typically include direct involvement from each picker in three important ways; *song selection*, the *flow of each tune* and *communication with other pickers*. The following are some important components. Observation and asking questions will shorten your learning curve and help to build trust and connection with pickers.

- **Calling Tunes**

Most jams move in one direction around the circle as songs/tunes are called (chosen and directed) by each musician in sequence. This allows everyone to choose a favorite tune when their time comes. It's also a good opportunity to demonstrate singing or picking skills you've learned on a favorite tune.

Some jams have a looser structure where pickers call tunes randomly. In such situations and if you're unfamiliar with the group, it's a good idea to observe for a bit before suggesting a song – see if it feels like they will make room for you to do so. If they seem inviting, wait for a time that feels right and go for it.

Newbs: It's fine if you want to pass when it comes your turn to call a tune but keep in mind that others may assume you will pass every time, so you might need to be assertive if you want to call a tune in later rounds.

Experienced Pickers: It's an open jam. It's not your show. Don't call every tune just because you can. Invite others to do so, especially those who may seem reluctant.

- **You're the Director**

The person who calls the tune is responsible for communicating the key, how and when the tune is kicked off, providing direction to the group as the song moves along, and ending it cleanly. It takes a little getting used to but it's manageable and very fulfilling when you get it dialed in. This requires observation of other pickers, management of dynamics within the structure of the tune, and overall awareness.

Newbs: Directing the circle through a tune while singing and playing is sometimes daunting for those who aren't experienced. One way to prepare is to practice singing a tune beginning to end repetitively until it becomes rote/natural/easy, then add the instrumental piece and repeat until it's all second nature. This ease allows you to focus on other pickers and the dynamics of the circle rather than on lyrics and chord changes. Don't try to get too fancy with it at first.

Section IV (cont.)

- **Selecting Tunes**

You will notice that some tunes/songs are called regularly in circles. Those are safe to work with as you develop skills. You might have the opportunity to branch out and call lesser-known tunes at some point but calling familiar songs will reduce stress and, in turn, increase the fun factor. If someone seems unfamiliar with the tune you call, offer to give the chord progression before kicking it off. (The Nashville numbering system helps – see *Addendum / Resources*)

Newbs: It's not a jam-band and it's not a singer songwriter showcase. Experienced pickers will roll their eyes and fade if you call a tune that's of a genre completely unrelated to bluegrass (unless it has a chord structure that is easily adaptable and can be played using common bluegrass rhythms and styles). You'll get the same reaction if you call something with 20 verses or an overcomplicated tune with significant key changes or atypical time signatures. When in doubt, ask.

Experienced Pickers: A tune is not a jam buster just because you've grown tired of playing it. If someone calls a tune you don't much care for, smile and support them ... you'll get your turn.

- **The Key**

Inform the group of the key in which the tune will be played. Although experienced pickers may know the applicable key for instrumental tunes, it's a good idea to announce it anyway.

All instrumentals (fiddle tunes) are typically written in a specific key in which it should be played. Learn those tunes accordingly.

For songs, with lyrics, it's your choice of key based on the range of your voice and where it's most comfortable for you to sing. For men, it's usually best to sing in the highest key you are comfortable with, in the range of tenor if possible. Singing in the higher key is especially important in settings where you will need to be heard over the instruments, and the higher key is a cleaner bluegrass sound. That's why many bluegrass songs are in the key of A or B.

- **The Kick-Off**

Allow time for anyone who needs to check the tuning of their instrument. This is especially true when changing the key from the previous tune.

It's common for a tune to start with an instrumental break. If your instrument is customarily used to do so on the particular tune you call, do a quick visual check to confirm that everyone is ready to begin, then start the tune. It's a good idea to count it in verbally so everyone is prepared to support you from the beginning. If you aren't comfortable starting the tune, or if a different instrument is better suited, ask someone else will do so.

Section IV (cont.)

- **Tempo**

The person who calls the song, sets the tempo. If you ask someone else to kick it off, give them the tempo you prefer with some muted chops, or count it in verbally, to set the pace and prepare the group for their first pick strokes.

Newbs: Setting a pace that's slower than others in the group might prefer can be a literal and figurative drag but it's your song so the tempo is your choice. If speed isn't your skill set, call a tune that's written for and typically played at a slower tempo – something comfortable for everyone in the context of the song.

If you call a fiddle tune that is typically played at a tempo outside your comfort zone, *it's okay to ask the group to let you kick off the tune with a break at your pace and offer to let them pick up the tempo after you've done so.* Let them know that's what you're doing, start at your pace, and be prepared to signal the bass player and others near the end of your first break so they can pick up the tempo. You'll probably not get a chance to slow it back down so be prepared to just play rhythm in support of others and be ready to end the tune cleanly.

Experienced Pickers: Honor the tempo set by the picker who calls the tune. You might be able to speed it up after the caller takes his break. *But don't assume. Ask.* Otherwise just support the music at the callers tempo and call a tune at the pace you prefer when it's your turn.

- **Logistics – The Flow**

Managing the circle through a tune requires attention to some key elements.

Tunes go around the circle in the direction determined by the person who called the tune, each picker taking their turn at playing their break while others provide backup/rhythm and the occasional grace note to compliment the experience.

--- **Fiddle Tunes** (instrumentals)

Fiddle tunes typically consist of two separate parts, or phrasings, referred to as the "A" and "B" parts. The A part is played, generally twice on each picker's break, then the B part is played, also twice. Some fiddle tunes include more parts (A, B and C), each part played in sequence, but these aren't the norm.

Newbs: Some have described fiddle tunes as "call-and-answer", a result of the way such tunes are written and performed. It's as if there is a conversation occurring among the phrases within (and between) the A and B parts of the tune. Pay attention for this "conversation" next time you listen to these tunes.

--- **Songs**

It's generally best to direct the circle through the commonly known version of a song rather than trying to introduce a new take on it. Creativity can be fun if you communicate where you want to go with it but it's best to wait to do that until you know the pickers and the nature of the jam.

Section IV (cont.)

- **Solos / Instrumental Breaks**

Direction is often communicated nonverbally between the caller and others before and after each picker takes their break, though it sometimes requires direct verbal communication depending on the size of the jam, the dynamics, and the skill level of pickers.

- **How and When To Take Breaks**

How do you know when you're supposed to take a break? How do you begin and end your break? How do you communicate that you want to pass without interrupting the flow of the tune? How do you support others when they take their break?

The caller should communicate with each picker. Pay attention to them as it moves around the circle, especially as the series of breaks comes close to you. The caller should make brief eye contact with you ("you're up next") and perhaps nod as the picker next to you finishes their break.

Newbs: If you aren't yet skilled enough to take breaks, make sure you can contribute in other ways, rhythm, voice, etc. Just focus on supporting the other musicians as you learn and improve. Make sure the caller knows your intent to pass as it comes to you each time.

--- **Fiddle Tunes**

Since fiddle tunes have no lyrics, your turn to solo comes just after the picker before you in sequence. It's that simple.

--- **Songs**

Songs require a bit more coordination in order to keep the flow of verse/chorus and breaks moving properly. A primary consideration in leading a group through a song is the process of spacing the instrumental parts among the verses, and directing the pickers as to when to take their breaks. This requires attention to the size and dynamics of the group.

The song caller typically begins with the first verse/chorus after it's kicked off with a few instrumental bars. Then, just before completing the first chorus, the caller should look to the first person to take their break, typically the person to their immediate left or right. This cues that picker to be ready and indicates the direction the breaks will flow from that point.

Section IV (cont.)

The caller also determines how many pickers will take their break between each verse/chorus. Communication on these segments can also be subtle; some don't make eye contact with anyone before starting the next verse. Others prefer to communicate more clearly before they start the next vocal segment.

Newbs: Consider the number of verses and the number of pickers who will take breaks; this will tell you how many people will play solos between each verse/chorus. Try to space instrumentals intervals into a few at a time, allowing everyone to play a break along the way; the final group of pickers should then be prepared to do so before your last vocal segment and ending the song.

- **Communication**

The caller has given you the go ahead to take your break. If you intend to play it, respond with a nod and pick your heart out. If you don't intend to take your break, reply with a shake of your head; this tells the caller they should cue the next picker in sequence.

Newbs: Proper etiquette includes consideration of pickers on either side of you, particularly the next one up. Don't wait until you were to start your break to indicate to the next picker your intent to pass, or worse – not communicate with them at all. This leaves others unprepared/confused and interrupts the flow of the tune.

If you intend to pass, get that person's attention and indicate that you will not be playing when your time comes. This can be done with a shake of the head and a silent indication you will pass. Make sure to do so in time for them to prepare to continue the flow of the tune. Giving the next picker advance notice also allows time to indicate your intent to the caller when they offer your break.

If you intend to take your break there is no need to inform the next picker unless you just want to be clear, perhaps because they may assume you will pass if you've done so on previous tunes.

- **Ending the Tune**

A great tune can be enhanced by a proper ending and the responsibility falls once again on the caller to indicate when and how that happens. Look for one of these two things and get used to doing it when you call and direct a song.

Leg Kick (fiddle tunes). The most common way to end a fiddle tune is to simply raise your leg/foot just before the last phrase. This signals the group to prepare for final pick strokes and end the tune.

Tagging The Song (repeating a bar or two). There may be other indications but this is often done by the caller waving the headstock of their instrument just before repeating the last lines of the final chorus.

That's It! Let's Pick!

Addendum / Resources

Nashville Music Numbering System

You will sometimes see someone holding up fingers in different configurations as a tune is in progress. These folks aren't flashing bluegrass gang signs. They're communicating the numbers corresponding to the chord being played at the time, using the Nashville numbering system. You should know what it means to play a song in a given key and the practical implications of progressions within the 1 – 7 nomenclature.

It's widely used and much easier than explaining many of the progressions, particularly when communicating actual notes/chords to a group while the tune is in progress. It's especially helpful for those using a capo.

Essentially, the key (root) of the tune has the designation of the "1" chord. Other chords are in subsequent/relative order. For instance, a tune called in the key of B, with a 1/4/5 chord structure, includes the B (1) chord as the root and the E (4) and F# (5) chords, the progression of the chords being specific to the tune.

Jam Classes and Camps

Colorado Bluegrass Music Society, Denver, CO
<https://www.coloradobluegrass.org>

Wernick Method Jam Camps/Classes, Various locations in CO
<https://www.drbanjo.com>
Instructors: Kevin Slick, Ed Harvey, KC Groves

Bluegrass Camps West, Pagosa Springs, CO & Fort Collins, CO & Ghost Ranch, NM
<https://www.bluegrasscampswest.com>
Instructors; Pagosa and Fort Collins: Finders & Youngberg 5 (FY5)
Instructors; Ghost Ranch: Erin Youngberg, Aaron Youngberg, Mike Finders, Ryan Drickey

Pagosa Festival Jam Camps; Pagosa Springs, CO
<https://www.ksutpresents.org>
Instructor; Junior Camp: Gregg Daigle
Instructors; Adult Camp: Finders & Youngberg 5 (FY5)

Mountain Mamas Music; Berthoud, CO
<https://www.mountainmamasmusic.com>
Instructors: Various accomplished female musicians/artists

Trails Recreation Center, South Denver
<https://www.trailsrecreationcenter.org> (cultural arts)
Instructor: Scott Slay / Slay Your Creative

Other Resources - Facebook

Colorado Bluegrass Music Society
Denver Pickers
Boulder Bluegrass Pickers
Denver Jamgrass

Front Range Pickers
Colorado Grass Chat
Mountain Mamas Music

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