

Comparing How Amateurs and Professionals Jam

by Dennis Winge

Because of the unpredictable nature of a jam session, each participant's musicianship really comes to the fore in many ways. I have run many jam sessions that were open to the public over the years, and I offer this, not as a be-all end-all guide to jamming, but as a flashlight whereby musicians can become aware of certain elements that can make playing with other people a lot more fun for yourself and for everyone involved.

Professionals listen.

A pro musician listens to the entire group, and what they play is what they think contributes to the whole. They adapt what they would normally play to what is going on around them. On the contrary, amateurs tend to listen only to what they do. They largely play a supportive role to whoever the feature instrument of the moment is, whether it's a singer or another instrumentalist. They realize the highly significant and very creative role that a supporting the musician then taking the lead allows.

When someone else is soloing, for example, a pro accompanist knows that he or she can not only adapt to, but heavily influence the soloist by what they choose to add to the conversation. At times, they can even challenge the soloist with new rhythmic or harmonic contrasts. Thus, the pro never is bored while accompanying, unlike the cartoon that highlights what goes on in a typical guitar players mind during a performance. The caption goes, "Boring, boring, boring, Guitar Solo! Boring, boring." Pros don't feel this way because the art is the whole, not the sum of the parts.

Pros lead confidently.

On the flip side, when it is their turn to take the lead, a professional does it confidently and clearly. Sometimes in amateur jam sessions, everyone is paying for him or herself and therefore nothing is really happening because it's not clear who's taking the lead. If the jam were somehow translated into a moving picture, the viewer would not know where to focus.

Another common scenario is that an amateur will solo, then continue soloing, and it will never occur to them to let someone else have a turn because they are not listening to the whole thing. In addition, amateurs will sometimes accompany a soloist by playing single notes, and even worse, in the same register as the soloist. This could be a pianist playing not only chords with the left hand but single notes with the right, or it could be a saxophonist playing melodic lines while someone else is soloing. In either case, they don't realize that they are competing with and distracting from the soloist, and most likely is detracting from the overall experience for both the listener and the soloist.

Pros prefer structure.

Most of the time, pros prefer a set form in which they can improvise. It would be a certain chord progression most commonly, or it could be two or three sections of music that have been predefined in a certain form. Amateur musicians, on the contrary, can sometimes go on and on without developing anything, and that is why professionals know that having a set form helps keep a flow, and frees them up to improvise within it.

For example, the blues is a 12-bar form. Or it could be something like an eight measure A section that goes twice, followed by a B section that goes once. Rock musicians might call this “verse, verse, chorus” and jazz musicians will refer to this as an “AAB form.”

Even when a structure is completely free, that is still a construction. In other words, if it has been decided upon that the harmonic material for the jam will completely open, or only be one chord, those are still structures. If it has been decided that there is no time signature or groove, that is still a structure. Amateurs, however, make no such decisions ahead of time, and thus the music tends to not develop much.

Pros keep their ears open.

Once a set groove and/or key is defined, amateurs tend to stay there and they won't be able to adapt to new harmonic or rhythmic information coming at them. It all comes back to listening above all else. Pro musicians in a jam session are open to new harmonic and rhythmic directions, even if an initial pulse and key and/or tonal center has been previously established. They are ready for anything.

Pros also vary tempos, key signatures, and time signatures. From one jam song to the next, pros innately feel that the tempo, key, and even time signature would be nicer if it were different from that of the previous selection. They don't necessarily think about this consciously, but they feel it. Amateurs are happy to stay in the same key and the same tempo range for long periods of time, without necessarily realizing the rut that they have dug themselves.

Pros manage their volume in the room.

The easiest way to determine if your volume is appropriate is to record a session and listen back to it later. Most phones can record audio nowadays, and such recordings do fairly accurately reflect what was heard in the room at that moment. If you can manage to put it in the center of the room, even better. You might do well also to tell the group

that your recording is only for your own purposes, and you will never share it, unless you get their permission.

When you find a successful volume level, make a mental, or even a physical note of it so that you can use that volume on that specific piece of equipment in similar situations in the future. After a short while, you will know what settings are appropriate.

Guitarists: never stand behind your amp. I still see guitarists do this, and they have no idea how loud their amp is in the room because they are behind it, much to the chagrin of everyone else in the room.

Pros are not afraid to lay out.

Earlier, we talked about how a pro will adapt his playing to the group. This sometimes means playing nothing. This idea almost never occurs to amateurs. What if everyone played at full volume during a bass solo? You would never hear it. That leads to the next point.

Pros communicate.

Pros will gesture, nod, make eye contact to make the jam session run more smoothly. Amateurs tend to not make eye contact when they are playing. Understandably, they are concentrating and need to focus on their instrument, but they may not realize how much easier jam sessions are with a little non-verbal communication.

Examples of performance gestures are a slight nod of the head in your direction might mean, depending on its context, "It's your turn to solo," or "you played the melody on the way in, so please take us out now." Examples of gestures could be someone holding up a fist which means "last time," or pointing to their head which means "top of the form."

Pros are also not afraid to speak instructions or ask questions out loud. There is nothing wrong with this in an informal jam session. Some typical remarks might be "top," or "bridge," especially there is any confusion about where the ensemble should be in the form of the tune. Another one could be "fours," which means the person is suggesting everyone trade 4 bars with the drummer.

Pros vary dynamics.

Amateurs never consider that jams could be way more fun for all involved if they got quieter and louder at different points. Classical music uses dynamics to great effect, but because our pop music has become so heavily compressed so that we can hear it well

in our cars and on our phones, we have lost touch with the ancient art of dynamics in general.

Dynamic variations are a wonderful to experience, and in a jam session, can be very enjoyable to create spontaneously. Because amateurs tend not to listen to the whole, it might be difficult to try to initiate getting quieter in such a session, unless you have at least two or three other people who are on board with that at the same time. Sometimes there will be a few people who may take a very long time to catch on to the change in group dynamics, or perhaps never will.

So ask yourself. Do you listen more than you play? Do you take the lead when it's your turn, confidently and clearly? Are you familiar with common musical forms and use them to your advantage? Is your ear trained to recognize new harmonic and melodic information? Are you rhythmically diverse? How well do you manage your volume? Do you make choices based on the group? Do you communicate? Do you vary the dynamics? I hope this helps on your journey to great jamming, and best of luck.