

How to Jam

by Dennis Winge

I. Song Selection

Ok so you've been playing for a number of months or years and you meet another person who also plays and you think it would be fun to jam together. So you get your guitars out, tune up, and then the big question: "what should we play?" Well, if you don't happen to have memorized any of the same songs, here are some tips on how to pick some songs and/or progressions to jam on.

First of all, just to clarify, when we say "song selection" in this context, it really means a chord progression or two that the song is made up of, for the most part. In the context of an informal jam session, it would not be necessary or appropriate to try and show the other musician(s) the little intros, bridges, turnarounds, or any other potentially tricky nonessential part of the song. By nonessential I mean like a cool arrangement idea that helps put the song together. All too often two or three musicians will get together and one or two will spend time teaching the other person how to play a certain riff or some part of a song, and now the focus is on the teaching and the learning, not the jamming. For an easy and fun time jamming, Just focus on easy chord progressions.

These simple progressions do not even necessarily have to be from any specific song either. A 12-bar blues is the basis for thousands of songs, but just because you may decide to jam on one doesn't necessarily mean it has to be identified. In fact, it can be more fun to simply decide on a key and a tempo and a groove (time signature and rhythmic feel for the song.) Further, when 'deciding' on these elements, a picture is worth a thousand words. Tell your jam partner(s) that you will "set it up," meaning that you will play a bit of the progression in the key, rhythm and style you envision, and they can easily pick up on it that way rather than verbally describing it. Alternatively, invite them to "set it up." Pros do this all the time.

If the other person is not familiar with the progression (and every guitarist really should memorize the pattern of a 12-bar blues because it is so common and easy to jam on), then simply write it down for them, with the bar lines, nice and big for them to see. If they are not as good as you are, that's totally fine, they may be happy just to play chords while you improvise, and you can do the same for them. If they are better than you, then that's even better for you, because it's always great to have better musicians to play with. It makes you grow more quickly.

Beyond the 12-bar blues there are so many easy pop songs whose chord progressions are fun to jam on. At one point I began to write down some of these for my students and some of them are so simple.

Even just two chords can be fun, like these (all examples in 4/4 unless otherwise indicated. % means repeat previous measure, || is beginning or end of section, and / means another beat of previous chord):

<p>"Feelin' Alright" C7 F7 </p>	<p>"Iko Iko" D % % A A % % D </p>
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<p>“Sweet Child of Mine” part 1</p> <p> D % C % G % D % </p> <p>And this bit could be used as an ‘interlude’ between each soloist:</p> <p> A C D % A C D % </p>	<p>“Sympathy for the Devil”</p> <p> E D A E </p> <p>And this could be the ‘interlude’ between soloists:</p> <p> B % E % B % E % </p>
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Another option is to go to any jam track website or youtube video and copy down the progressions (and tempos) for the ones you like (or transcribe it which is to be discussed in another article.) There are so many more options, so hopefully from now on you’ll never be stuck again for material to use for informal jam sessions. Happy jamming!

II. Playing Together

In part 1, we talked about what easy and fun material two or more musicians can jam on even if they know nothing about each other’s musical preferences or styles. Now, let’s say for the purposes of this article, you start jamming together with another guitarist. What happens first? You start playing chords? You jump right into a solo? What about the melody of the song (if you’re doing a song as opposed to just a progression)? Is one of you going to sing it or try to pick out the melody on the guitar? How long should you solo for? How should we end the song?

Melody - First, you don’t necessarily need someone to play or sing the melody of the tune. When there’s a singer, sax, violin, or some other melodic instrument, then it is understood that the pianist or guitar would accompany their playing the melody, but after that, (assuming the musical context is indeed a jam session), the focus should be on improvisation. But when it’s a jam session between 2 instrumentalists like guitars, I personally am not a big fan of someone singing the melody just because they are attempting to convey the melody of the song that has been decided upon as the vehicle for improvisational exploration. As soon as someone does this, the whole vibe changes because the instrumental sections (the sections for which the whole engagement was formed in the first place) becomes merely a backdrop to the singer’s vocal performance.

If one of you knows the melody on guitar, then that is a great way to get you in the spirit of the tune and will fuel your improvisation on it. However, if it’s not easy for either of you to grab the melody, then don’t worry about it. After all, improvisation itself is spontaneous melody-making.

Soloing length – Obviously, you don’t want to carry on for hours in your solo, but you also shouldn’t worry about keeping it short and neat. This isn’t a wedding band where you are expected to take one short and sweet solo and that’s it. This is a format where you can stretch out, be creative, and try to implement the things you are working on. A good rule of thumb is, if you still have more creative ideas to explore or contribute, keep going. If you’ve run out of ideas and you’re just repeating yourself, move on.

Soloing tools – If you're unsure about what scale(s) to use over a certain progression, you can ask your jamming partner. If you think they are a better musician than you, listen to what they say but don't take it as gospel. Explore it for yourself, and then ask your teacher later. If they are not as good a musician than you, you can still bring it up but be very cautious about what they say. My dad used to always say "amateurs teach amateurs to be amateurs."

Comping – This is an abbreviation for the word "accompanying." It means you are supporting the soloist, usually with chords. Try to 1) not be louder than the soloist 2) keep good time 3) have a good 'feel' that's appropriate to the song 4) keep the 'form' of the tune – i.e. don't get lost with where you are. (This is also very important while soloing.) 5) Explore different ways to buoy the soloist – play with dynamics, maybe change the voicings you use on your chords, or arpeggiate the chords, or play bass lines, or guide tones only, or muted power chords, etc.etc.

Trading and Form – The 'form' means keeping the total lengths of each section intact and playing them in the right order. It can be a tool by which you can have more interaction and more fun. For example say you are playing "Knockin' on Heaven's Door" which is an 8-bar verse and an 8-bar chorus. You could each take solos on multiple times through the form. But then what about trading 16 bars each? How about 8 bars or 4 bars or even 2 or 1 bars each? It can be really fun to interact with each other this way and it really increases your ability to keep the form as well as transition from rhythm to lead playing without losing the form. What about soloing at the same time where no one 'comps'? It can be very challenging, but hugely rewarding as well.

Endings – When you are both done soloing and trading, one of you can play the melody if appropriate. Otherwise you can just give some kind of body language that you're ending (or look for similar queues from your jam partner), or you can simply say "last time" or something. You'll end it somehow sooner or later so you might as well speak up if they miss your queues and you feel the song is done. Also, you don't have to always make a big musical drama for each ending. Sometimes the simplest endings are the best.

Have fun, experiment, and jam with as many different people as possible. Keep a record of easy and fun tunes you like to jam on and it'll get easier and easier.

III. Jam Etiquette

Jam sessions are really fun. Musicians who've never even met before can make great music together with no preparation. Just think about how cool it is to know that you can go to any country in the world and not even be able to speak the language and yet have some very meaningful and mutually fulfilling experiences with people by speaking the universal language of music!

In part 1, we explored ways of deciding what to play. Part 2 discussed melody, soloing length, comping, trading, endings, etc. In this, part 3, we will address 'etiquette.' It's a funny word that people don't really talk about any more, and I use it here to mean how to be respectful to other players. There are no rules to a jam session, but learning some of these guidelines will prevent you from inadvertently annoying other players and help all the participants enjoy themselves even more.

Manage Your Volume While Accompanying – Part 2 briefly mentioned how someone playing rhythm should not be louder than the soloist, and this is worthwhile to restate here. When someone else is soloing, let them shine! Do not get in their way. Let them be louder than you but of course you still want to be heard and don't be afraid to be creative with rhythms, voicings, etc. to help the soloist build. If what you're playing is contributing to the musical moment, that's perfect. If you're just being a robot and playing the same thing over and over, chances are you can do more, but again don't get in the way too much. If there's any doubt about how well you are 'comping' (playing rhythm), simply ask the soloist afterwards. If they didn't really notice what you were doing, that means they liked it. ☺ After all, if there was something they didn't like, they would remember it.

Manage Your Volume While Sololing – We've all heard guitarists soloing too loudly. It's the soloist's spotlight-time and he/she is going to be noticed! Well, sometimes they get noticed in a way they weren't intending! If you can hear every note you play clearly AND the rest of the band, you're probably in the right ballpark. The best way to manage your volume, I have found, however, is to put a small recording device somewhere on the other side of the room where all instruments can be heard with equal balance, and also remember what setting your amp was on for that night. Listen back and see how your overall volume is and you will soon get a sense of how to set your amp for typical situations.

The Order of Soloists – There are no rules on this, but typically the person playing the melody (or "head" as they call it in jazz) or the one who calls the tune/ progression has the right-of-way to solo first. Obviously, everyone should get a turn. After everyone solos, the person soloed first should play the melody to take the tune out (the "out-head") or at least do something musically or verbally to indicate that this is the last time through the progression and the end is coming. Lesser experienced musicians, sensing a gap in the music, sometimes take a whole other solo. This is not recommended.

Trading – This was discussed in part 2, but as far as etiquette goes, simply follow the lead of the person who took the first solo or called the tune. If they play 4 or 8 bars and then gesture to the next person, they are attempting to initiate 'trading' in which case all soloists who took longer solos now play that same number of bars that the initiator played, and the order of soloists is the same as it was before. This all is done over the 'form' of the overall progression, and the leader may have to allow an unequal number of turns per soloist if the top of the progression is coming and he feels like it's time to take the tune out and accordingly plays the melody or end the tune before the next cycle is reached.

Take turns leading – Everyone should contribute an idea on what to play. In a jam session, it's everyone's opportunity to bring to the table something they love, in hopes that other musicians will find it inspiring as well. So, if you have a 'passive' personality, don't let other musicians dominate the direction and shape of the jam session. If you have something you love to play on, share it! Similarly, if you are a more 'dominant' personality, make sure everyone gets a turn. It's a great experience for all.

IV. Other Tips

Vary the tempos, feels and time signatures, and key – Even if you end up playing blues progressions the entire jam session, it will be a lot more fun if you vary the:

a. **tempo:** These can range from slow, medium-slow, medium, medium-fast, and fast, and they all feel completely different of course. For example, a very slow blues feels very different than a fast shuffle.

b. **feel:** you can vary whether the groove is straight or swung. A straight groove is where the 8th notes are even. To understand the difference, say “1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &” where all syllables are evenly spaced. This is what is known as “straight 8th notes.” This can also apply to 16th notes which would be “1 e & a 2 e & a 3 e & a 4 e & a” all evenly spaced. A shuffle, or swing feel is triplet-based. Say “1 & a 2 & a 3 & a 4 & a” out loud and you’ll see that each beat is subdivided into 3 whereas in the straight feel it was subdivided into 2 or 4. These two feels are very different.

c. **time signature:** Perhaps you and your jam partners won’t be ready or willing to try 5/4, 7/4 or other odd meters, but many jammers overlook the relatively easy but refreshing alternatives to 4/4 such as 3/4, 6/8 or 12/8.

d. **keys:** I know this one is obvious, but if you are conscious about mixing up not just what the tonic (root notes) are for each jam progression, but whether they are major, minor or bluesy, it will enhance your session greatly. If you are in C, for example, the home chord for major will be C or perhaps Cmaj7; for minor it will be Cm or Cm7, and for ‘bluesy’ it would be C7 (or at least a progression whose home chord is C but one or more of the other chords have a the b7 of C in it such as Bb or Gm. Those of you familiar with modes will identify this sonority as mixolydian, but it is not necessary to know modes to use the concept of harmonic variety from one tune to the next.)

Embellish or vary the chord voicings – When you’re playing rhythm, look for ways to keep the same progression going around over and over interesting for both yourself and the soloist. For example, if the progression is just | Bm | E7 | how many ways can you play each of those chords? Can you play variations such as Bm9 and E9? Can you play inversions such as Bm/D or E/G#? Can you add embellishments such as the 11th to the minor chord or 13th to the dominant chord?

Simplify the chords – This may seem in direct contradiction to the point above, but it means that if you see a B713b9 or something you don’t know how to play, just stick to a basic major, minor or 7th chord (unless the chord is m7b5 or dim7) and you’ll be fine. When in doubt, you can always lay out if there are others to carry you through that sections. Alternatively, just ask your jam partner(s) about any chords you may not know beforehand what you might be able to substitute for those. Sure, they could teach you how to play the unfamiliar chords, but you don’t want to risk losing a good rhythmic feel by struggling with tricky or unfamiliar voicings.

Vary the articulation – Perhaps it’ll be stylistically appropriate to find alternative ways to play chords other than to strum them. For example, you could arpeggiate them with a pick, play fingerstyle, play all down strokes, use palm muting, and much more.

Vary the rhythm – Perhaps it’ll be stylistically appropriate to find alternative ways to

Vary the dynamics – As a rhythm player you are still improvising just as much as the soloist, and this includes how loud or soft you play. You can actually control, to some extent, the whole shape of the other person’s solo by varying the dynamics of the accompaniment. If you do it tastefully, they will thank you for it. If you do willy-nilly it

without listening to what they are doing and try to be supportive, however, you may get some dirty looks (or not be invited next time).

Add some bass lines – Sometimes you can mimic a bass player if there is not one present. Perhaps you strum a few chords and connect one or two of them with a short bass line. This can really spice up a rhythm part. Don't overdo it, though.

Decide whether chord charts will enhance or detract – Not everyone is comfortable looking at chord charts during a jam session. Especially if the chart seems difficult, it can feel like work for them. On the flip side, it can save you from having to teach a chord progression to others in the session, and it saves them from having to remember it on short notice.

The best way to see if using paper during a jam session is to show them what you have in mind and ask them if they would be comfortable reading it. If they say yes and yet still struggle to play it, you might want to scrap the idea and move to something else.

If you do use charts, make sure the both the chords and the song form is clear and simple. For example, perhaps everyone can play the whole song form, then the solos are only one section of that, and then after everyone solos, they play the form again. If it's a song you know and they don't, make executive decisions on where you can simplify the arrangement. Remember, this is a jam session, not a rehearsal.

Have fun, experiment, and jam with as many different people as possible. Keep a record of easy and fun tunes you like to jam on and it'll get easier and easier.