



The Joys of Jamming

By Stephen C. Butler January 19, 2024

I was very lucky to grow up in a time when people sang together in groups, with or without musical instruments. I believe it wasn't until the mid-1980s when lightweight stereo headsets started covering both our ears that popular music became an individual pursuit. So, until that time songs were everywhere and people listened and sang along. On the school bus we sang "My eyes have seen the glory of the burning of the school." On the playground, girls skipped rope to "Cinderella dressed in yella, went upstairs to kiss a fella." At school assemblies each week we sang multiple verses from memory to "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," "America the Beautiful" and "The Star-Spangled Banner." In our church we sang all the verses to all the hymns. At Scout meetings the Troop leader led "They built the ship Titanic to sail the ocean blue." And at summer camp we learned "The Lord said to Noah there's gonna be a floody-floody. Get my children out of the muddy-muddy." Everywhere I went, people sang together in groups, from songs memorized and passed down from one generation to another.

In my early years, there were seldom any musical instruments involved, except in church or school. But when the Folk Music Revival came our way in the mid-1960s, guitars became all the rage. Friends started singing during lunch period at school and the music teacher was happy to

lend me a bass. It wasn't long before we started playing for civic groups and talent shows, and occasionally attending performances at this wonderful place called Caffe Lena.

After high school I put away the bass for a while but would get it out every now and then. When I retired, I found some friends had started playing Bluegrass in something called a Jam. In the 60s we used to call these get-togethers a Hootenanny. Folks gather in a circle, someone starts a song, everyone plays along, then each person or group of instruments has a chance to play the melody. No one has to lead a song or play a solo if they don't want to. Listeners are always welcome and I find it a whole lot of fun.

As with many activities there are some commonly accepted "best practices." When choosing a song to lead, it's a good thing to pick a simple one in an easy key with not more than four or possibly five different chords. Especially with beginners, use one with two or three chords in the key of G or C. And I found these "Ten Commandments of Jamming" online:

1. Pay attention to what's going on. Sit so that you can see and hear the other musicians.
2. Keep the beat, do not rush, do not drag.
3. Keep your instrument in tune and play in tune.
4. Play extra softly if someone is singing.
5. The musician who starts a tune is generally the one who decides when to end it.
6. Do not change keys more often than necessary.
7. Do not practice licks on your instrument between tunes.
8. Do not come to a jam session expecting to impress others with your virtuosity. Jam sessions are opportunities to share tunes and songs.

9. Play some tunes that everybody knows.

10. It is never a sin to play too softly.

There are several different types of jams in the greater Capital District area. Caffe Lena holds a Beginners Slow Jam every Thursday afternoon from 1:00-3:00 pm called Bluegrass, Folk and More. Their evening Bluegrass Jam is on the Third Wednesday of each month from 7:00 -9:00 pm. In Glens Falls, the Crandall Library's Bluegrass Jam is held on the first Thursday of the month, October thru March from 6:30 – 8:30 pm. The Parting Glass in Saratoga holds its Celtic Music jams Wednesday evenings at 7:00 pm. The Capital Region Blues Network holds a jam every Sunday at 7:00 pm at McCreary's pub in Albany, NY. The Old Songs Community Arts Center in Voorheesville, NY holds several jams each month. Their Picking and Singing Gathering in on the second Sunday from 1-4:00 pm. The Bluegrass Jam is on second Mondays 6:30-9:00 pm. The Old Time Jam is on second Wednesdays from 7:30-9:00 pm. And their Traditional Irish Slow Jam is on Third Wednesdays from 7:30-9:00 pm. Check their website at Oldsongs.org in advance because some don't meet in the summer. On Facebook, check out "Capital District Old-time Jams and Events," and "North Country Bluegrass Jams." Or search online for "Jams Near Me" and see what's there. I find it helpful to attend a jam and listen before bringing my instrument. Jams almost always welcome listeners as well as players. And what's a performance without an audience?

Happy Jamming!