

BEYOND BUG JAMS

All of the tips from BUG jams introduction apply. Choose songs specific to each jam. If you know kind of instruments you will be playing along with and the type of songs they might enjoy choose from your repertoire.

Certain instruments do better in specific keys. Banjos like G, guitars like E. Check on the internet the hand positions for simple chords on guitar to give yourself chord hints. Learn to read guitar player's chords. This is very useful if you get lost or don't know the song well.

LEADING SONGS IN JAM SESSIONS

Because there are so many great songs out there, and such a wide variety of musical interests among people, it can be surprisingly tough to find songs that most of the people 1) know, 2) know how to play in a particular key, and 3) remember the lyrics. The more obscure and complex the song, the less likely anyone else there will know it well enough to play. It's OK to play alone, and maybe some will be able to follow you and jump in, at least on the chorus.

Choose the Song

It is important to choose a song that you know well.

Including the chords and lyrics, without burying your head in a page. It is OK to have the page for reference, but you should be able to look up most of the time. Having the song memorized makes you look good!

Stay with the common first position chords, for the first couple of times through.

Announce the name and key of the song clearly before starting.

Remember that the letters B, C, D, E and G sound almost exactly alike from across the room. Use phonetics – Key of D, “delta”. Key of G, “golf”. Key of C, “charlie”.

State which version of the song if possible.

There are big differences between the Hawaiian “Iz” version of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” and the Judy Garland movie version.

Get your head up and watch other players.

You need to make eye contact to delegate the solo anyway. If you see people drifting off the beat, play a little louder so that they can hear you better. The first beat of the measure gets extra emphasis.

At most jams, song leadership usually goes around the circle. At other jams, there may also be one designated leader for the whole evening. Generally the song leader gets to:

choose the key
set the tempo

start and end the song
delegate the solo breaks

If you are not up all of that, it is OK to choose the song then ask someone else to lead it or sing it – if they actually know the song. IT IS UNFAIR TO ASK SOMEONE TO LEAD A SONG THAT THEY DON'T KNOW.

If you want to do a classic bluegrass song like “Rocky Top”, but you want to do it in the key of D to fit your voice better, remember that most people will know it in the original artist’s key of G. Some intermediate and most advanced players can transpose keys on the fly, but many cannot. It can help to have a few printed sheets to pass around, showing the new chords.

Hint: It is a good practice to pick a favorite song and transpose it to several keys. That is how you build the skills needed to transpose on the fly. When choosing keys, think: CAGED +F”. C, A, G, E, D and F are the most common keys used for most fretted instruments, because they are usually easy shapes to grab.

Introduce the Song

When you announce the key of the song, we know a lot of information. We instantly know all the “usual suspects” for chords. If the song is in G, we know to expect G, C, D and Em most frequently, with Am and Bm as possibilities too.

You can also provide additional clues to the structure of the song: “this is a 12-bar blues in D”, “this is a 12-bar blues with a quick four”, or “this is a basic I – IV – V song but has a II7 chord in the second line of the chorus”.

Leading the Song

Give each measure all four beats (three beats in 3/4 time). Many beginning players play alone, and get in the bad habit of rushing ahead into the next phrase as soon as they finish a lyric line even though there are two, three, or four beats between phrases. But the rest of the group will be expecting all of the beats in a measure. In most cases, each chord gets either two or four beats. It is fairly rare to have three beats and a new chord for just one beat.

Starting and Ending Songs

This is one of the more important things a group can do. If the group starts together and ends together, everything in between is mostly forgivable. There is something particularly satisfying about finishing together.

Generically most songs start with a verbal four count, then four or eight beats worth of the first chord, then launch with the lyrics.

Song endings are most commonly:

- play two beats of the I chord, two beats of the V chord, and end on the I chord
- play the primary chord progression over four beats, just like you started
- repeat the last lyric line, then end with four beats of the key chord (tag)
- vamp out (if the style calls for a vamp, or a standard ending figure)
- repeat the last line and fade

Signaling the end:

- foot kick to indicate the last four bars, or the finishing phrase
- some obvious statement like “big finish” or “last line again”
- “tag” is shorthand for “play the last line / last phrase again to finish”

New Songs

- Bring a few copies to pass around if it is an obscure song, complicated, or in an unusual key
- Use shorthand if you can -- “This is a 1 – 4 -- 5 song in D, with a 2 chord in the verse”
- Warn people of any unusual chord changes
- Verbally walk people through the chord changes ahead of time
- Demonstrate any usual fingerings or chord shapes that you will use -- “This is my Bm chord”
- When leading try to stay with simple first position chord shapes that are easily seen

Within the song you can use a lot of verbal cues like, “flute solo from the top”, or “guitar solo, take a verse”. Hopefully everyone should know which is the verse, bridge, and chorus of the song (not all songs have all three elements). If you are leading a song, try to stay with the common first position chords, at least for the first couple of times through.