

# GET<sup>25</sup> INTO WAYS TO A ENHANCE REAL YOUR JAMMING JAM EXPERIENCE

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By  
**Nicole  
Solis**

FOR THOSE OF US who spend most of our musical careers practicing by ourselves, jamming with other people can be a revelation. Jamming is social and interactive, pushing you to find out how to take that lick you've worked so hard to master and put it to good use. It can also be overwhelming at first. Rather than being solely responsible for the sound, you're suddenly just one part of the whole. You have to learn new songs on the fly, there's no stopping and starting when you make a mistake, and you're doing all this in front of other people.

Yet, it's not a performance. Those people are your allies, not your audience. "It's more like basketball than theater," says Jason McInnes, a guitar teacher who leads several regular jams at Chicago's Old Town School of Folk Music. "Everybody wants the game to keep going, so they're going to do everything they can to keep it going."

By spontaneously making music with other people, you learn to be flexible and roll with the punches. Whether you're new to jamming or an old hand at it, these tips will help you better prepare for a jam, participate more fully once you're there, and maybe even expand your repertoire of tricks to show off at your next session.

## BEFORE THE JAM

Find the right jam for you and make sure you're prepared for it.

### 1 MATCH THE JAM TO YOUR JAMMING GOAL.

Different kinds of jams can help you work on different aspects of your playing, so think about what you want to get out of a jam. Jamming is a cornerstone of the blues, bluegrass, and jazz communities, so if you want to focus on one of those styles, you should be able to find a jam to sit in on. If you're ready to get a taste of performing, seek out a stage jam, where musicians actually play into mics, sometimes even for an audience. Though some stage jams limit the number of musicians onstage, many will let lurkers play in the back until they feel confident enough to step in front of a mic. Beginners can get their feet wet at slow jams (where songs are played at slower tempos), where they can get used to playing with other people and even switching off between rhythm and lead. If your main goal is just meeting other musicians, you'll be able to do that in any jam, though you'll get more out of a jam with musicians who are close to your playing level. However, playing with musicians who are slightly more advanced can help you grow faster as a guitarist. Just make sure you're up for a bit of a challenge. Knowing what kind of jam to look for will help you focus your

search as well as your energy. If you get overwhelmed, remind yourself why you're doing this.

### 2 ASSESS YOUR STRENGTHS.

"Everybody has something to offer in a jam," McInnes says, "It's like a food analogy. If we're going to have a potluck, a simple macaroni salad can be just as useful as a big bowl of chili that took two days to make." You might bring rock-solid timing—the ability to lay down a metronome-like beat that the rest of the players can follow. Or you might know just the right fill to play at any given moment. When I went to my first bluegrass jam, I didn't know a single bluegrass song, but I can sing harmony easily—a helpful skill when nearly every song has three-part vocal harmony. Use your own skills—whatever they are—to contribute to the overall sound and help develop your self-confidence.

### 3 SCOPE OUT THE LOCAL JAMS.

To find a jam you might want to sit in on, talk to fellow players, teachers, and music store employees. When you show up, check out the scene before you even take your instrument out of the case. Try to get a sense of the rules that they follow. Is there a leader who runs the show or do people go around the circle, each calling a song? Are there other people who play at your level? Do the people seem friendly or fun? You might not find the perfect jam, but as McInnes says, "the most

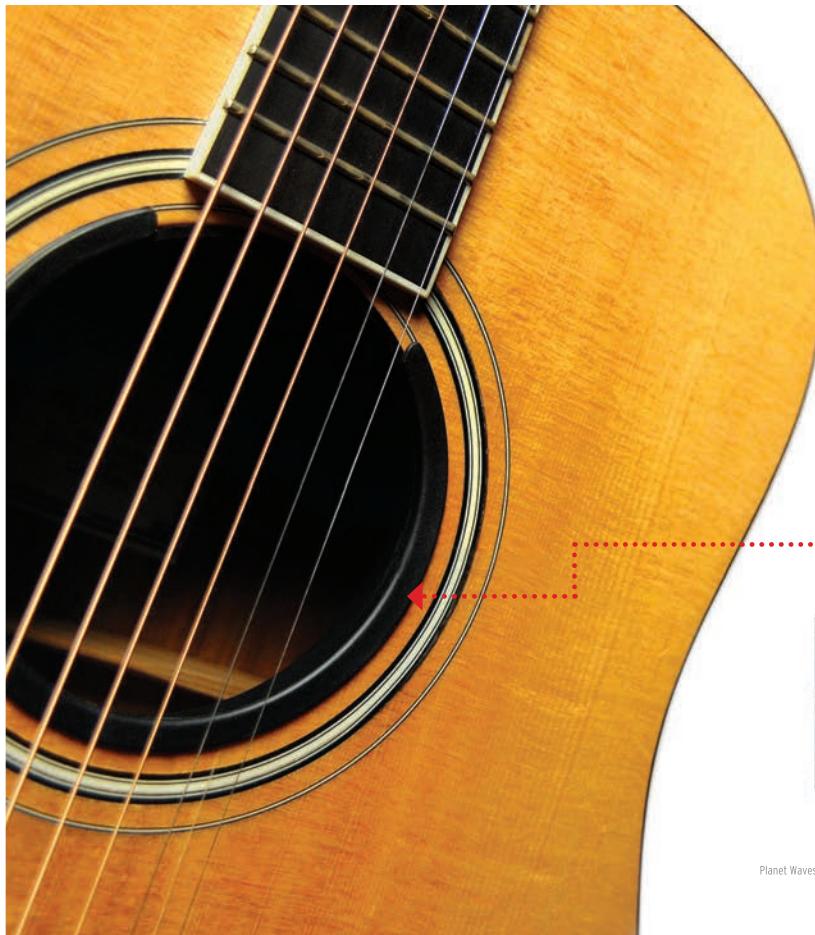
important thing is finding people who make you comfortable no matter what level you're at."

### 4 ASK BEFORE YOU JOIN IN.

Not every jam will welcome you, but don't take it personally. Some jams limit the number of instruments or players to get a tight, band-like sound. In other jams, the community of people playing together is what's important, not the quality of the sound. Whatever kind of jam it is, introduce yourself during a break between songs and ask if you can play. If it's a tighter jam, you'll earn respect for showing good manners, and you can take a guitar seat when one opens up. If it's a truly open jam, you'll be welcomed—and you'll have already started to get to know the people playing near you.

### 5 TUNE YOUR GUITAR.

Before you step into a jam, make sure your guitar is in tune. Once the jam starts, it's good manners to step out of the circle to tune. A clip-on tuner will save your sanity when you try to tune your guitar at the same time as the other guitars, violins, banjos, ukuleles, and basses. If you can't hear your instrument with all that racket going on, face a wall or corner as you tune so the sound bounces back at you.



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## PLAYING RHYTHM

When you get a big group of musicians together, there needs to be some way to control the chaos and channel it into music. That is the rhythm. At the most basic level, your role in a jam is to play the right chords at the right time and in time, something you'll be doing for 90 percent of your jamming time. Here are some tips to help you play better rhythm on the fly.



### 6 LISTEN TO THE CUES FOR THE CHORDS.

Richard Colombo, who leads several jams at Artichoke Music in Portland, Oregon, warns, "In most jams, they'll say, 'This song is in D,' but they won't say what the changes are." If you're having trouble figuring out the chord progression, look at and listen to the other guitar players. Train yourself to read other guitarists' fretting hands when they play open chords. G, C, and D are easy to tell apart, C and F can be a little tougher. But also listen for the little hints that not only tell you a chord change is coming but what chord is coming up. Often, when a chord is about to change from a I to a IV, a guitar player will play a I7, as in **Example 1**. Another common cue is the bass walk-up, where the bass notes move up to the root note of the next chord. **Example 2** shows a few different walk-ups in the key of G. Notice how the walk-up from G to C sounds different from the walk-up from G to D? Learn to hear that difference in a jam and you'll be able to tell which chord is coming next. When you become more experienced, you can play them to telegraph the chord changes to newbie jammers.

### 7 SIT OUT AN UNFAMILIAR TUNE.

If you still have trouble with the chord changes, McInnes says, "Don't be afraid to sit out for a while. I don't mean leave. Watch and listen." You can mute your strings with your strumming hand, but still fret the chords to practice. By the end of the tune, you'll have a better sense of the progression, and, as McInnes says, "you'll get it the next week."

### 8 COMPLEMENT THE BASIC RHYTHM.

If there are a lot of instruments strumming the same rhythm, you can improve the overall sound of the jam by playing something different, as long as you keep the same general feel. Try simplifying your strum pattern, highlighting the accented beat to give more definition to the sound. If everyone is boom-chucking away on "Folsom Prison Blues," scale it down to a tic-tac rhythm (**Example 3**). Palm

mute near the bridge to get a punchy staccato sound that will clearly articulate the beat and help clean up the overall rhythm. To add some texture, play a simple fingerpicking pattern or add a piano- or banjo-like sound with cross-picking, as in **Example 4** (based on Merle Haggard's "Mama Tried"), which uses a simple down-down-up picking pattern on the open chord shapes.

**9 BE THE BASS.** Bass players have an exalted role in a jam, and rightly so. As the arbiter of the beat, the bass player is the metronome everyone should follow. If there's no bass in a jam, it's up to some noble guitar player to take on the role. The easiest way to "play bass" on guitar is to hit just the root note on the downbeats. If you want to get a little fancier, play the root and fifth of each chord, as in **Example 5**, based on a standard progression in G. To really impress your friends, try varying the rhythm a bit, as in **Example 6**, which is based on the verses of "Help" by the Beatles.

### 10 LET THE LEAD BE THE LOUDEST THING.

One guitar, with its six strings ringing, can be loud, but a roomful of them can be deafening. No matter how many instruments there are in a jam, you should always be able to hear the singer or soloist. If you can't, quiet down. If someone with a quiet voice is singing, lighten your touch, play partial chords or even power chords, or take this as one of the few opportunities you may have to play fingerstyle without getting drowned out.

### 11 USE YOUR CAPO TO VARY THE TONE.

If two or more guitars are playing the same chord shapes, you can add some variety to the sound by playing out of a different capo position. For example, if the song is in D and the other guitarist is playing D, G, and A chords without a capo, capo to the second fret and play C, F, and G chords. To complement C, F, and G chords played without a capo in the key of C, capo to the fifth fret and play G, C, and D. You'll add a lot of range to the overall sound and still use simple chord shapes.

#### Common Capo Positions

Open	G	C	D	A	E
Capo II	A	D	E	B	F#
Capo III	B	E	F	C	G
Capo V	C	F	G	D	A

The open chords will sound as indicated when capoed.

**Ex. 1**

**Ex. 2a**

**Ex. 2b**

G      C      G      D

**Ex. 3**

F      B♭      F      C      F

**Ex. 4**

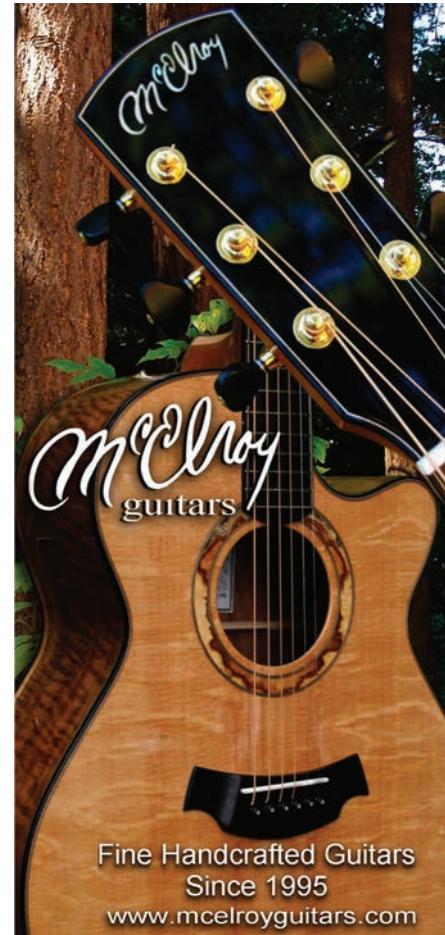
D      G      D      G      A

**Ex. 5**

G      C      D      G

**Ex. 6**

G      D      E<sub>m</sub>      B<sub>m</sub>



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## PLAYING LEADS

Somehow, the leads you can play perfectly at home become more challenging in front of other people. That's a good thing. Taking a solo in a jam teaches you how to keep your playing consistent even as you play in different environments. It often forces you to improvise as you learn to recover from mistakes. All this helps you become a better player. And if you've never taken a solo before, a multilevel or beginner jam is a great place to start. The bar is low: just keep the music going. "There's nothing more beautiful and wonderful than seeing someone take a solo for the first time," says Colombo. "Even if there are some clunkers."

**12 KEEP YOUR SOLOS SIMPLE.** Simple and good is always better than complex and not-so-good, but in a jam, when you're competing to be heard above different instruments playing different things, a simple solo can be truly powerful. "A two-note solo with rhythmic variation and volume variation is so much more impressive than a solo played by someone who knows all their scales up and down the neck but doesn't have any musicality," McInnes says.

**13 PLAY THE MELODY.** No matter what style of music you're playing, you can always play the melody as your solo. After all, you already know it works with the chords. Before the jam, practice on one of the songs you plan on calling. Melodies are often based around chord tones, so sing the first melody note, then pick the notes in the first chord to see which note you're singing. Continue working through the song like this, gradually putting together the contour of the melody. When you get a better feel for it, try to play the whole melody more fluidly. Eventually, you'll be able to hear melodies on the fly. And then you can add fills, harmony notes, syncopation, or other embellishments to really make the solos your own.

### Ex. 7

Ex. 7 is a musical example consisting of a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a guitar tab. The tab shows a sequence of notes on a six-string guitar neck. Fingerings are indicated above the strings: 0-2, 1-3, 0-3-0, 3-1, 2-0. The tab is divided into measures by vertical bar lines. The music starts with a series of eighth-note chords, followed by a measure of eighth-note chords, then a measure of eighth-note chords, and finally a measure of eighth-note chords.

### Ex. 8

G

Ex. 8 is a musical example consisting of a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a guitar tab. The tab shows a sequence of notes on a six-string guitar neck. Fingerings are indicated above the strings: 0-1, 2-3, 3-3, 3-3, 0-0, 0-0. The tab is divided into measures by vertical bar lines. The music starts with a series of eighth-note chords, followed by a measure of eighth-note chords, then a measure of eighth-note chords, and finally a measure of eighth-note chords.



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## LEARN HOW TO LEAD A SONG

At some point, it will be your turn to call a song. Be prepared. These simple tips will help you know what kinds of songs to bring and how to prevent that deer-in-the-headlights feeling so you can confidently lead your song.

**16** **BRING EASY SONGS.** Before the jam, think of some songs that you like, that you know the chords to, and that aren't too complicated. Two- and three-chord songs are great. "Pay Me My Money Down" is a popular song at the jams McInnes leads. "There are only two chords and the chord change happens on the word 'money' every single time," he says. "If you have 50 beginners in the room, everyone can get it right away."

### 17 TEACH YOUR JAMMERS SOMETHING NEW.

When you're thinking about what songs to bring, Colombo says, "Bring something that everybody knows and something that you can teach us, so we can learn something new." The first few songs called tend to be simpler ones, to give people time to warm up. But as people feel more comfortable and confident, you can introduce more challenging songs. When you call the song, make sure to warn the jam about anything that might be



a little unusual, like the minor chord in the chorus or the tricky timing.

**18** **CREATE A CHEAT SHEET.** In a big jam, you might only be able to call one song, but if the circle is small enough, you might get to call two or three. The more songs you call, the more likely you are to experience "jamnesia," that

strange phenomenon that causes the names of every song you've ever known to disappear from your memory the second it's your turn to call one. To cure it, write down the names and keys of your songs. If you have trouble remembering a line or which order the verses go in, jot down some notes to jog your memory. I keep all my jam songs in an iTunes playlist (with my key in the Grouping field), so I can practice along with the recordings. To create my cheat sheet, I export it to Excel, clean it up, sort by key, print it out, and keep it in my pocket whenever I jam. Dorky? Absolutely. But it's also very handy.

### 19 MEMORIZE THE LYRICS.

It's OK to reference a songbook if you have trouble remembering words, but try not to read from one. Jamming is a social experience. Reading lyrics out of a songbook as you sing is kind of like reading an article to your friends during a dinner-party conversation. When you read words, you're no longer making music together because you're disengaged from what's happening at that moment. "If we get away from the books in the jam," McInnes says, "we open our ears and eyes to the larger musical picture."

JEN FUJIMOTO



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## LEARN THE LANGUAGE

Like any kind of social group, jams have their own language and ways of communicating. Think of this as your jamming phrasebook. You won't necessarily be fluent after reading this, but you'll be able to get by just fine.

**20 KNOW CHORD NUMBERS.** In a multi-instrument jam, there needs to be a common vocabulary for chords. Rather than learning all the names of every chord in every key, most jammers use chord numbers. The main ones you need to worry about are the I, IV, V, and vi chords in the most popular keys, as in the chart below. That knowledge and a capo will let you play almost any song.

### Four Chords in Five Keys

Key	I	IV	V	vi
G	G	C	D	Em
C	C	F	G	Am
D	D	G	A	Bm
A	A	D	E	F#m

**21 MAKE EYE CONTACT.** Once a song starts, the talking stops. So how do you know if the song leader is asking if you want to take a solo on a song or sing harmony? Or if the person next to you doesn't want to take a solo, but is asking if you want to? Eye contact. That piercing gaze doesn't mean you're doing something wrong, it's usually asking you a question related to whatever is happening at that particular moment or is about to happen. That's why, as much as possible, you should be looking up at the other musicians. To take the solo, nod your head and start playing. To sing harmony, nod your head and start singing. To pass, shake your head and look to the next person.

**22 LEARN HOW TO KNOW WHEN THE END IS NEAR.** The song leader will usually gesture to signal not only that the song is about to end, but also how it will end. Most jams or even regions have their own cues. If the leader rotates his hand, head, or instrument, he'd like to repeat the last line or two. If she makes a quick downward motion with her instrument or hand, she'd like it to slow down at exactly that moment for a *ritard*. And in some parts of the country, the song leader will stick a foot out to signal that a plain old ending is about to happen. A lot of veteran musicians don't bother giving physical cues. Instead they rely on subtle music cues or expect you to know how a song should end. So keep your eyes and ears open.

## KEEP THE JAM GOING

**23 EMBRACE YOUR MISTAKES.** The bad thing about jams is that you can't stop and repeat a section if you make a mistake. But you will soon learn that this is a really great thing. One of the most valuable lessons jams can teach you is not to dwell on your mistakes. As Colombo says, "Who cares? Mistakes go by really quickly." McInnes adds, "Be ready to make about a billion mistakes," and let them pass by. Everyone will make mistakes, from tiny flubbed notes that no one notices to a train wreck that ends the song. It's an accepted part of jamming. You don't need to apologize. Plus, mistakes give you something to work on before the next jam.

**24 KEEP IT MOVING.** As McInnes said, everyone in a jam has the same goal: to keep playing the song. Don't noodle, tune, or chat too long between songs. Be ready with a song to pick when the circle comes around to you. Try to pay attention when someone calls a song (though it is OK to ask them to repeat the name and key if you didn't hear it).

**25 HAVE FUN.** If practicing is like studying, jamming is like a party. It's a celebration. Compliment people on their playing. Listen for the jokes some people put into their music. Sing harmony on a song you love. Answer someone's lick with a lick of your own. Try something new. Hang around afterward for a beer or coffee and meet your fellow jammers. You already have so much in common: these are people who love the same



music you do. Many of my musician friends are people I started jamming with nearly ten years ago, when we were all just learning. Now, we're all much better musicians, and we still get together to play music, share stories, and geek out over each others' instruments. What could be more fun? **AG**

**Nicole Solis**, former editor of *Play Guitar!*, plays bluegrass mandolin in the Barefoot Nellies and writes about music, food, and various other topics.