

Successful Jamming

Part 1

Jamming (also known as improvising) is something that we are all familiar with, and it occurs in many styles of music. It is something that most musicians have taken part in - whether it's jamming with your buddies in a basement, or actually taking it to the stage with a band; you can even jam on your own. Think about all the times you have found yourself in one or more of those situations. Think about all the positive things that have come out of it. You get to know your instrument better. You get the chance to try out new riffs, rhythms, melodies, and scales that you have been practicing, or even create new ones on the spot. You get to make a musical connection/bond with other musicians. But best of all, in my opinion, it's a release. No rules or boundaries; complete musical and artistic freedom. Of course when indulging in this "complete freedom" it can be easy to lose track of what is the foundation of a good solid jam session. What I'm speaking of is **balance**. Without an understanding of balance things can fall apart or just in general not sound good. A balanced jam will be both fun to perform and listen to. In this article I will discuss the different elements that contribute to a well balanced jam in the context of playing with a group of musicians. The first element we will discuss is **awareness**.

In most cases of jamming you will be playing with one or more other musicians. It is important to be aware of what others around you are doing on their instruments. Far too often I see inexperienced musicians on stage focusing too much on themselves. Everyone can end up in their own corner of the world if this happens, and the balance shall be lost. Use your ears! Be aware of how loud or soft someone else is getting, or the rhythm that they are playing. Is it intense or laid back? Ultimately you will be reacting to these things, so you must first be AWARE of them. This will help you decide how to go about playing what you will play. The key here is that everyone involved must be listening to each other. Everyone must be aware. You can have 4 people following one individual, but you will never be able to follow 4 people who are each doing their own thing. This brings us to the next building block of a balanced jam, **organization**.

A lot of people might be thinking at this point "forget organization...it's all about being in the moment and not knowing what's going to happen next." The truth is you can keep the

organization minimal and still retain the spontaneity. Being organized can mean any number of things: having a planned chord progression(s), planned rhythm(s), planned melody(s), planned key change(s), planned dynamic change(s), or it can be ideas like trading off solos, or doing a call and response between members. There are many possibilities here, and the more advanced a musician you are the more possibilities there are. Basically you want to organize a foundation for the jam that everyone can come back to. I've heard some of the greats jamming out to a point where it seems like complete chaos, and a moment later they are all back to where they started. To a certain degree it's all planned. For example, let's say your band decides that you want the chord progression to change at some point during the jam. This is when you can use a **cue**.

A cue typically is a short, 1 to 4 measure fill assigned to a specific instrument that tells everyone to change to the new chord progression, melody, rhythm, etc. It can also be a visual cue such as a nod, hand signal, or body movement of some sort. You can have a different cue for each change, or you can have a certain order of changes indicated by a reoccurring cue. The less variety of cues you have, the easier it is to remember and recognize them. However you may want to avoid the repetition factor. It's up to you and your group to decide this. The cue is given when the player performing the cue feels it's necessary. This person assumes a sort of leadership role. This is where the "awareness" plays a key role for all the musicians involved. If the cue is given and two measures later the key changes from C major to F# minor, but the bass player is still playing in C major, it is going to sound very unpleasing and can cause the jam to lose its energy and momentum. The question now is when is the right time to introduce the cue? Let's say you have been gradually increasing the dynamics (volume) and intensity of your rhythm, and it just can't get any more intense; this is the time to introduce some sort of change. An experienced improviser knows that you do not want to change too soon or too late. If you have just arrived at the most intense moment you may not want to cut it off right away. You want to let it sink in that "this is it"! This is what the band has been building up to, but you don't want to let it drag out for too long or it can become stale and lose its power. This can also happen in reverse when you are decreasing the energy of the jam. Judging when enough is enough is a matter of experience, and also observing the energy of the listeners. You will learn over time. So a cue has been given that indicates it's your time to solo, and as you start your band mate begins to do a solo as well. The final element I will acknowledge here is **composure**.

Lack of composure in a jam is a sure fire sign of an inexperienced musician. I am going to sum this up in one simple phrase: "Know your place, keep to your space!" Let me explain...nothing is more irritating then when you are in the middle of a solo and then someone starts playing their own solo. If it's planned then that's one thing, or perhaps the other

musician is attempting to harmonize the solo or initiate a call and response, but if you're expected to be holding down the groove then HOLD THE GROOVE!!! It can become really confusing to the other rhythm players, and it can also appear as if it's the great battle of Ego vs. Ego. This also means don't do something that is distracting in any other manner as well. By that I mean if the jam has a real mellow and smooth feel to it, don't start playing an intense fiery riff. Again the more experience you have the more you can go outside of the box and still keep it in context, but it is best to start inside the box and gradually work your way out. With all that said, if you are the one soloing don't hog the spotlight. Unless a selected individual is intended to be the focal point of the jam, share the stage. Another quick point I want to make is if you do get lost don't show it. Don't be looking around at your band mates with a "what's going on?" look on your face. A lot of the time the audience won't pick up on mistakes because it goes by too quick. Just use your ears, pick back up on where everyone else is and smoothly join in. As obvious as this paragraph may seem I'm surprised to find many musicians ignore these points.

I want to sum up the key points of this article: maintain a balance, be aware of what others are doing, have some sort of foundation, use cues to make smooth transitions, and keep your composure. I want to point out that some of the things I said not to do or to avoid are things that can be done and can sound good if it is planned, or if the musicians are skilled and experienced. I suggest next time you practice with your band you should practice jamming. Try listening closer than you usually do, and work with using cues. Also understand this classic piece of advice; mistakes are good as long as you learn from them, and that the more you jam the better you will get. Don't beat yourself up over a mistake. Renowned jazz player Jody Fisher once told me that "...yes, it is very possible to make mistakes when improvising, but that's the price you pay when going for something so inspiring and of the moment."