

# **Jam and Performance Etiquette - Tips for OTSMA**

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This tutorial contains information about problems that reduce the quality of musical experiences obtained during jam sessions and stage performances. Each description of a problem is also followed by suggestions as to how to reduce the problem. The goal is to produce optimal pleasure, as well as optimal learning, for all, at OTSMA sessions. These comments are based on issues that have been observed at our jams, but are also informed by my reading of various "jam etiquette" web sites.

## **The problem of "noodling"**

I'll start with an error I and others have often been guilty of: "noodling". To noodle is to continue playing after a song has ended, between songs, etc. For example, I often find myself working on riffs for fills, or phrases that have freshly appeared to me while we have been playing a tune. Sometimes I am just trying to find them again, because they appeared as if by magic and they are in process of quickly disappearing, like elves in the wood. They vanish as soon as you see them. Like elves, after they disappear they leave one with a vague longing or even a gnawing emptiness. So I try to capture them by carving them into my muscle memory. For me, this is accomplished by noodling. I imagine others have experiences similar to that.

Since many of us are having frequent epiphanies on the guitar these days, and since we don't take a whole lot of instrumental breaks on our tunes, there are few other opportunities for us to work on those riffs while someone else is playing rhythm. I know I can't easily play rhythm as a foundation for myself and then simultaneously discover lead riffs for the OTSMA tunes while alone at home. Eventually maybe I will be able to do that, but meanwhile I noodle shamelessly, and I'll probably keep doing it until we find a solution (see below).

By the way, during performances, it is sometimes necessary and fine to noodle a bit, to find the riff for the hook on a tune you have not played for a while, find the tune's rhythmic groove, etc.. But that should be kept to a minimum, just enough to find the riff, find the groove, etc., and then stop and wait for the tune to begin.

## **A solution to "Noodling":**

### **More jamming during instrumental breaks, and taking more breaks**

When jamming we could take a lot more instrumental breaks. At many of our sessions we have not been "jamming" so much as we have been "playing tunes". We don't always have to plow through so many songs every evening. We can stay on tunes far longer, and pass around the instrumental breaks to those of us who want to take them, so we can noodle around DURING the song. That is the best time to do it, anyway, because the riffs need the rhythm as a foundation to work off. We could even go so far as doing breaks three or more times for every repetition of vocal section if we wanted to. I know this would be helpful for any of us who want to develop our abilities to work on leads and fills. If we take too few breaks, by the time you have found a good riff, the break is over until the next session, so it never gets into muscle memory; hence the temptation to noodle.

## The problem of "not listening"

### General overview

There are several problems of not listening relevant to stage performing and jamming. They all center around not listening for ways to leave spaciousness in the music, and not listening to how our own instrument or vocal is fitting into the mix.

**The reason for this problem is that we all want to play. Go figure!** But that can become a problem for the music if we are not listening while playing. The more people there are up on stage or sitting in the jam circle, the more important this becomes. The musicality of good music is actually as much, or more, about the space between notes than it is about the notes themselves.

**A basic rule of good music: LESS IS MORE.** So, when more people are on stage, and more instruments in the mix, or more people are sitting around jamming, that should not automatically add up to more notes being played. It should probably add up to about the same number of notes being played, with fewer notes being played by each instrumentalist.

Another problem of "not listening" happens when we are setting up the PA and doing the sound checks. More will be said about that, further below.

### Several ways in which the problem of "not listening" manifests during a jam:

#### A) Playing over the vocalist

During breaks, instruments are king. That is their opportunity to shine. But during verses and choruses, the vocals are supposed to be king. The instruments should NEVER step on the vocals. Basically, while vocalists are singing, instruments are supposed to be the foundation and background. They keep the rhythmic phrasing going, and maintain the tempo. But they should leave lots of space for the vocals. There are many techniques for maintaining spaciousness in the music. **They all require listening.**

### A solution to playing over the vocalist:

#### Step 1 (do this at home)

#### **Listen carefully to your favorite pieces of recorded acoustic music.**

Probably (depending on which are your favorite pieces) you will hear during the vocal sections that the instruments (guitar, banjo, mandolin, fiddle, etc.) will often be playing nothing more than rhythm strokes on 1 and 3, or for a backbeat on 2 and 4. Those rhythm strokes may even get hand damped to make each note briefer and more acutely rhythmic. But that also adds space for hearing other sounds. Pay attention to how these kinds of things done with the rhythm notes open up acoustic space for the vocals, or for other quality sounds that may support the vocals harmonically or create ambiance without stepping out on top of the vocalist. On soft songs, the rhythm guitar might even just play a soft lingering stroke on beat 1 that opens up the measure, and hangs there wide open until the next beat on 1 comes around. **Notice that although the tune might be in 4/4 time there may be no single instrument playing right on the beat on all four beats (or all 8 or 16) per measure.** Musicians only play notes where those notes produce the expressive effect that they want to hear.

As you listen to your favorite music (though this won't work for metal or thrash, etc.), you will probably also hear instruments supporting the vocals with lyrical phrases that go beyond the rhythm, beyond harmony, and beyond ambiance. Once a little space has been opened up, by careful attention to keeping the rhythm out of the way, then a person who is listening for musicality, and who has the instrumental ability, can find empty spaces for these kinds of phrases, which are often called "fills".

They are called "fills" for a reason. They are not called "overflows". There has to be space to put "fills" into. Fills are often strategically located in ways that may portend or echo (as in a "call and response" style) or in other ways set up or respond to the vocalist, **while not stepping on the vocalist.** Sometimes a fill will be a "signature phrase" (AKA "hook") that is a memorable and catchy phrase that might get repeated here and there in the song. You may walk away from

a song humming instrumental fills and hooks as much, or even more, than the vocals. Of course, vocal hooks are often memorable too; but only if they can be heard.

Summary: listen to some of your favorite recordings. You will almost certainly hear rhythmic articulation, spaciousness, fills, and hooks. And those can all be there without stepping on the vocals.

## **Step 2 (do this while jamming and performing)**

### **Listen carefully to what everyone else is doing**

a) Don't step on the vocals. Be the base, the foundation on which the vocals build.

b) Don't step on the other instruments. If someone else is playing a good rhythm, let them do that. Do some solid supporting bass notes (not bass leads - unless called out on a break), find spots to add fills, play with a backbeat but don't derail the train with it, make your guitar sing with some "harmonic rings", try soft and lingering chords for "atmospheric" ambience, etc. Or just hang back out of the mix for a few measures. A few well-placed chops laid down sparsely over a solid foundation are worth a lot more than having two or more rhythm guitarists dueling it out.

c) You don't have to play on every song; or on every verse; or on every phrase; or on every beat.

d) All plucked-stringed instrument players should **learn and practice hand-damping** techniques. Again, **the sounds that you do not make are as important as the sounds you do make**. Most of the time you do NOT want your strings to just keep ringing until they fade out on their own. Playing a guitar without properly damping is like playing a piano with the sustain pedal down continuously. Pianos have built-in dampers. The default mechanical setting on the piano is to immediately damp the string as soon as a key has been released. One actually has to intentionally permit a string to sustain on the piano, either by holding the key depressed or by depressing the sustain pedal. The resonant chamber and soundboard of the piano has plenty of built-in sustain to it as well. The proper manipulation of sustains is one of the most important things that differentiates a good pianist from a poor pianist.

The same is true on the guitar. Guitars have a resonant chamber, and a soundboard, which allow notes to ring on (i.e., sustain) after the strings have been struck. But the guitar is a very simple device; it has no mechanical parts to do any damping for you. Nevertheless, just as with the piano, proper manipulation of sustains is one of the most important things that differentiates a good guitarist from a poor guitarist.

Proper damping is a very important element in opening up the spaciousness of music. It is one of the most important skills a musician can develop. One should often want to damp one's strings, especially when playing rhythm chords. Of course, one does not always want to damp, as sweetly lingering sustains are wonderful, particularly for atmospheric, but also for dramatics and fireworks (think of The Who doing "We Don't Get Fooled Again", where the rhythm guitar begins with a powerfully sustained single strum before they start into the tune's signature rhythm - that moment is perhaps one of the most memorable moments in Rock and Roll - equivalent in its power to the ending of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony). But for a musician to aimlessly strum rhythm chords and let every note of every chord sustain, beat after beat, measure after measure, is a sure sign that the musician is not listening even to their own instrument, much less to whether it is or is not contributing to the overall musicality of the jam or stage performance.

e) **Remember: LESS IS MORE.**

## **B) Playing over the lead instrument**

During breaks, instruments are king. **But not all instruments are king**. Just the lead instrument or lead instruments are kind. The lead instrument (or instruments) on a break should be treated like vocalist(s).

## **The solution for playing over the lead instrument (do this while jamming or performing):**

### **Listen carefully to what everyone else is doing.**

All the issues discussed above about leaving space for the vocalist apply equally for the instrumental breaks. There is no need to repeat the suggestions here. Just treat the lead instruments as if they were vocalists.

Sometimes you may want to have only one instrument take a break on the lead. Sometimes you may want more than one lead instrument. If there is more than one lead instrument playing on a break, the instruments can harmonize (e.g. harmonica and guitar, guitar and banjo). They can trade riffs, they can interweave into an interesting tapestry. But that can only happen if there is a foundation of spaciousness that is left open by everyone else.

## **C) Not listening to the monitors during a stage performance**

It is important for each musician to pay attention to how what he or she is doing is coming out in the overall mix.

### **A solution to not listening to the monitors:**

#### **Listen to the stage monitors**

If you are trying to listen, but still can't hear your vocals or instrument when you are singing or picking, then one of the following four situations is happening:

a) The sound person has forgotten to send your mic's channel to the monitor. Oops. Each channel can be individually boosted in the monitors, and sometimes, when the crew is rushed, this step gets neglected.

**Solution: cooperate with the sound crew during sound checks, to minimize distractions.**

b) Your microphone's level needs to be adjusted in the PA. That is addressed by the initial sound check and by adjusting levels dynamically during the performance. If nobody leaves spaciousness in the music (problem d, below), boosting mixer levels doesn't solve the problem, it only creates volume creep, and eventually we hit the volume ceiling with feedback.

**Solutions: cooperate with the sound crew during sound checks, and then continue to communicate with the person running the mixer about your needs during the performance.**

c) You may not be using your microphone well. This is probably the biggest part of the problem for most people, especially if the first two issues have been addressed. Mostly we use "dynamic" mics on stage (sometimes we might use condenser mics, which are much hotter, i.e., more sensitive, and that will affect your microphone technique). The dynamic mics that we mostly use on stage are "cardioid" mics. That means that they have a fairly narrow funnel-like area from which they pick up sound. They also have a very shallow range from which they pick up sound. What that means in practical terms is two things: (1) They do not suffer too much from feedback on stage if they are positioned properly relative to the monitors and loudspeakers. That is why they are preferred for live settings. (2) The volume that you get out of them is HIGHLY sensitive to **your proximity to the mic, and to the angle** at which you approach the mic.

#### **Solutions to problem of not be using your microphone well:**

**Microphone tips for vocals.** To get maximum volume, get right on the mic, as if you are just about eat the microphone. If sound-check levels have been set well, you should be able to get good volume from a couple/several inches away, and then back off when doing harmonies, etc., and get closer to get powerful. In performance situations where we have to set the input levels low to avoid feedback from problem rooms, knowing how to eat a microphone can be really important.

Popping P's are another microphone issue. Popping is not as much a problem with dynamic stage mics as it is with condenser mics (for which, in the studio, you generally use "pop filters" to prevent popping), but it is still a problem. The letter P is the most powerful of the "plosive" phonemes, and it really POPS microphones. If you are about to use a word that has a P, tilt your

head a little so the wind from the sudden release of air from your lips (called the "plosion") does not blow right straight into the mic. Blow the PPPP-OP over the TTTT-OP of the mic, not into it. Make some P sounds, just for fun, so you really get the feel for how "PPP-losive" that letter P really is.

**Microphone tips for instruments.** Position the mic as close to the soundboard as you can get, without risking bumping it while playing. Aiming it towards the sound-hole from an angle (not directly into it) will often provide a deeper more booming resonant sound. Aiming it straight into the sound-hole can make for feedback issues in some venues. Aiming it towards the bridge or to the end of the fret-board will give it a brighter but less resonant sound. That all depends also on the characteristics of your instrument. You can actually play around with changing how you approach the mic, as a way of making your instrument sound more varied and therefore more interesting, at various points in a song, to enhance the musicality of a performance. The person running the soundboard will dynamically bring you up or down in the mix to accommodate the volume produced by your individual instrument. To allow the sound-board person to be able to do that, you have to stay close enough to the mic to give him or her some flexibility. If you stay too far back, you can't be brought up into the mix without risking feedback.

**Play with microphones to learn how to use them.** During the next sound check that you are participating in, play around with the mic during the sound check (always in cooperation with the sound-check process, of course). Try making the same sound from one foot away, from six inches away, from three inches away and from one inch away. For extra fun, cup your hands around the mic, hold it close to your mouth, and growl. You might scare the devil out of someone. Try making sounds from straight in front of the mic and then at the same distance from off angles. The differences will be dramatic. Especially, the closer you get, the more important each little bit of distance is. The difference between one and three inches is VERY dramatic. Add cupped hands and it gets even more dramatic. And this applies to both the vocal and instrumental applications of the microphone. You may discover that you have a soft-spoken sweetheart voice when singing from three inches away, but it can become the wrathful thrashing voice of a demon if you approach the microphone cupped in your hands and the mic an inch away from your mouth. On the other hand, you may be telling a great joke from one foot away from the mic, and the audience will not hear you at all. Well, depending on the joke, that might be good, but off-color jokes always have a way of being picked up by a microphone.

Learning how to use the mic will help you also when it comes to working with the spaciousness of the music. If you want to deliver an instrumental phrase that cuts through the mix, get right up on the mic. If you want to hang in the background with rhythmic chops, back off the mic, and listen to how your chops are fitting into the mix. If you don't want to be heard, stop playing altogether, or step off to the wings, out of microphone range.

d) Others are not giving you space, so you are being drowned out by the wall of sound. This has often been our biggest problem.

**Solutions: the same as those discussed above**, pertaining to leaving space for each other. No need to repeat them here.

## Summary

At all times **listen to the monitors and hear what you are doing**, and listen to how that interweaves with what everyone else is doing. The distance you are from the microphone REALLY matters, for both vocals and for instruments. Nothing a sound-board person can do at the mixer can fix a performer's inconsistent or careless use of the microphone.

## Remember:

**The attainment of musicality requires listening as well as playing**

## The problem of “not listening” while setting up the PA

Setting up a PA, and working a mixing board can be a fantastic experience. Or it can be nightmare. A lot of that depends on whether or not musicians cooperate with the sound crew. Setting up mics and doing sound checks takes a very intense and focused concentration on the part of a small number of people. There are many things to keep in mind all at the same time, and any distraction can really hinder that process. The sound crew may speak curtly and abruptly with requests for musicians to cease and desist in producing hindrances. Don't take it personally. Not only are they juggling lots of issues, they are acutely aware of the timeline, and want to get finished without having to delay the start of a performance. Musicians often hinder the process without realizing it. After all, we are all there to have fun. Just don't think naively that what you are doing does not matter. You can either help or hinder the process. Help is best.

### Specific problems related to “not listening” while setting up the PA

a) standing or sitting among the microphones while people are stringing cables and doing sound-checks.

**Solution:** stay away from the microphones unless you are personally involved in set-up and doing the initial sound checks. Any help porting equipment from a truck is welcome, but once that is done, step out of the way and let the few people who are doing the sound set-up get to work. There is a deliberate order and sequence to the process of stringing cables and doing sound checks. We begin at one end of the stage and work across, one microphone at a time. A few others will be setting up amps, etc. If you are not directly involved with the sound equipment, go somewhere else.

Don't stand or sit in the middle of everything socializing with your friends. Don't bring your instrument into the microphone area until the initial sound check is done. You can unpack and tune your instrument somewhere else.

If you want to be jamming, such that you will be making a lot of noise, go somewhere else. Preferably that will be as far away from the stage as possible. But be attentive, as you will eventually be called on, for the final sound check, when we actually need you to be at the mics. So stay aware of what is going on, even though you are staying away.

b) not cooperating with the plugged-in instrument sound check.

**Solution:** Once we have all the cables run, and all the mics checked, then we need to check all the instruments that are plugged directly into the sound system with cables. If you have such an instrument, be ready to get on stage for the instrument check. It can go quickly, and then you can remain up on stage, plugged in, in preparation for the final sound check. But keep in mind, just because we have checked your instrument, and you are plugged in, the sound check is not done. So NO NOODLING should be happening. There is nothing more difficult for a sound person to cope with than when someone starts playing music before the sound check is done.

Stop, wait, and listen. The crew will eventually ask you to play a few chords. Do that ONLY as requested, then STOP, wait, and listen. **NO NOODLING** should be happening.

c) not cooperating with the final sound check.

**Solution:** Once we have all the cables run, all the mics checked, all the plugged-in instruments checked, then we need everyone to take their final positions. Nobody should be around the mics until they have been called up. But when people are called up, they should be ready to move into place quickly.

Once everyone is in place it becomes possible to check the relative levels of all the instruments and set the volumes for all the individual channels on the mixer to initial settings so the first song can begin.

The crew will ask people to do some things to enable that process to happen. Do ONLY what you are asked to do, then STOP, wait, and listen. **NO NOODLING** should be happening.

We really need everyone to cooperate with the sound check process.

**Warning**

**If you are on stage, you could be coming through loud and clear over the  
PA.**

**Watch what you say.**