

FOLK JAM WORKSHOP leading & following with mark dvorak

A musical awareness

Playing good music requires an ongoing return to practice. At the same time, playing music with others is also important. Playing and singing with others, we develop a special kind of musical awareness. Our rhythmic impulse has the chance to mingle with others, at first like young dancers at a sock hop, later like graceful partners, moving and breathing in unison. We learn to measure how loud or soft to play and sing at a given moment, and we learn to find our place in the collective rhythm going around the room. Playing and singing with others teaches us to listen and watch for the subtle clues that inform us in unnamed ways, and which later help us unlock much about the greater musical puzzle.



The rhythm

The first responsibility of all the musicians at the jam is to help keep time. A thing called duple meter is perhaps the most basic building block in our musical world. It goes like this: One, two, one, two, one, two, one, two. The first of those two beats is the strong beat, the other one is the back beat.

Basses and guitars are better at defining the strong beat, mandolins, banjos, fiddles, harmonicas, and different percussion instruments are better at accenting the back beat. Think about a teeter-totter. Think about all the different ways people walk down the street, or down the hall. Those are duple meter too, and some do it more musically than others.

Such a delicious blend of sounds occurs then the bass and the guitars create a big phat first beat, and the complex chunk of strings and reeds answers on the back beat. Listen for this on any recording, to see how your favorite bands and artists articulate this simple feat.

This duple meter, dances through the chord changes and creates a lovely framework over which the singer, or singers - or instrumentalists - can express the melody. When the balance between bass tones and back beats becomes blurred, the group sound begins to wobble, less sure of direction and purpose. Pretty soon after we find ourselves sitting together in the same room, but isolated in a way, reaching for each other amid a wash of rhythms and notes, and a clamor that is less musical than before.

When you are looking to join the circle, first look to find each other on the strong beat.

The melody

The melody to any given song can be expressed by one or more voices, and by one or more instruments, but not necessarily all at the same time. Our job as musicians is to provide a solid rhythm over which the person or people singing, or instrumentalists, can articulate the words and melody without screaming, or racing.

A melody articulated in tune and on time, supported by a rich, crisp rhythm section, is a thing we come to treasure as ensemble players. Before long the more experienced players are adding color tones to their chording, and fills to compliment and punctuate the melodic phrases. The harmony singers are drawn to join the chorus or double up on the verses if they know the words. Sound is born.

Louder & Softer

When it is your turn to choose a song, sing loud so the others can hear the words. When you or someone else is singing the words to a song, play softly, so others can hear them.

Try putting away all the gadgets just to see what happens: Part of learning to pay attention at the folk jam includes getting rid of distractions. One time, try coming to the jam without your tuner. Ask someone to help you tune if you need it. You will make a friend.

Leave your books and sheets and music stands at home. If you don't know all the words or chords to a song, sit in a place where you can watch someone who does. You'll be learning the way all great musicians have learned, and continue to learn. If something seems too difficult to play along with, sit one out and try to pick up on the chorus the next time it comes around, and match your singing with the person who is leading. At the end of the day, playing and singing together happens somewhere beyond the reach of our cognitive powers. To play and sing without sheets and books and tuners is the best way to sharpen these musical sensibilities.

The democracy of chaos

Sit close to one another. Leave your instrument case away from traffic patterns and out of the way so others may find their way to the circle. Don't forget your picks and capo. Begin with two or three songs that are familiar, repetitive, and ones that have a good chorus. Don't worry about whose turn it is. If you have a good song in mind, just begin.

Your folk jam functions more like a tribal ceremony and less like a corporate staff meeting. It is not a church service, but good ones have something in common with church. It is not a performance, but good ones are exciting to listen to and witness. A folk jam is different than a jazz cutting session, and different again than a parking lot session at the bluegrass festival.

A good folk jam recognizes common musical voices and common material. A good folk jam recognizes that the familiar is as good a starting place as any. A good folk jam welcomes all who dare to venture in and respects each individual's taste and intention. There is real trust involved. And friendship.

At the end of the day the music we create at the folk jam expresses much. We return each week to reconnect as human beings, and to articulate again, some ongoing, unspoken agreement. At the end of the day, the music we make at the folk jam expresses a kind of love.

An egalitarian approach, where everyone gets a turn in the circle, is perhaps more civilized, but I guarantee you, less musically exciting. Good players need the chance to air out their chops. Beginners need to lay back and hang on in a comfort zone of their own determining. Each of us needs the chance to participate in a spontaneous, creative endeavor that carries some meaning beyond blind obedience. This requires benevolent leadership that respects and nourishes each musical moment as it unfolds.

Know thy words and chords

Choose three songs from all of the songs you've ever heard in your life. Make sure two of them are built like folk songs, simple and repetitive with easy, singable choruses. Songs like "I'll Fly Away," "This Land is Your Land," "Worried Man Blues," "Down in the Valley," "Amazing Grace," "Careless Love," "Midnight Special," and on and on. These are good ones. Take the time to memorize three verses, and take the time to get the chord changes down cold. For the third choice, pick something you really, really love. Make it something you would only sing and play in the company of your very best friends. Take the time to learn it well, then bring all three to the next folk jam.

Noodling

The rules are these: You can play anything you want at anytime, so long as it is in time, in tune, and very much quieter than the person singing or playing the melody.

Expression

The kind of ballad singing still found in New England and the Appalachians, is in a way comparable to the Mexican corridos, and sean-nos singing found in Ireland. In Afro-American traditions, the moan and wail of a blues singer takes place before sunrise Sunday morning, just as the testament of a lone gospel singer in church takes place after. These are examples of a singular vocal expression common in our western music tradition.

Now think about all the different kinds of group vocal singing in our world. There's church choirs and barbershop quartets. There's Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young and Peter, Paul and Mary, and the Lennon Sisters. There's Christmas caroling every December and the wobbly chorus of "Happy Birthday" that happens around the table each year.

You are here at the folk jam to express something of yourself that is personal, or universal, yet strangely both at the same time. A good folk jam allows room for both the singular and group vocal expression to take place.

What does it mean to be musical? "The most musical thing you can ever do," said Frank Hamilton, "is to get out of the way and let someone else play."

Just begin

When it's your turn, begin the song. Don't explain the chords, play them. Don't explain the words sing them. A couple times through if necessary. Begin by doing.

It's okay, once people have heard the tune, heard a few of the words, and gotten the initial grasp of the tone, narrative and imagery of the song, to take a minute then, to make sure everyone's on board, before continuing.

That's the time to go over the chord progression again, and to teach the words to the chorus. People need the chance to grab hold of something new, but they also deserve to hear it first.

What to watch for

First, watch whoever is beginning the song. Their posture, the tempo and level of volume at which they play and sing, and the level of confidence which they project, inform the rest of us in the circle in immeasurable ways. If the person leading seems sure, and you are less sure of the chords, scoot your chair over so you can watch them change. Or keep your eye on someone in the circle that seems confident in making the chord changes. Play quietly until you are a little more sure of the progression. That's how good musicians work, no matter how long they've been playing. Looking at a sheet with the words and chords robs us of the chance to watch each other, to take in all the subtle clues going around the room.

If you play the guitar, make your bass notes strong and strum stroke compact. If you are playing another instrument, find the back beat, and blend in with the others on that end of the duple meter teeter-totter.

If you are familiar with the tune and feel like you can play an instrumental break, begin quietly while the singer is singing their verse. Try not to interrupt or compete for the lead, but find a way to shadow what the singer is singing in a complimentary way. Your branching off at this point will signal one in the benevolent leadership that you are ready to try an instrumental break. The rest of us will support you with our solid rhythm and our best wishes, as you venture out on your sixteen-bar odyssey.

If you happen to be an experienced instrumentalist, your artistry will inspire the rhythm section and further validate our gathering in grand musical terms.

What to listen for

Listen for how loud the person singing is singing. Listen to how loud the person playing the melody or instrumental break is playing. Play anything you wish, or can, a whole lot quieter than the singing or playing you hear. You'll know how to adjust and respond from there.

If you really want to help out in a musical way, find the bass notes if you're on guitar and bass, or find the back beat if you play another stringed, reed or percussive instrument. If you blow a flute or bow a fiddle, try to create long drones starting with the tonic note. Then see if you can add long strands of harmony here and there. Try this in short bursts and defer again to a quiet and crisp, rhythmic expression.

If the chord progression is difficult to pick up, determine what the home chord is, usually the chord the verse and chorus end on. See if you can hear the difference between the home chord, or tonic, and when it changes to something else. Play quietly while you fool with the changes, watching others and listening all the while. Your ear will soon enough, begin making associations with these different chords, these different sounds, and your playing will begin to evolve from there in a very fortunate way.

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