

## OLD TIME RULES

A large majority of old time jamming is instrumental, but that does not mean that vocal songs are not allowed. In fact in some jams, vocals and songs may predominate. In old time, the emphasis is on playing together, so unlike in bluegrass, (often, but not always) more instruments are welcome. That said, however, you need to be cognizant of the specific jam: if it's a super hot jam with super experienced players and you are a beginner (or even intermediate) player, you might not want to position yourself in the midst of the "core" players. Instead find yourself a seat somewhat removed from the "inner circle". Other jams are more wide open. In old time more than bluegrass, there's a wider range of "inclusivity" levels, so it's just important to try to gauge the inclusiveness of the jam you're joining based on factors such as: number of players already there, obscurity of tunes being played, relative ability/notoriety of players already involved, whether you know them or not, etc.

In old time, everyone plays the melody together, and no one takes breaks. Rhythm, "locking in," "trancing out," and "playing the tune for what seems like years," are all common.

Jammers take turns "calling" tunes. When you call a tune, you are generally expected to start it, although it's not uncommon to call a tune and then ask a fiddler to start it. Tunes are often started with some indication of the tempo, such as "potatoes" or a simple count-off. Since both banjos and fiddles often re-tune when changing keys, jams tend to stay in one key for long stretches of time.

In an old-time jam, there is more of an emphasis on repertoire, and the expansion of repertoire, than there is in bluegrass. As such, many jams are oriented towards being a learning environment, and so it's generally acceptable to remain in the jam even though you don't know the tune. A big part of old time jamming is learning tunes from other folks. If you don't know a tune that's called, sit out the first few times and listen, trying to pick up the general form and pattern of the tune. When you've got that, start trying to play it (quietly); every time the tune comes around again, you will have picked up a little bit more, so that by the end, you should be playing a mostly-recognizable version of the tune. Again, however, be respectful of what the "core" players are doing, and don't let your learning interfere with that.

Many fiddle tunes follow a simple "AA, BB" pattern, meaning, there are two parts to the tune: an A part, and a B part, and they are each played twice in succession. In old time, however, there are a fair amount of tunes that differ from this pattern (there may be 3, 4, even 5 parts) so when learning a new tune, try to figure out how many parts there are. Be aware that some tunes are considered "crooked" (this could take a whole book to explain), basically meaning there are extra beats, or sections, added or subtracted from the pattern.

Whoever called the tune is usually expected to end it, either by sticking their foot out - which means, "we're ending it at the end of this time around," or by yelling something, such as "last time" or "one more time."

## **Instrument roles:**

**Fiddle:** The fiddle (or fiddle section, which is often encouraged in old time, as opposed to bluegrass) plays a very important role. Fiddles often lead tunes, call tunes, and are generally expected to remember tunes and know how to start them. The fiddles play the melody the whole way through. Fiddles often use different tunings for different keys.

**Banjo:** In old-time music, the banjo is played differently than in bluegrass. Instead of the rolling three finger “Scruggs style” used in bluegrass (generally with finger picks), in old time, players use a different style, known as “clawhammer” or “frailing.” Banjos use different tunings for different keys.

**Guitar:** In old time, the guitar player plays a “boom-chuck” rhythm, but it is a much simpler style than in bluegrass. The focus is on the guitar as a rhythmic instrument, as opposed to a melodic instrument, thus, it is generally accepted that only “boom” and “chuck” should be played, without “backbrushes” or “G-runs”. A “basic bass note plus down brush” is the drive of most old-time scenarios.

**Bass:** The bass, as in bluegrass, plays the “boom” of the boom chuck. The bass is the main exception to the “more the merrier” rule in old time. Almost without exception, only one bass is allowed to play at a time.

**Mandolin:** Though not always considered a “traditional” old time instrument, the mandolin is widely accepted at old time jams. In old time, the mandolin can play either the melody or chords, and can provide a driving rhythm to the jam.

**Percussion:** Percussion is a sometimes-welcome addition to old time jams, provided it is the right kind of percussion, and that it’s tasteful. Typical old time percussion instruments might include washboard, spoons, hamboning, or clogging/flatfooting (a type of percussive dancing). Drums are generally frowned upon.

**Banjo uke:** A largely under-utilized but still traditional instrument, the banjo uke is tuned like a ukelele, looks like a banjo, but is played like neither. The banjo uke plays a “double time” rhythm that sounds like “chunka-chunka-chunka-chunka.”