

Old-Time Jam vs. The Bluegrass Jam

by Tim May

Let's look at what makes an old-time jam unique. In an old-time jam only the melody will be played on fiddle tunes. There are no improvised solos. Much like the Irish tradition, the melody will be played multiple times, because it's assumed (or hoped!) that there will be dancers present. One very positive outcome as a result of this is that it is a good opportunity to really get the melodies in your head and under your fingers if you are trying to learn some of these great old-time melodies.

On vocal songs, the concept will be the same: on instrumental breaks between vocals a basic version of the melody will be played usually in unison, carried by the fiddle and sometimes by the fiddle only. A loose harmonization of the melody will sometimes be played, almost as a counter-melody, and this is as close to improvisation as old-time music is likely to get. Harmony singers may take the same approach.

It is common to stay in the same key for long periods of time compared to other jams you may be familiar with. This is largely because the banjo players do not use a capo. Banjoists will tend to tune to the key the tune is in: if a tune is in 'G' and the key moves to 'A', old-time banjo purists will usually tune the banjo to open 'A'. Double 'C' tuning is another favorite tuning. You can imagine the chaos if the banjo had to re-tune for every tune, so as a courtesy to the banjoists the group will stay in one key for a while.

The rhythm style on guitar should revolve around the 'boom-chick', alternating bass rhythm, and multiple bass runs are expected. The syncopated drive of the Irish rhythm guitar style will not work, and the 'G-run' that bluegrass players use so often is almost non-existent.

The old-time repertoire can be pretty universal, but particular versions of tunes can vary widely from region to region. Be aware of this, especially if you are bringing your version to an area where you haven't been. Be open-minded, because I've found, for example, that sometimes a West Virginia version might be a little more interesting than the one we play in Tennessee or vice-versa. Sometimes the versions will be close enough that they can be played together, sometimes not, so pay close attention and make sure your version is not distracting if it's determined that they are not exactly the same.

Old-time jams are much more of a team sport than are bluegrass jams. The idea is to make one big joyful noise and to contribute to the overall party: if you are looking for a place to practice cool arrangements this would not be the place: take it for what it is, an ensemble of folks from all walks of life coming together to share tunes and have fun.

