

A Gentle Guide to Session Etiquette at NESI



NESI – in addition to the workshops, pub sing, contra dance, and Saturday night show – is a thin slice of Jammers’ Heaven. Sessions pop up in every available space, covering just about every genre of music. It explains why so many of us need days to recover. To enhance the enjoyment of these impromptu musical gatherings, it’s important to observe some simple, common-sense rules.

Take Turns. There’s nothing more irritating than the jammer who starts a tune, and then immediately starts another before anybody else has a chance, or – worse – jumps in over another player trying to start a tune. Some sessions solve this problem by taking turns around a circle; others take a less structured approach and rely on common courtesy. Either way, remember: this isn’t a performance, and you are not the only musician who wants to pick tunes. A session is a community activity in which every musician should have an equal opportunity to fully participate. Hogging the stage spoils things for everybody. Curb your enthusiasm and make sure others have a chance!

Listen before you plunge in. Some NESI jams are wonderfully eclectic, moving easily from Irish to English to jazz to whatever, and that’s great. Others clearly have a narrower focus, and that’s great, too. When you sit down with a group that’s already playing, take a few minutes to *listen* and figure out what the focus is – if there *is* a specific focus – before starting tunes. If in doubt, ask: “What are you folks playing here?”

Avoid jam-killing show-off tunes. Sessions are great for learning new tunes, but nothing kills sessions faster than players who start tunes that are far beyond the abilities of those present, and which few can pick up on the fly. That really tricky Scandinavian tune you worked on for months? Great for the Saturday concert, but it might drive a stake through the heart of a session. This can be a blurry line; what seems easy to you might be a killer for everybody else. If you’re unsure, go back to rule 2: listen first, and get a sense of the tenor of the jam. Is the tune you want to play something this particular group is likely to pick up? If not, pick something else!

Play quietly until you sort of get the tune. It’s the nature of a session that we are playing many tunes we barely know, or don’t know at all, and that’s one of the charms of this whole business. It’s fine to fumble around until you get the tune; that’s called learning. But it’s disruptive when you do it at *full volume*. Play quietly until you get a handle on a tune. This doesn’t mean ‘getting it’ without mistakes; it does mean trying to avoid being disruptive. Keep in mind that our instruments are *loud!*

Respect people who are just rehearsing or playing with a special buddy. In addition to all the jamming, NESI is a great venue for renewing one-on-one musical relationships. Sometimes, friends will get together for a little private catching up on the tunes they’ve been working or rehearsing something for the Saturday night show. Use your social antenna to discern: is this a session, or a rehearsal? Don’t be embarrassed to ask!

A tangential note: The Big Board in the registration room enables people to offer not only workshops but also “focused” jams. If you are hoping to find a group of people who want to play klezmer tunes or Christmas carols or television theme songs all night, consider convening a focused jam by designating a meeting place in an open time slot.