

## SESSION ETIQUETTE

THE WORLD OF THE SESSION can be extremely daunting for the uninitiated. Sessions often exude an air of elitism, only for those who know a mysterious repertoire of tunes, or those who can play tunes at a very fast pace. Those who do not know the unwritten rules can either be nervous of joining a session, or insensitive to its aims and purpose.

The trouble with session etiquette is that there are possibly as many opinions about this delicate subject as there are participants in sessions, and nobody can give you hard and fast rules about it. I have attempted to give advice about some aspects of the session, and hopefully you can use these comments as guidelines. In general, the watchwords are courtesy, consideration, sensitivity and patience.

In talking about sessions, I have divided the playing standard into three main types:

*Advanced:* The session appears to be going at warp speed, with long strings of tunes played by all those there. There is an inner circle of experienced musicians who prefer the company of others of the same skill level.

*Intermediate:* There's a lot of stopping and starting, and the skill levels of the musicians appear to vary. Less serious, more welcoming.

*Beginners:* Participants have been playing a year or two and are just building up their skills and repertoire. It may be acceptable to use books or sheet music. It's usually led by one more experienced player who calls the tunes and sets the pace.

Of course, in reality, the standard of a session may fall anywhere between these definitions.

### Advice for Session-Goers

#### Joining the Session

*"If you're new to the session and don't know what you're doing, wait and watch"*

You can learn a lot from a good session, just sitting right outside the session circle and paying attention. Don't barge in and start showing off - that's one way to annoy the regulars. If it's a small session, ask someone who seems to know what's going on if you may join them. In larger sessions, it's probably OK just to join in.

*"Be aware of the skill level"*

In an advanced session (it's very crowded, the music is fast and furious and everyone looks very earnest), if you are new to it, do not sit down in the circle. The circle will frequently open up to a familiar or respected musician who turns up, but don't you expect such behaviour. An intermediate session will be more tolerant, but it might still have an inner core, which is why it's best to watch and wait at the beginning.

*"Only sit IN the session if you're going to PLAY in the session. "*

If you're there only to listen, be considerate and let those that want to play sit next to each other.

## Tunes

### *Starting a Tune in a Session*

Advanced sessions are often led by a small group of good musicians who are being paid by the pub. If you are new to the session, let others start the tunes. If you eventually become a regular, nobody will think it odd if you start a set. It will be easier to start a tune in intermediate sessions, but wait until there is a break in the music. Be aware of the response from others; if they appear disinterested, they are.

### *What Tunes?*

Don't play any tune unless you can play it through several times without faltering. If you have started a tune which few people know, try to follow it with a popular tune which will then bring people back into the session (this informs folk that you're aware of them and want them to be playing with you). It is often expected that if you start a tune, you will be choosing what follows, so make sure you have a group of two or three tunes which go together well.

In beginners sessions, there will probably be fixed sets of tunes which everyone knows. Sometimes there will be copies of the tunes in music notation so that if you don't know the tune you can still join in. The leader will usually call the tunes, but probably will be open to suggestions.

### *How many times?*

In Irish sessions, the convention is usually to play a tune three times. This gives anyone trying to learn the tune or more chance to pick it up. In Scotland, however, the custom is to play tunes twice through. You will have to listen to each session and work out what their usual convention is. In beginners sessions, the tune can be played three times or more. Four-part tunes would be played fewer times.

### *Requesting a tune*

If you have a tune you'd like played, don't yell out "Play such-and-such!"; simply ask "Does anyone know such-and-such?".

### *Speed of Tunes*

Never Speed Up Or Slow Down! The musician who started the tune sets the tempo, and it should never vary or falter until the set is over. Don't play at a speed above your skill level. Remember that it's better to play a tune slowly and well than quickly and badly.

## General

*"Don't start playing a tune while everyone else is tuning."*

It's more difficult to tune while a tune is being played, so be considerate and wait until everyone is done tuning before starting to play. Try not to tune your instrument excessively while everyone else is playing. It's distracting. A good time to tune is when a break occurs. If no break seems to be coming soon, try to tune quietly, or at a short distance from those playing, so as not to disturb.

*"Don't talk loudly while everyone else is playing."*

Musicians are concentrating when they're playing tunes, so don't walk up and start talking to them. It's distracting, rude, and shows ignorance. Wait until they've stopped playing for any chatter.

*"Ask before recording a session"*

Tape recording a session is common, but it is always appreciated when you ask first. It's unlikely that you'll be told "no", and it is also a good way to preserve a tune for later learning by ear. Be polite, and discrete - don't shove tape recorders or microphones in the musicians' faces, even if permission was granted. In beginners sessions, it is expected that people will record many of the tunes.

*"Don't be afraid to ask questions"*

...but wait until there's a break in the playing. Once a musician has put their instrument down, they may be open to questions - otherwise, they may be waiting to play, so don't interrupt them with a question. Common courtesy and decency almost always win out, and a quick question or comment during a lull wouldn't seem inappropriate.

Wait until a set is finished before asking for tune names.

*"Handling others' instruments: Don't!"*

NEVER, ever, handle, play, touch or move another musician's instrument without asking them first. An instrument is of great importance to its owner, and should be approached as a precious object.

### Summary

*"Every session has its unique unspoken rules..."*

...or lack of them, as you'll learn as you attend more. As a newbie, the less noticeable you make yourself, the less chance there is of your being embarrassed or annoying people.