

### ***General Session Etiquette***

Etiquette is simply a French word meaning "the practices and forms prescribed by social convention or authority." Using this definition, there are definitely some conventions followed by most sessions.

Some of these *might* include:

1. It is considered polite when first visiting a session to wait to be invited to play, if you are not an expert player (most expert players don't need this list). If you walk into a session with an instrument in a case, the musicians will notice, even if you don't think they do. Strike up a conversation with one of the musicians between tunes. (If you're a beginner in a new area, asking after teachers is a good way to start.) Nine times out of ten, you'll be invited to play a tune or two.
2. If you are not a regular visitor of a session, expect to spend at least half of your time listening at first. The tunes may not be the same ones regular to your home session. Pay attention to what's going on around you. This session might play tunes in a different key or wildly different setting from what you're used to.
3. Keep your instrument in tune. If there is a piper or a non-tunable instrument (a box, for instance), usually you're expected to tune to that instrument. Otherwise, use a tuner or tune to the session leader -- and tune quietly, especially when others are playing. Check your tune every now and again, especially if you tuned to a piper.
4. Be aware of who the session leader(s) is/are, and defer to that person (especially where it comes to tempo and choices of tunes). Even when there's not a designated session leader, someone is usually filling that role. Far better to be first seen as humble or quiet than first seen as rude to the session leader. If you are an accompanist, be sensitive. If there is more than one guitar or other accompanying instrument, play quietly so as not to drown out the melody instruments, or clash with another's choices of chords.
5. If it's noisy, you might even sit it out until it's your turn. There should never be more than one bodhran player playing at one time in a regular session of average size (under 10 players). If you're a beginning piper, make sure that you don't over-use your drones, especially when there are accompanists.
6. Never "twiddle" during a tune unless this appears to be something everyone likes, nay, even expects. Irish traditional music rarely incorporates lovely harmonies and lush orchestration. An occasional foray into this won't get you banned, but a lot of it will get you jokes and insults behind your back.
7. Don't mix types of tunes (a hornpipe with a reel with a slip jig). This is fine in a performance, but usually not at a session. Also, if it's an Irish session, discuss tunes of other countries with the other players before launching them. Some sessions (especially those in the US) are Irish-only sessions. Miscellany: If a singer starts a song, stay very quiet. Ask before you record, and to be safe, don't bring a video camera.
8. In general, sensitivity goes a long way. Every session is different depending on the players in it, so you must be aware of what's going on around you and adjust accordingly. In middling to desperate cases, asking a friendly musician about whatever is puzzling you might be your best avenue. We highly

recommend Barry Foy's book, "A Field Guide to the Irish Music Session" for a look at Irish session etiquette that's so complete some people think it's total bosh.

9. So what is the nature of playing Irish music in pubs? What happens when Irish musicians get together and play? What are the preferred instruments? What is the proper session etiquette?

10. If you happen upon a pub session you might find musicians gathered in a circle, sometimes around a table, engaged with each other in their music, almost oblivious to other bar patrons. The instruments might include fiddles, flutes, whistles, uilleann pipes, concertinas, accordions, mandolins, banjos, a guitar or bouzouki, and bodhran.

11. The tunes played are mostly from a long tradition of Irish dance music in the form of jigs, reels, hornpipes, and polkas. Occasionally a slow air or waltz might be performed and someone might sing an unaccompanied song. Or someone might do a lively step dance to a fast jig or reel.

12. If you happen to be a musician, it is important to know the proper etiquette before joining in. Most sessions are open to anyone who wants to join, provided they know how to play traditional Irish music. However sessions may vary from place to place and have different unwritten guidelines and styles. It is best to first observe the session and try to understand how it operates. Common sense and a sensitivity for the music and musicians is most important.

13. If you would like to participate, you might ask the host or other musicians about joining with them. If you don't know the tunes they are playing, just sit and listen, and only play the tunes that you do know. After all, you wouldn't want to annoy both musicians and listeners by trying to play tunes that you don't know. If you want to learn tunes played at a particular session, you could ask if it is okay to tape record the music for learning. That, and attentive listening, is the best way to learn.

14. It is most important not to disturb the flow of music. The purpose of the session is to have fun; when this is not the case, musicians tend to leave. Guitar, bouzouki, and bodhran players should approach a session very cautiously.

15. As you observe the session it may not be obvious how tunes are started, and by whom. Some sessions operate by musicians taking turns around the circle to start tunes; in others, musicians seem to start tunes at random. In the latter case, a musician will start a new tune, as he or she deems appropriate, but should not dominate the session. A good host will often encourage new players to lead a tune. A player who leads a tune may often follow it with another paired tune in the same key and form, or another player will follow with an appropriate paired tune.

16. Often the pub owner will reward the session players with free beer or other drinks, up to a limit of course. It is best to ask the local custom, and in any case tip the bar person (it improves the service!).

17. If you are not a musician but just a punter (non-musician listener), it is also important to know proper etiquette. If you provide a proper listening environment (talk quietly) the music will be heard and played better by the musicians. Don't crowd the musicians, but give them ample room to play. If you want to be close to the music, try not to take up space that another musician might want to play in; ask a musician if it's okay.

18. When a song is called for, it is essential that everyone be absolutely quiet. Most singing is unaccompanied and solo. If everyone is quiet you will be delighted with the beautiful melodies and interesting stories that make Irish songs so great.

19. If you want to photograph, video, or record a session, it is proper to first ask permission. Clapping or "whooping" is appropriate, but only at the end of a set of tunes. Musicians appreciate this because it means that you are listening and enjoying their music. But don't clap or "whoop" during a tune as this may tend to throw them off or worse, scare them. Just enjoy the "craic" (general conversation and ambiance) and have a good time.

### **THE SESSION:**

The **session** is the life-blood of traditional music, and with the session goes the associated notion of **craic**.

#### **What is a "Session"?**

Source: <http://groups.msn.com/traditionalirishmusic>

An Irish "session" is a gathering of musicians (often taking place in a public venue) for the purpose of playing music together.

Playing in a good session can be fun, invaluable playing experience, and a great chance to improve your music--all at the same time. Good sessions can produce some of the best Irish music in the world, and they can do so for hours on end--under the right circumstances.

There is a popular misconception that "The Irish session" is meant to be an open forum, where anybody who can come in off the street is welcome to participate and learn to make music at the same time. In reality, while some sessions may be such open forums, this characteristic is not intrinsic to "the session" itself, and it can be a big mistake to incorrectly assume that it is.

In reality, Irish sessions are much more like other casual social gatherings than they are like open forums. Often, sessions are groups of friends getting together for a few tunes, and not as an open invitation to everyone to come and play. People who come in off the street will usually be welcomed, but they may be met with a certain amount of circumspection until they demonstrate their ability to "play well with others".

Here are some of the bigger mistakes that will alienate your fellow musicians at a typical session (in no particular order):

Playing a percussive instrument poorly, out of turn, too loudly, or generally outside the taste of the other musicians. A good rule of thumb here is: "one bodhrán and/or guitar/bouzouki at a time". More than one will often clash, irritating the melody players. In Irish music, the melody is FAR more important than the backing, and backers who assume otherwise can quickly become session-pariahs.

Joining a group of unfamiliar musicians without asking, or without being invited. This is especially important if you think your presence might change the existing dynamic in a way that the musicians don't want it changed. The quality of the music is often what determines how much fun people have. If you ruin their music, you are probably ruining their fun too.

Playing when you don't really know the tune. It's usually ok to do so very quietly, but... be careful! Your wrong notes may distract, and irritate, the person sitting next to you.

Starting too many tunes without consulting the other musicians. It's generally a good idea (especially at an unfamiliar session) to ask the other musicians if they'd like to play a tune before you launch into it. This helps you make sure that you won't be doing something antisocial by starting a tune that the other musicians don't know or don't want to play.

When someone does one of these things at a session, it makes everybody feel uncomfortable. While it might be nice (especially for beginners) if the other musicians would politely inform you, this is difficult to do tactfully, so this isn't usually what happens. Instead, the other musicians are more likely to simply feel irritated and leave it at that.

In general, remember this: If you're not organizing the session, you are a GUEST, and all the same social guidelines apply to your "visit" that would if you walked into someone else's party. Just as you can alienate people by crashing a party and being rude, so too can you alienate them by crashing their session and being rude.