

Fiddling Around May 2014

by Sean Kenan Trad & Now Vol.13 No.5

Session Etiquette

How many times have you heard the cry "The sessions in Ireland are a lot more friendly than the sessions in Australia"? Well, not so fast. Several trips to Ireland have shown me that there is even more variety in sessions in Ireland compared to those in Australia. Some sessions are friendly towards new comers and beginners whilst other sessions ignore or discourage such players from participating in the music making. What I did find was that the higher the musical skill of the players the more exclusive were the sessions. Likewise the lower the standard of musicianship, the friendlier the session. There are reasons for this although it is humiliating and humbling to be rejected from a group.

What are the Rules?

First up there seem to be no rules as to how a session should be conducted. Courtesy and politeness are always appreciated by most of us and apply well in sessions but sometimes these basics are ignored. Avoiding eye contact and taking a toilet or smoke break when a particular player strikes up a tune are subtle but effective methods of rejection. Refusing to join in with a tune can send a powerful negative message to a struggling player. On the other hand it can be a sign of respect every now and then to merely listen without playing along with another musician.

Session Etiquette

Peter Holmes says sessions should be conducted in a similar manner as a good conversation. All can participate and it is important to listen to others rather than always playing and taking up the space. This takes great restraint with some personalities but to the shy this comes quite naturally. Rather than rules, etiquette is polite behaviour that allows groups to function harmoniously on a regular basis. Snobby sessions often have a short life span and the inclusive welcoming sessions tend to outlive the exclusive ones. However this is a hard balance to achieve and often depends on the skill level of the players who attend. Some guidelines are:

- If you know the tune, join in. Support the timid players by playing along at a speed that is comfortable for them. Avoid speeding their tunes up so they are left behind as the rest of the group takes off.
- Any player is free to join the group at any time and leave the session at any time.
- Avoid repeating tunes that have already been played at that particular session. This is hard to work out if you arrive late. Perhaps check with the other players and ask if the tunes in the set you are about to play have already been done.
- Whoever starts a tune has the right to pick the following tune or tunes. If the player stuffs up and forgets the tune midway they have forfeited the right to continue the set. Another player then can take over and launch another set.
- The person who starts a set has the call on the number of repetitions of each tune. Three times each tune is a minimum but often five times through a tune is better.
- Signal the change in a tune set with a loud cry "Hup." The other players then will be alert and ready for a tune change.
- When new to a session avoid getting your instrument out straight away. There usually is a session leader and they may or may not invite you to play. You can always ask a leader or long term session member if they mind if you join in. Bodhrans are the most unpopular session instrument and guitars follow close behind. Some sessions in Ireland refuse to allow bodhrans into the group.

Songs in tune sessions



This is a hard mix to get right. Tunes are mostly about group participation and when a song starts up the instruments are put to one side and the group listens to one person singing. Some singers get really annoyed when musicians jump in and spoil their song by playing along. The fact is that most sessions are tune based and song sessions are much harder to find so singers often attend tune sessions because they have an audience and can try out their songs in public. Too many songs at a session can cut into tune playing time hence the saying, "So many tunes, so little time."

Seating

Many sessions have a seating hierarchy and it is regarded as a serious matter to sit in a chair reserved for an established player. Skilled players tend to cluster together and the lower skilled players take chairs on the outer edge. As the session gains more players the polite way is to widen the circle. Having your back to another player is extremely rude.

Around the circle

This works well for beginner to intermediate level sessions. Rather than a chaotic scramble to push in to get your tune in, try going around the group in a clockwise or anti-clockwise direction and each player picks a tune or set in sequence. This is a democratic and equal sharing of the musical space amongst the group. Those who are inclined to be pushy are then required to take their place in the group and listen to others.

Will the session be improved if I join in?

This is a good question to ask yourself. If a group of really good players are ripping into some great tunes will a bunch of beginner tunes drag down the momentum and energy? Who is being selfish in this context? Is it the group of advanced players who have spent many years learning and developing their tunes or is it the beginner who insists on interrupting the flow of the session with a tune they may have just learnt? Kevin Burke said that when he attended sessions in London when he was growing up, it was a honour to be asked to play a tune. You then were expected to have the tune thoroughly prepared before bringing it out at a session.

Pub sessions

Martin Hayes recalls that back in the 1970's it was not a common thing to find music sessions in County Clare pubs. Often there were just social gatherings at houses and even then a tune may or may not eventuate. How different that is now! Tourist buses pull up and line the roads of small towns in Clare and tourists pour out to experience a "real Irish session." You can find Irish sessions all around the world now and even Tokyo has six regular purely traditional Irish tune sessions per week. Irish music now is truly a global phenomenon. The history of Irish music in pubs is quite new and started around the late 1950's. Before that sessions were at informal house parties and gatherings. Of course Irish tunes were always being played publicly in dance halls and dance events but the introspective tune playing was done mainly at home amongst friends and guests.

