

GEMS CULLED FROM EXPERIENCE

If the Golden Rule as enunciated by Jesus, Moses, Buddha, Mohammed, and Yogi "Deja Vu All over Again" Suranawathama isn't sufficient to guide anxious young session musicians through the thicket of Correct Session Behavior, then perhaps the following Gems Culled from Experience may be of assistance (the capital letters are heavily laden with significance).

[1] Never ever try to eat a meatball hero/hoagie/grinder or a Wendy's breakfast sandwich and play a slow air at the same time. This applies especially to whistle and flute players.

[2] Come to think of it, chomp away at the sandwich and forget the slow air unless your fellow sessioneers are already asleep. Sorry, gang - I can't think of any mid-level session I've ever been at that's been improved by a slow air.

[3] If you're gonna play a tune that nobody else knows, make gosh-darned sure you know it cold. Nothing short of amateur root-canal work is more excruciating than listening to some oaf attempt to plow his/her way through a gem of his/her own choosing and then getting totally lost somewhere around bar 18. (Don't take this personally - we've all done it!)

[4] Same rule applies even more strongly to singers.

[5] I have said before and I repeat: "turloch o carolan" is Donegal Irish for "kiss this session goodbye". Once you're past the session equivalent of potty training, this shouldn't be a problem, but sometimes "Fanny Power" just seems so RIGHT. . .

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[6] Try to keep speeds reasonable. Even if you're convinced you can play it just like you heard it on the De Danann CD, you probably can't, and the chances are really good that no one else at your session can either. A WTPTF (Weird Tunes Played Too Fast) session should be strangled at birth and buried quietly at the dark of the moon under a pile of "4 Men and a Dog" CD's.

[7] If you don't know the tune, you should never try to learn it while someone else is playing it. (Musicians who plan to violate this rule should ensure that the owner of the pub has the name and phone number of their next of kin.)

[8] If there's more than one bodhrán player, they should agree on alternating between tunes so that never more than one is playing at any given time. This should apply regardless of skill level and is especially important in a confined area (i.e., anything smaller than a Pac-10 college stadium).

[9] The only spoons that should ever be allowed into a session should be manufactured out of tofu or jello or some other non-clacking substance. A good spoon player is a marvel to hear, and about as easy as an anorexic piranha to find. Sorry I had to be the one to break the news. . .

[10] A session is in some ways a lot like ess-ee-eks: anytime one of the participants isn't having a good time, you might need to review the procedures.

[11] Corollary to the above: a session should be fun and should never be a cause of anxiety to anyone. In reading the various IRTRAD posts on the subject back in the day, I was always amazed that something so innocent and joyous could be the source of so many sweaty palms and breathing problems.

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[12] Give new players the benefit of the doubt. If they turn out to be catastrophic, at least you'll know what to expect when (or if) they show up again. And always remember that no matter how many eons you've been at it, you were once a new player yourself. (Corollary: ears, not fingers, should be a newbie player's most active attachments.)

[13] If somebody's got a tune list, it's okay to refer to it from time to time. It will probably include a lot of tunes you were going to play anyway. Operative words in this paragraph are "from time to time".

[14] I have a thing about reading music at sessions but some very nice people do it so maybe it's just me but then again if you keep reading tunes, you'll never learn them, but on the other hand why do you have to learn them if you can read them and . . . but . . . hey, whatever works. Just don't expect everything to come to a dead halt while you flip frantically through your tunebook looking for "Devaney's Goat".

[15] If your instrument is screwed up, your being in the company of other musicians is probably not going to be sufficient to bring about a miraculous cure. Sometimes we all have to admit defeat. Better a broken soundpost in your fiddle than a fiddle broken in two over your head.

[16] Knowing tune names is probably one of the more subtle ways that you can help pass the tradition along. Try to find them out; any decent musician will be happy to share if he knows. A no-talent moron, on the other hand, will give you a hard time. Keep that in mind the next time someone busts your chops; that way at least two of you will recognize the moron for what he really is. (Note: a lot of real honest-to-heaven trad musicians are terrible with names, even

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if they can do a great job playing the tunes they go with. You'll get to know the real musicians from the frauds very quickly.)

[17] Folks who insist on holding conversations while someone else is trying to play should probably know better. If they don't, they should be provided with a quick but efficient education. A two-by-four up alongside the head may be required in some particularly stubborn cases.

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