

Ensemble Skills: Organizing Your Thoughts

Playing in an ensemble takes a lot of focus and mental preparation. It takes a lot to assess the situation, determine what the audience wants, and to quickly sort out what you need to do as a performer. Here's a list of things to think about before playing any notes.

- 1. What is the skill level of this ensemble?** Not every player can keep up with every song. The goal should not be to show off how good you are as a player; the goal is to play good music and entertain the crowd. Ask some questions, listen to the other players strum a bit, and assess what songs you know that might work in an ensemble situation. Only call songs that will be successful.
- 2. What is the instrumentation of the group?** If you don't have a banjo, don't call a banjo tune. If there is not a bass player or a mandolin player, think about what your role as a guitar player will be to cover those missing parts. Think about how you can fit in to the ensemble and reinforce the missing pieces. If there are several guitars, ask yourself what you can add without being redundant, or if it's best just to stay out of the way.
- 3. What is the venue like?** Is it a jam in a circle? Is it a formal stage? Is it a makeshift stage under an easy-up? Is the stage live? Can you hear? Can the band hear you? Do you have a sound system, or is it all acoustic? Do you have monitors or not? What do you need to do with you playing to react to the situation? Think ahead and react in the moment.
- 4. What mutual repertoire do you know?** One of the best things about knowing a lot of songs is that you can lead a gig, or at least there might be better overlap with other musicians. Rehearsed bands know all the same repertoire, but jam sessions are different. If you're the band leader make sure you have enough songs to play the whole gig. Don't rely on the other musicians to contribute. If they do, great, but you need to be able to carry the whole thing or hire someone who can. If you're a sideman, bring four or five songs that you can pull out if you need to. Help relieve some of the pressure or cover for any stage mishap that might occur.
- 5. Be equipped and practiced.** If you are in a rehearsed band, know the tunes and be ready to play them. Try not to be in a situation where you're asking others for cues on stage. They should be memorized, practiced, and prepared, and so should you. Don't let them down, and don't abide them letting you down. Also, make sure you have all the gear you need. Bring your tuner, get your glass of water, bring your lyric sheets, your cords, your microphones, your capo, your extra set of strings, your sweat towel, or whatever else you need for the gig to be successful.
- 6. Have a good attitude.** Gigs are hard. Jams are hard. Often the situations aren't ideal. Complaining helps no one, and the purpose of your being there at the gig is to be an entertainer. Band issues are dealt with at practice. Be happy, be charming, smile, have fun, or fake all of those things until after load-out.
- 7. Be on time.** Everyone expects musicians to be late. Having extra time at a venue helps you get in the groove and feel the "vibe" of the place. It eases everyone's stress and makes all things better. Be on time, or if you're going to be late, be in communication.