

Jazz Jam Sessions: A First-Timer's Guide

Ready to check out your first jam session? There's much more to jazz music—and to the “session” in particular—than meets the eye. This primer will help you better appreciate the intense psychodrama being played out on stage. Special *Insider's Tips* will help you make the most of your maiden voyage.

Although your food and drink dollars are the lifeblood of the jazz economy, remember that to the musicians, you're irrelevant. Don't make requests. Don't start dancing. And don't try to sing along. The last thing the session needs is another ego—things are complicated enough already.

1) The Room

Session venues fall into two distinct categories:

Yuppie jazz dives

Young Urban Professionals don't generally like dives, but jazz, to a Yuppie, is a daring adventure. There may be no valet parking, but caution be damned!

The club will be located in a “transitional” part of town. Walking hurriedly from parking space to venue will briefly raise the courageous Yuppie's heartbeat above Peloton (Low Impact®) level. All the more gratifying, then, to finally feel the club's warm embrace. Home at last among the trendy appetizers and fancy martinis.

The food will be overpriced and lousy. There will be at least one fake Cajun dish on the menu. There will also be at least one abstract painting of a saxophonist on the wall. In the restrooms, a fresh coat of Lysol won't fully suppress the smell of vomit.

There will be no piano, or there will be a Samick—a rough approximation of a piano.

“Samick,” translated from Korean, means “looks like a Steinway but sounds like a Hyundai.” Hyundai is an actual piano; can Kia be far behind?

The room itself will be an acoustical nightmare. In the absence of carpeting or drapery, sounds will reverberate and distort like a bad LSD trip. Feeding this psychedelic nightmare—simultaneously—will be the bar's blender, a cash register, a big-screen television, and an audio system cranking out music that is the owner's idea of jazz: R&B, Smooth Jazz, or Hip Hop. When the band starts, somebody will forget to turn the TV and audio player off. Yuppie conversation, to compete with these sounds, will elevate to a roar. Somewhere in the background, a jam session takes place.

Non-Yuppie jazz dives

Same as Yuppie jazz dives, but without the Lysol.

2) The Musicians

Sit as close to the band as possible. Stare intensely at each musician during his solo, and move your mouth along with his lines. Don't smile. Now watch—each will assume that: a) you play his instrument, and b) you think he sucks. You are “vibing” them, and they'll come undone. All jazz players, regardless of age, instrument, or ability, are deeply insecure. Have fun with this!

While a jazz artist may claim to have a “unique voice” on his instrument, sociological analysis tells us otherwise. In reality, jazz players are simply the embodiment of instrumental archetypes. Jam sessions, then, are the playing out of archetypal conflicts. Jazz “standards” performed at the sessions make up the script. Over time, an epic play is realized. Here are the characters:

Saxophone: Saxophonists think they are the most important players on stage; consequently, they are temperamental and territorial. They know all the Coltrane and Bird licks but have their own sound, a mixture of Coltrane and Bird licks. They take exceptionally long solos, which reach a peak halfway through and then just don't stop. They practice quietly but audibly while other people are trying to play. Saxophonists sleep with their instruments, forget to shower, and are mangy. They proudly wear t-shirts with the faces of other saxophonists no one else recognizes. If you talk to a saxophonist during a break, you will hear a lot of excuses about his reeds....

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