

THE ART AND ETIQUETTE OF PLAYING WITH OTHERS

By Steve Glickstein

Playing together with others can be one of the greatest joys for a musician. There is nothing like the feeling and the sound you get when you connect with other musicians and make the music soar! That's when you realize the true meaning of the saying, "the whole is greater than the sum of all the parts."

In order to achieve that coherent group voice, a team effort is required. In practice, this means that each member of the group must participate and play in a way that blends with the others and does not overwhelm the rest of the musicians or vocalists. It requires that each member pay attention and listen to what the others are doing and do their part to make the group sound good as a cohesive unit.

This, in turn, requires each of the group members to subjugate his or her ego for the good of the overall sound. If one or more of the group members fails to do this, the resulting sound will be unbalanced and the group will not sound "together."

Group members can fail to blend in a number of ways. The singing of slightly different words on an ensemble chorus or passage or phrasing the lyrics differently from the way others are singing, are common errors which lead to a jarring sound. Similarly, playing rhythms which are out of sync with others in the group will lead to the same problem.

Playing out of tune or singing off key are a couple of other common mistakes which will lead to a discordant sound. These can be corrected with careful group practice.

Of course, there are the intentional (ego) transgressions which ruin the harmony of a group. In this category is the player who cannot, or will not, be a team player. We've all experienced occasions where one person continually plays louder than the others, or insists on playing lead lines over the vocalist or another performer's solo. Unfortunately, there is not much you can do about this problem short of refusing to play with that person. That person is simply going to upstage everyone at every opportunity and doesn't care to listen to what the other members of the group want or do what is good for the overall sound.

The key to playing successfully with others is listening to what's going on around you and finding ways to make the sound fuller and completely harmonious. Obviously, vocal harmonies which blend into a chord are always crowd pleasers. But what else can you do to achieve a good group sound?

Blending picking styles can be a very effective technique. If there is more than one guitar in the group, one can flatpick while another fingerpicks.

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Varying the instrumentation also goes a long way to achieving a nice and varied sound. Adding mandolin, banjo, violin or a flute for example will flesh out the sound very nicely. Bear in mind, however, that those instruments are all treble or high range instruments and you'll have to work to balance the sound.

Listen to what's being played and analyze what might be missing. If there is a lack of low end being played on the instruments, concentrate on playing full chords with an emphasis on the bass strings for that fuller sound. String bass or bass guitar is always helpful to add that low end and rhythm but if you can't find a bass player, do the best you can with your particular instrument to cover that range.

Watch the other members of the group and make eye contact with them as you play. This is as important as listening as there are visual clues that will help you play in sync.

If you're having a tough time hearing the rhythm being played, watching the other person's hands as they play will give you a visual cue to help you keep the beat. Then there are times when you need to help out another group member. For example, when the vocalist forgets the lyrics and needs some time to recover and remember. If you have been watching, and are an instrumentalist, you can jump in with an instrumental break and cover the lapse seamlessly so the audience won't know that there is a problem.

Finally, don't lose sight of the goal. Making music with others should be a fun group effort. Let the music transport you and you will not be disappointed in the result. Keep practicing.