



THE IRISH MUSIC SESSION

by Stewart Hendrickson

What is the nature of playing Irish music in pubs? What happens when Irish musicians get together and play? What are the preferred instruments? What is the proper session etiquette?

If you happen upon a pub session you might find musicians gathered in a circle, sometimes around a table, engaged with each other in their music, almost oblivious to other bar patrons. The instruments might include fiddles, flutes, whistles, uilleann pipes, concertinas, accordions, mandolins, banjos, a guitar or bouzouki, and bodhran.

The tunes played are mostly from a long tradition of Irish dance music in the form of jigs, reels, hornpipes, and polkas. Occasionally a slow air or waltz might be performed and someone might sing an unaccompanied song. Or someone might do a lively step dance to a fast jig or reel.

If you happen to be a musician, it is important to know the proper etiquette before joining in. Most sessions are open to anyone who wants to join, provided they know how to play traditional Irish music. However sessions may vary from place to place and have different unwritten guidelines and styles. It is best to first observe the session and try to understand how it operates. Common sense and a sensitivity for the music and musicians is most important.

If you would like to participate, you might ask the host or other musicians about joining with them. If you don't know the tunes they are playing, just sit and listen, and only play the tunes that you do know. After all, you wouldn't want to annoy both musicians and

listeners by trying to play tunes that you don't know. If you want to learn tunes played at a particular session, you could ask if it is okay to tape record the music for learning. That, and attentive listening, is the best way to learn.

It is most important not to disturb the flow of music. The purpose of the session is to have fun; when this is not the case, musicians tend to leave. Guitar, bouzouki, and bodhran players should approach a session very cautiously. These are not traditional Irish instruments, and need to be played with great skill and understanding of the music. If not played properly, they tend to throw off the rhythm and melody of the other players. Only one bodhran or guitar (or bouzouki) will be tolerated at any time; two guitars or bodhrans in a session are too many! This is because different rhythms or chords are possible, but should not occur at the same time.

As you observe the session it may not be obvious how tunes are started, and by whom. Some sessions operate by musicians taking turns around the circle to start tunes; in others, musicians seem to start tunes at random. In the latter case, a musician will start a new tune as he or she deems appropriate, but should not dominate the session. A good host will often encourage new players to lead a tune. A player who leads a tune may often follow it with another paired tune in the same key and form, or another player will follow with an appropriate paired tune.

Often the pub owner will reward the session players with free beer or other drinks, up to a limit of course. It is best to ask the local custom, and in any case tip the bar person (it improves the service!).

If you are not a musician but just a punter (non-musician listener), it is also important to know proper etiquette. If you provide a proper listening environment (talk quietly) the music will be heard and played better by the musicians. Don't crowd the musicians, but give them ample room to play. If you want to be close to the music, try not to take up space that another musician might want to play in; ask a musician if it's okay.

When a song is called for, it is essential that everyone be absolutely quiet. Most singing is unaccompanied and solo. If everyone is quiet you will be delighted with the beautiful melodies and interesting stories that make Irish songs so great.

If you want to photograph, video, or record a session, it is proper to first ask permission. Clapping or "whooping" is appropriate, but only at the end of a set of tunes. Musicians appreciate this because it means that you are listening and enjoying their music. But don't clap or "whoop" during a tune as this may tend to throw them off or worse, scare them. Just enjoy the "craic" (general conversation and ambiance) and have a good time.

A useful and humorous guide to the Irish session is the [Field Guide to the Irish Music Session](#) (a guide to enjoying Irish traditional music in its natural habitat) by Seattle writer and musician Barry Foy (with drawings by Rob Adams), available at Dusty Strings and other Irish shops. [Listen to Rick Steves talk with musicologist Barry Foy](#) about the

traditional Irish music "session" — "when a circle of musicians comes together to play reels, jigs, and hornpipes in an Irish pub."

Irish Sessions in Seattle

- [Couth Buzzard Books](#) – 1st and 3rd Saturdays, 11am – 1 pm, host: Ming.
- [Fado Pub](#) – most Sundays (check) 4-7pm, host: Mary.
- [Murphy's Pub](#) – Mondays 7:30-10:30pm, host: Kieran.
- [Wedgwood Alehouse](#) – Sundays 2-4:30pm, host: Randal Bays

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