

We Can Jam If We Want To

by Dana Bryan Jones

...or can we?

I once invited a fellow musician to jam with me by a waterfall. I thought it would be cool. She was a classically trained violinist and I brought along my acoustic guitar. We found a good spot, close enough to the falls to have the scenic beauty, but far enough away to not be deafened and have it drown out the sound of our unamplified instruments.

I told her I would play a progression in E Minor. As a heavy metal guitarist from the days before the explosion of drop D, drop C, and 7-string crunching, E minor was pretty much my default. She said "OK". I cycled through three or four times worth of something like Emin, Amin, Gmaj, Dmaj and she didn't play a note. I asked if everything was OK and she said yeah, but that she didn't know what I wanted her to do. I told her to improvise over the chords I was playing, anything in E Minor would work. She said "OK".

So, again, I cycled through my chords and, again, she was silent. She finally fessed up that she didn't know how to improvise. That's fine, I said, but I think you do and you just don't know it yet. After all, she was an accomplished classical violinist, surely she could find something to play over the key of E Minor... or any key for that matter. Well as it turned out, she couldn't.

She asked again, what I wanted her to do. Now having jammed with probably close to a hundred different musicians over a period of ten years or so, I wasn't sure how to answer that. It was like trying to teach someone how to cross one eye while leaving the other looking forward, if you know how to do it, great, but good luck explaining *how* you do it. So, I asked her if she knew the notes that are in the E Minor scale. She said she did. I told her that while I'm playing my chords, pick any notes from that scale and play them. It doesn't matter what order you play them in, as long as they're part of the E Minor scale, they will work, just play them, we'll start with that. To me it sounded simple. But she couldn't do it. I'd heard her play Mozart and Vivaldi, she had been first chair in her high school orchestra, but I couldn't explain to her well enough how to jam.

But it made me remember something. I began my formal music training with classical piano when I was 9 years old. I couldn't jam then either. I'd forgotten that. I took lessons for five years never realizing that the key signatures I was learning had a much greater impact than the song I was playing at any given moment. Each key signature represented an entire universe of potential sonic expression and I never appreciated how universal music could truly be; how it's its own language and transcends many others, particularly the spoken ones. It's something that could be felt whether you knew how to read the symbols or not. And if all you knew were the symbols you could learn to trust your feelings to guide you to the "right" note without having to rely on those very same symbols. I remembered being completely mystified by the jazz masters who improvised those awesome moments of their musical careers. I even remember thinking it was a sham, that it couldn't be done; there's no way people could play music together without

having rehearsed it first, or at least having some kind of prior knowledge of what they were going to play. However, by the time I was in my early twenties, jamming was second nature to me. But only because I took those first steps; even though I didn't realize I was doing it at the time, I still took those first steps toward spontaneous creation. They are two different mindsets.

I have to admit, though, that during a week-long guitar camp I went to when I was 15, I took an improvisation class. They offered four levels of difficulty for the course, one being for the least experienced and four being for the most experienced. I had been playing the guitar for two years at that time and had progressed fairly quickly, likely because of my piano background, and I chose level three but the class was full. So, I went with four... WAAAAAY over my head so I ended up in two but that turned out to be too basic for me at the time and it didn't really do much for me. It *really* all started about a year after that. When getting together with a musician you've never played with before you don't always have common songs to play together. You do your best to make sure you know at least one song in common before you get together but it doesn't always work out that way. If you expected someone to learn a song they didn't already know, you had to have that song, or go to the store and buy it (which sometimes meant ordering it and waiting 10 – 14 business days), make a copy and physically deliver it to the musician you wanted to learn it. Yes, I know, I am indeed referring to the dark ages of the internet when very few even knew what it was or that it even existed (the late 80s and *pretty* much all of the 90s). So, a lot of times you just ended up playing "what came to you" and the others either followed along or they didn't. But the important thing is that, even though I didn't

realize it at the time, I was learning a very valuable lesson. And just like anything else, the more I did it, the easier it was to do... but the harder it became to explain.

So, there I was, so many years later, trying to convince someone of something I couldn't be convinced of when I was in her shoes. At that point we put our instruments away, ate some snacks, and enjoyed the awesome scenery. We never tried that again.

As it turns out, time and perspective are both a hell of a thing. And I really appreciate it. In fact, it's helped me clarify one of my long-term goals: to be able to grab my guitar and jam with anybody else on any instrument in any style and have some meaningful connection with it and to truly and deeply reconnect with this universal language I was once fluent in. Considering I've barely touched my guitar in the last eight years I feel that's a lofty goal, but one I can achieve. It is one of the reasons this website exists: to push me to grow.

2017