

“Sitting in”

“Sitting in” refers to an unrehearsed performance you give at an open mic or jam session or as a guest of other performers on their gig. It is a great way to meet other musicians and to check out the venues in your area where you might perform. A successful outcome will depend on how well you are prepared in advance.

1. As American Idol says: “It’s all about tune choice.” Perhaps you’ve just heard an unbelievable version of “Sophisticated Lady” and you’re dying to try it. Perhaps you’ve always wanted to sing “Lullaby of Birdland” at a REALLY fast tempo. I can (almost) guarantee you that you will wish you’d had another thought. An unrehearsed performance puts everyone on the spot. In order for you and the musicians to shine, choose a song that plays to everyone’s strengths. If you spend a little time listening to the band you will hear the type of material that they choose for themselves and what they play well. It’s helpful to have a list of songs in various styles and in your key that you can choose from when you’re sitting in. Songs and feels that are familiar but not overdone work well in this situation and it’s good to have a few standards in original keys you can sing if the band is less experienced with transposing keys.

2. Make sure you know the tunes you’ve chosen as your “sitting in repertoire” very well. There are many distractions when you are playing in an unfamiliar environment with an unrehearsed group and you will be expected to lead the band. You will need to tell the players in advance the tune, the tempo, the rhythmic feel and the form of your tune.
 - a. Intro: A common intro for standard tunes is often the last 4 or 8 bars of the tune faster tempos often have an 8 bar intro and slower tempos, 4 bars. A bossa nova can frequently begin with a vamp intro. (A vamp intro is 2 or 3 chords that repeat, generally for 4 bars but they can be extended indefinitely.)

 - b. Form: Here are some musical terms that musicians use to describe the form of a song.
 - i. AABA: means the song plays and A section, then another, goes to the bridge and then the last A. Many standard songs from the “American Songbook” use this common 32 bar form. Make yourself familiar with the form of your song.

ii. Other terms:

1. The “head” is the melody of the complete song form, 1 time through.
 2. A section: first section of a tune. This refers to our song form such as AABA, etc.
 3. B section: generally the bridge of a song.
 4. Tag: repeating the last section of a tune usually 2 or 3 times.
3. Leading the band: You are the leader. You are in charge. Sticking with the form is a very important part of leading the group. Unexpected musical ideas might be very welcome within the form but when a singer jumps around from A sections to bridges to wherever no one is able to follow. A usual way of going through a tune would be:
- a. Sing the entire melody through once.
 - b. Then the song repeats for solos either by you or by other players.
 - c. Keep track in your head where you are in the song so that when it is your turn to come in you know where you are in the form.
 - d. Keep visual contact with the players. It may fall to you to direct who is soloing next or they may decide among themselves.
 - e. When the last player is finishing his solo, signal that you are coming back in with eye contact, raising your microphone or stepping to the center of the stage again.
 - f. Generally you will sing the song to the end now taking a tag or slowing down on the ending. Be clear about what you are doing. You can lead the band with your voice and also with your body movements. Looking in terror at the pianist isn't the best choice here.
 - g. Be flexible. This is unrehearsed so “big ears,” and “big eyes” are important here. Listen, react and be aware of what's going on around you.
4. Hand gestures: Everyone can see you. Unless you are trying for some dramatic effect *a la* James Brown, it isn't necessary to telegraph your musical intentions too broadly or too soon. Clear communication is the goal here. Some commonly used hand and body gestures are:
- a. Pointing to the top of the head meaning: I'm going back to the “top” or beginning of the tune.
 - b. Pointing to the bridge of the nose meaning: (Yep) I'm going back to the bridge.
 - c. Gesturing the hand in a “you're crazy” sort of circle (not while pointing to your head) meaning: Go around again (often used for a tag.)
 - d. Making a fist: (Not I'm going to punch you but) meaning: this is the last time through the tune.

Your body language will supply a lot of the information that the other musicians are reading. Experienced players will know the form of the tune and will be looking to you for indications of your intentions. Don't wave your arms around aimlessly or make listless gestures. Beginnings, endings and transitions are all accomplished in time so be aware of where you are in the rhythmic feel of the tune. That means knowing where you are in "the count," such as 1-2-3-4. When signaling endings, etc., phrases will usually start on the "1."

5. Bringing a chart. For organized jam sessions and open mics you will usually bring your own charts. (You may bring a chart with you also if you think you might be invited to "sit in.") All the rules of clear chart writing apply here. 5 pages of sheet music or multipage charts not taped together will make for an unreliable performance from both you and the band. Remember this is an unrehearsed situation so have a clear chart, in your key, geared to the performance level of the accompanying group.

Some tips:

1. Develop a repertoire of tunes you sing when you are sitting in. A few songs in various styles that you know well and can count on to show you off to your best advantage. Choose songs appropriate to the venue and the occasion for which you are singing. Depressing ballads are often more fun to sing than to listen to and getting a good response from the audience is part of what makes sitting in fun. (I'm just saying...)
2. An important part of sitting in is meeting new musicians and developing your fan base. Remember to be a "class act," by listening respectfully to others, meeting people and accepting comments graciously. You know.
3. Search out open mics and jam sessions in your area. Most gigs come about by being out and about, meeting other musicians and meeting fans. Until you are well known to others in your community you probably won't get a call gig by sitting in your armchair. Support live music.