

SO YOU WANT TO SING AT A JAZZWORKS JAM SESSION?

That's good. Especially if you're just starting out as a jazz performer, jam sessions are a great way to discover your strengths and weakness – to find out what you don't know and maybe start to fill those gaps. They're also a great way to demonstrate your talent to other performers, which can lead to linking up with others and opportunities for more performances. They can also be a lot of fun.

In order to give the best possible demonstration of your talent, you want to have the best possible accompaniment; the better they sound, the better you'll sound. And the more fun everyone will have.

This won't be a problem if you're fortunate enough to perform with top-notch, fully professional musicians. They know all the songs, don't need music to play them and can play them in any key. Unfortunately, this kind of musician is usually in pretty short supply at jam sessions; they're busy earning a living.

So, if you want the less fully professional musicians who are likely to accompany you at a jam session to sound as good as possible, there are some things you can do to make this easier for them to accomplish –

- bring lead sheets (“charts”) of the song you want to sing
- make sure that the charts are as “readable” as possible
- select a key for the charts that's suits your vocal range but doesn't put your accompaniment into a key they might be uncomfortable with
- bring copies of the chart for all of the accompanying musicians

Let's look at each of these points in more detail.

Bring Lead Sheets (Charts)

You can't assume that there'll be someone at the jam session who knows the song you want to sing. To avoid being disappointed, bring music. This doesn't have to be a full-fledged arrangement. Most of the musicians at a jam session will be able to work out a perfectly adequate accompaniment from a “lead sheet” or “chart.” This is just a page of music with the melody and the chord symbols of a song.

Make Sure the Charts are as “Readable” as Possible

You may be asking your accompanying musicians to play a song they never played before, maybe never even heard before, all in a darkened room. So they'll be dependent on the music you bring. The following measures will make it as easy for them to read as possible:

- The music and chord symbols should be as large as possible without forcing the chart onto two pages. It's especially important that the chord symbols be as large as possible; you'll be singing the melody but your accompanists will be working mainly from the chord symbols. Choose an easily readable font for the chord symbols; Ariel works well.
- Most songs have 8 bar phrases so a chart that has four bars per line makes it easier to keep track of where you are in the song.
- Major portions of the song, such as the bridge, should always start on a new line. This may require the use of more than four bars on the previous line if the previous phrase has a repeat with first and second endings.
- A bit of extra space between the major portions of the song also helps the musicians to quickly identify where they should be at any point during the performance.
- Computer-printed charts are usually preferable to hand-written charts. Programs such as Encore, Finale and PrintMusic can produce easily readable charts. Band-in-a-Box, while highly recommended as a practice tool, is not so useful for printing music since it allows less control of the appearance of lead sheets than the other programs mentioned.

How do you do all this if you have limited knowledge of music theory and/or don't have access to these programs? Well, that's where it helps to have musician friends.

Key Selection

It's important for jazz singers to have a song fit in their natural vocal range. This is truer for jazz singing than for just about any other type of singing. Forced high or low notes just don't have the natural sound of jazz. So musicians are not surprised when a singer wants to do a song in something other than its normal key. But that doesn't mean that anything goes.

Jazz musicians are used to playing in certain keys, generally keys without a lot of sharps in the key signature. (On the other hand rock musicians tend to use keys with a lot of sharps because these keys favour the open strings of guitars.) If you pick a key your accompanists are uncomfortable with, their playing will be stilted and unnatural (maybe even full of mistakes). They won't sound good and neither will you.

OK Keys		Keys to be Avoided	
Key	Key Signature	Key	Key Signature
C	No flat's or sharps's	D	2 sharps
Db	5 flats	E	4 sharps
Eb	3 flats	F#	6 sharps
F	1 flat	B	5 sharps
G	1 sharp		
Ab	4 flats		
A	3 sharps		
Bb	2 flats		

You must also bear in mind that most horns won't be using the same key as you and the piano and bass players (see below).

So how do you pick a key that fits your vocal range without annoying the musicians accompanying you? Let's take an example. Suppose you decide that you'd like to sing "Georgia." It's normal key is F but you find this too high for you so you feel you'd be better off a tone and a half lower in D. D isn't such a bad key but it will require the trumpet and tenor sax players to play in E (very bad!!). But if you could manage to sing it in Eb, just a half tone higher, the trumpet and tenor players will be in F and everyone will be happy. Even Db, just a half tone lower than your first choice, wouldn't be bad.

Bring Copies of the Chart for All the Accompanying Musicians (Don't forget the horn players!)

Remembering the darkened room problem mentioned earlier, it's usually pretty difficult for your accompanists to share one chart. So even if you only sing with piano and bass, you should bring two charts. If there's likely to be a guitar, bring another one. But it gets more complicated if you will have horns accompanying you.

For reasons that are too complicated to go into here, most horns used in jazz are "transposing instruments;" i.e. their music is written in a different key than the piano and bass. Trumpet and tenor sax music is in a key that is one tone higher; their keys have two fewer flats or two more sharps than the piano and bass keys. Alto sax music is in a key that is 4½ tones higher than the piano and bass; their keys have three fewer flats or three more sharps than the piano and bass keys.

So, to follow the example used in the previous section, for "Georgia," you should bring –



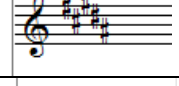
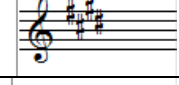
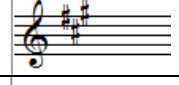
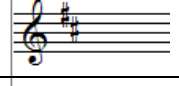


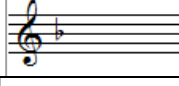
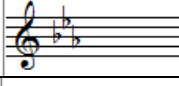
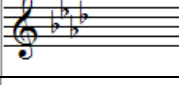
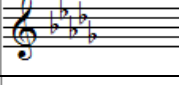
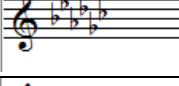
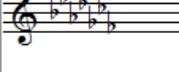
- three copies of the chart in Eb for the piano, bass and guitar
- at least one copy of the chart in F if you think there will a trumpet or tenor sax accompanying you
- at least one copy of the chart in C if you think there will be an alto sax accompanying you.

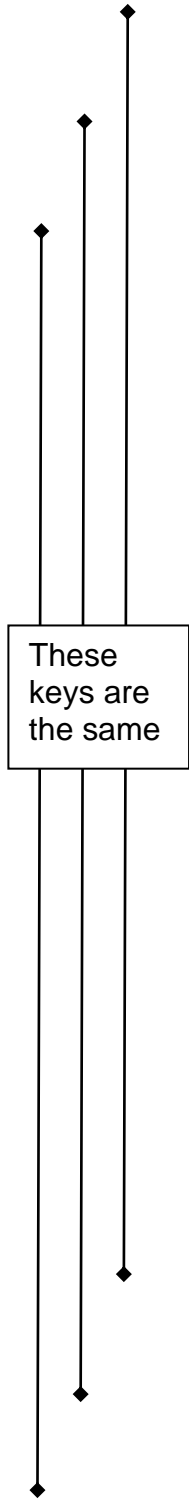
Since most jam sessions are pretty unpredictable, you should probably bring at least these five copies of the chart in any case.

Do all this and the musicians will love you and look forward to accompanying you again!!

Here are some tables that may help you in sorting our keys:

Keys for Transposing Instruments		
Concert Pitch vocal, piano, bass, guitar, trombone	Bb Instruments trumpet, tenor sax	Eb Instruments alto sax
C	D	A
C#	Eb	Bb
D	E	B
Eb	F	C
E	F#	C#
F	G	D
F#	Ab	Eb
G	A	E
Ab	Bb	F
A	B	F#
Bb	C	G
B	C#	Ab

KEY SIGNATURE	MAJOR KEY	MINOR KEY
	C#	A#min or Bbmin
	F#	D#min or Ebmin
	B	G#min or Abmin
	E	C#min or Dbmin
	A	F#min
	D	Bmin
	G	Emin
	C	Amin
	F	Dmin
	Bb	Gmin
	Eb	Cmin
	Ab	Fmin
	Db	Bbmin
	Gb	Ebmin or D#min
	Cb	Abmin or G#min



Note:

- For flat key signatures, the major key is the note of the second last flat.
- For sharp key signatures, the major key is the note one half tone above the last sharp
- The minor key is a tone and a half below the major key.

Here is an example of an easily readable chart:

Arial 16 for chord symbols

four bars per line

extra space between major sections

GEORGIA Hoagy Carmichael

The musical score is presented in a 4/4 time signature with a key signature of two flats (Bb and Eb). It consists of four sections, each with two staves of music. Section A (measures 1-8) features chords: Ebmaj7, Dm7(b5), G7, Cm, Cm/Bb, F/A, AbmD7. Section B (measures 9-16) features chords: Ebmaj7, C7, Fm7, Bb7, Gm7, C7, Fm7, Bb+7. Section C (measures 17-24) features chords: Cm, G7/B, Cm/Bb, Adim, Cm, G7/B, Cm/Bb, Adim, Cm, G7/B, Cm/Bb, Am7, D7, Gm7, C7, Fm7, Bb+7. Section D (measures 25-32) features chords: Ebmaj7, Dm7(b5), G7, Cm, Cm/Bb, F/A, AbmD7, Ebmaj7, C7, Fm7, Bb7(b9), Ebmaj7, (Fm7, Bb7).