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Learning advantages of online old-time jams

ABSTRACT

During the COVID-19 pandemic, participants in the old-time community of practice employed readily available streaming and teleconferencing platforms to jam online. Old-time musicians use acoustic instruments – primarily fiddle, banjo, mandolin, guitar and bass – to play traditional fiddle tunes from the United States, and jams are important sites for both learning and community building. Old-time jams were primarily facilitated using Zoom, Facebook Live and YouTube Live – platforms that allow a leader or small group to broadcast from a single location while other participants play on mute. While these platforms cannot successfully replicate in-person jams, for some players they provided a superior learning experience. This study draws on quantitative, qualitative and participant–observer data to categorize and describe the ways in which online jamming helped old-time players to sustain musical growth during the pandemic. While the inaudibility of individual participants might seem to be a major drawback of these platforms, it in fact benefited developing players in multiple ways. Participants also valued the opportunity to learn from recorded sessions, see and hear more clearly, maintain autonomy over their learning processes, access online resources and meet new challenges. For these reasons, online jams continue to serve as a valuable learning tool even as players return to in-person activities.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19
virtual music-making
participatory
music-making
mediated participation
virtual learning
traditional music
string instruments
string band

INTRODUCTION

Although the COVID-19 pandemic proved disastrous to all musicians, lockdown and quarantine measures posed special challenges for members

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of participatory musical communities, whose practices centre on in-person collaborative music-making. Musical performance, in which a musician produces sounds intended for reception by a relatively passive audience, translates easily (if not without significant disruption and loss) to existing virtual communication platforms designed to stream audio-visual information from a broadcaster to a receiver (e.g. Facebook Live [FBL], YouTube Live [YTL], Zoom). However, participation typically requires the multidirectional flow of audio-visual information – something that is not currently supported by accessible communication platforms. Nevertheless, participatory musicians found ways to continue singing and playing ‘together’, even when this meant adapting to entirely new modes of participation. In the old-time music scene, which brings together acoustic instrumentalists in the participatory performance of traditional US fiddle tunes, online jams facilitated using Zoom, YTL and FBL attracted large numbers of participants on a weekly basis.

This study considers the online jamming habits and experiences of old-time musicians one year into the pandemic (April–May 2021). I collected data at that point in time because some of the online jam hosts had indicated plans to scale back or terminate their operations, and it seemed urgent to document what I perceived as a unique historical phenomenon. Although many jams did come to an end, it has since become evident that virtual jams now have a permanent place in the old-time scene. According to the ‘Online Old Time Jams’ Google Calendar, in the first week of May 2022 musicians could access no fewer than fifteen virtual jams constituting over 25 hours of playing time. Although this represents a decline from the 24 jams scheduled in the first week of May 2021, constituting over 39 hours of playing time, a majority of the jams are still active. Furthermore, recordings posted to social media indicate that participation remained stable and strong over the year following data collection (Sue 2021, 2022).

The jams that have ceased to function were, in many cases, hosted by professional musicians who were able to resume their touring and performing activities (e.g. Rachel Eddy, whose YTL jam was coordinated via the Thursday Night Old-Time Jam Facebook group) or local groups who returned to meeting in-person (e.g. the Baltimore jam, broadcast over FBL in the Baltimore Old Time Jam group by Ken and Brad Kolodner during the pandemic). However, certain jams – the ‘Su & Jules’ sessions, for example, and the sight-reading sessions hosted by Carina Ravelly – seem to have developed uniquely virtual identities, and they have sustained the interest of participants even as in-person opportunities return. It is evident that online jams satisfy participant needs that are not met by in-person alternatives, and the results of this study offer some strong clues as to what those needs are.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Jamming and learning in old-time

The designation ‘old-time music’, though contested, is widely used to describe the pre-bluegrass string band traditions that flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Reish 2017). Old-time musicians play fiddle, banjo, mandolin, guitar, bass and other acoustic instruments, emulating the repertoire and style of rural and ‘hillbilly’ performers documented on both commercial and field recordings (Decosimo 2018: 11–12). The jam, which is perhaps the central institution of the old-time scene, has long been of interest to ethnomusicologists (Woolf 1990; Williams 2020). Jams take place at festivals and community centres, on porches and campuses, and in restaurants and stores. They can be large or small, slow or fast, open to all or invitation-only.

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In most cases, participants sit in a circle and takes turns selecting tunes that are played by the entire group without solo 'breaks' or any notable variation. A tune ends when the player who called it indicates that they are ready to stop.

Old-time jams play a key role in the transmission and refinement of repertoire, skills and knowledge within the old-time community of practice (CoP). A recent definition by one of CoP theory's architects posits that, '[c]ommunities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015). The CoP model has been applied to the old-time players who learn tunes, technique and history by participating in jams (Richardson 2019), attending music camps and festivals (Blanton 2016; Morgan-Ellis 2019), and engaging with one another in virtual spaces (Waldron 2009, 2011, 2013a, 2013b). Many of these individuals are adult learners who seek to improve their skills and knowledge, and they have long made use of the internet as a resource for learning and community building. Related research concerning jams (Waldron 2008) and online learning (Waldron and Veblen 2008; Ward 2019) in the Irish traditional music CoP further confirms the significance of both jamming and the internet to skill acquisition among adult instrumentalists in traditional music scenes.

Online participatory music-making during the pandemic

Despite the challenges of facilitating participatory music-making during the pandemic, many ensembles, organizations and musical communities found ways to sustain their activities, although choral groups were more likely than instrumental groups to move online (Draper and Dingle 2021). The same technologies – videoconferencing services, streaming services, low-latency communications platforms and video-editing software – were typically employed by all practitioners, although preferences and modes of usage varied widely. Generally speaking, members of other participatory communities had the same aims as old-time players: to maintain social ties, keep making music and continue growing as musicians.

All of these aims certainly characterize college a cappella singers, who used Zoom to socialize and rehearse in preparation for producing 'virtual choir' videos (Duchan 2024). The 'virtual choir', in which video recordings of individual singers are pieced together into a single 'performance', quickly became familiar during the early weeks of the pandemic as they flooded social media (Bendall 2020; Kinsella 2021; Morgan-Ellis 2022). The term 'virtual choir' recalls the technique's origins in the choral world (Armstrong 2012: 33–35), but was also used widely by instrumentalists during the pandemic (Kearney et al. 2021; Frishkopf et al. 2021), as was the conceptually related 'duet' feature on the social media platform TikTok (Kaye 2022). Although 'virtual choir' participation has been demonstrated to have significant social and learning outcomes (Carvalho and Goodyear 2014; Fancourt and Steptoe 2019; Morgan-Ellis 2021c), this model was not widely adopted by old-time players.

A large-scale study of UK choral singers found that 'virtual choir' production was common, but that far more singers were using synchronous options, including both videoconferencing and streaming (Daffern et al. 2021). When rehearsals were held over Zoom, a leader would sing, perhaps with accompaniment, while chorus members participated on mute (Price et al. 2021; Cusworth 2021). A similar model was employed by music therapists, who also provided patients with pre-recorded videos intended to facilitate participation (Dowson et al. 2021). Sacred Harp singers, who constitute a global

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CoP centred on singing out of the shape-note songbook *The Sacred Harp* (first published in the US state of Georgia in 1844), developed a unique approach to online music-making. While Sacred Harp singers also made use of Zoom, they generally preferred to sing along with video or audio recordings of previous in-person events, although they also employed a live-leading approach (Morgan-Ellis 2021a). This reflects the community's unique participatory values; singing is never regarded as preparation for performance, and historical connections to people, places and events are highly valued. In addition, Sacred Harp singers developed a way to use FBL to produce a broadcast containing multiple sung parts (Morgan-Ellis 2021a, 2021d).

Due primarily to latency, which introduces a non-negligible communication delay between participants, videoconferencing software cannot facilitate music-making activities for which all participants are unmuted, except in the case of free-form improvisation (MacDonald et al. 2021). Although participatory musicians across traditions were nonetheless most likely to use videoconferencing software (Onderdijk 2021), a significant number utilized low-latency platforms such as Jamulus, JamKazam and Soundjack (Rowan 2021; Morgan-Ellis 2021a).

The vast majority of studies regarding participatory music-making during the COVID-19 pandemic have focused on health and well-being concerns. This includes most of those cited in this review and others (Levstek et al. 2021; Zhu and Pitts 2021; Shibazaki and Marshall 2021; Gosine and Ryan 2021), as well as studies concerning the loss of music-making opportunities (Pennill and Timmers 2021; Myrick et al. 2024) and the use of social media to maintain community (Trottier-Pistien 2021; Snyder et al. 2022). Educational implications have been explored by Gibson (2021), who documented the approaches taken by facilitators of online participatory music-making.

METHODOLOGY

The object of the study was not specifically to determine the pedagogical effectiveness of online jamming, but rather to document participant experiences across categories of enjoyment, frustration, social connectivity and perceptions of 'liveness'. Categories and individual items were developed based on my own experiences as a participant-observer, especially in the online jams hosted by Rachel Eddy (2021) using YTL and the Slow Jam Fizz series in Zoom (Berkeley Old Time Music Convention 2022), and on my research interests, which span music learning, participation and media.

Formal data were gathered using an online questionnaire that combined single- and multi-select multiple-choice, Likert-type and open-ended items (Appendix 1). The questionnaire was divided into four sections, each of which appeared on a separate page. The first ten questions gathered data concerning the respondent's musical experience and online jamming habits. Questions 11 and 12 asked the respondent to consider the advantages of online jamming by engaging with a series of Likert-type items and an open-ended item. Questions 13 and 14, structured in the same way, asked the respondent to consider the disadvantages of online jamming. Finally, Questions 15 through 18 asked the respondent to reflect on their experience of connection and togetherness in the context of online jamming, again using a series of Likert-type items and two open-ended items. Some of the data collected were not relevant to an examination of learning advantages and are not presented or analysed in this article.

The questionnaire was available from 19 April 2021 until 22 May 2021. It was circulated in the Facebook groups Old-Time Open Jams, Baltimore Old

Time Jam and Clawhammer Rules, and also shared in the chat during the Slow Jam Fizz Zoom meeting on 23 April. A total of 83 valid responses were submitted. All 83 study participants responded to items concerning the advantages of online jamming. 82 responded to items about the drawbacks of online jamming and 81 responded to items about social connectivity. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at my institution, and all participants granted informed consent.

This study was not designed to facilitate rigorous statistical analysis. Instead, results from the Likert-type items provide structure for interpreting the open-ended responses, which were coded using a general inductive approach (Thomas 2006: 238). Quotes are attributed to study participants in terms of Question number to which they were responding, skill level and most-used platform. When put in conversation, the quantitative and qualitative results reveal both general trends (e.g. significant vs. insignificant advantages ascribed to online jamming) and finely grained detail.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Trends in the qualitative data, supported by quantitative results, revealed that online jamming is most highly valued for its learning outcomes. Although a few respondents indicated that they also secured the musical and social benefits associated with in-person jams ('[s]o fun to feel the groove! Also feels a bit "social" and now I have [Z]oom friends!' [Q12, adv., Zoom]), responses indicating the absence of those elements were far more typical: '1) Missing out on social aspect. 2) Not hearing the group, not being able to form the collective groove/dynamics' (Q14, int., YTL). Many respondents indicated total dissatisfaction with online jamming or described it as a pandemic-era stopgap, the value of which would expire with a return to normal conditions: 'Online jamming is a past time until able to jam in person' (Q12, adv., FBL and YTL). Others, however, cited opportunities to achieve musical growth that were not available to them before the pandemic. These respondents learned new tunes, picked up additional instruments, developed their capacity for learning by ear, honed their improvisation and harmonization skills, and became more confident playing in jam settings.

In his study of pandemic-era choral activities, Bendall found that 'virtual choirs present modes of musical practice and group identity in online communities that differ from pre-existing synchronous choral practice and are, in some instances, at odds with that practice' (2024). Similarly, respondents in this study indicated that online jamming is a fundamentally different activity from – and perhaps in some ways at odds with – in-person jamming. All the same, online jamming offered significant learning advantages and satisfied previously unmet needs – in particular, those of (1) developing players and (2) players without access to in-person music-making. As such, there is cause to maintain virtual jamming opportunities indefinitely.

The who and how of online jamming

The survey instrument gathered some general data about respondents' experience and engagement levels. They had been playing old-time music for between one and 50 years, with an average experience of 16.8 years. Fifty respondents (60%) played more than one instrument. Respondents played all of the listed instruments – fiddle (47), guitar (42), banjo (34), mandolin (23), string bass (13), ukulele (13) and mountain dulcimer (12) – as well as hammered dulcimer (6), autoharp (3), tenor guitar (2), cello (1), recorders (1), harmonica (1) and

steel pan (1). Regarding level of accomplishment on their primary instruments, 46 (55%) self-identified as intermediate, 31 (37%) as advanced, five (6%) as professional and only one as beginner. It is evident that the vast majority of jam participants were adult amateur learners with significant experience, and open-ended responses indicated that many participants used online jamming as an opportunity to develop skills on secondary instruments. I myself identify as a professional fiddler but I usually played banjo (on which I am an intermediate player) or guitar (beginning) in virtual jams, both for the opportunity to practice and because most jams were led by a fiddler.

Zoom was by far the most commonly used platform, followed by the streaming services FBL and YTL (Figure 1). Each of these platforms facilitates broadcast from a single site; participants are able to play along with leaders but cannot hear one another. A distinctive feature of Zoom is that participants can see one another, although they have to remain muted. In Zoom, it is also possible for participants to take turns broadcasting, resulting in a 'round robin' format; however, only about half of respondents had participated in jams of this type. Most common were jams for which a professional musician (or pair/group) broadcast throughout, whether facilitated using Zoom (e.g. Slow Jam Fizz), FBL (e.g. Baltimore Old Time Jam) or YTL (e.g. Rachel Eddy's Thursday Night Old-Time Jam). All platforms facilitate text-based chatting. Only two respondents used low-latency communications software 'most of the time', while the majority did not use it at all. These audio-only platforms are not currently accessible to all musicians. They require fast internet, a hard-wired connection, good equipment and a reasonably high degree of technical facility (Morgan-Ellis 2021b).

When invited to list the specific jams in which they participated, respondents provided the names of 52 individuals and organizations. Weekly jams mentioned more than twice included the Baltimore Old Time Jam (27), Rachel Eddy's Thursday Night Old-Time Jam (14), the 'Su & Jules' jams (10), Slow Jam Fizz (7) and Slower than Dirt (4). Most of these jams can be categorized as 'led by a professional musician', which was the most common type, although the 'Su & Jules' jams sometimes take a 'round robin' format (Figure 2). Camp and festival jams mentioned more than twice included Fiddle Hell (6) and Ashokan Old-Time Rollick (5). Finally, three respondents described playing along with Jay Unger and Molly Mason, who broadcast each Wednesday on the Ashokan Music and Dance Facebook page. Their 'Quiet Room' concert series, which serves as a fundraiser for the Ashokan Center, does not explicitly invite participation. However, old-time players have a long tradition of playing along with online videos of jams and concerts in order to learn tunes – a practice mentioned by several respondents.

Online jamming as a learning tool

Many respondents made it clear that they regarded online jamming as a unique activity, distinct in purpose from in-person jamming. Specifically, they regarded online jamming as a learning tool:

Right off, I am not looking at online jamming to replicate an in-person experience, as it can't. I am looking at online jamming for different reasons: to increase my exposure to new tunes, new approaches, new styles, and ability to improve my improvisation skills with less distraction around me.

(Q18a, int., FBL, YTL and Zoom)

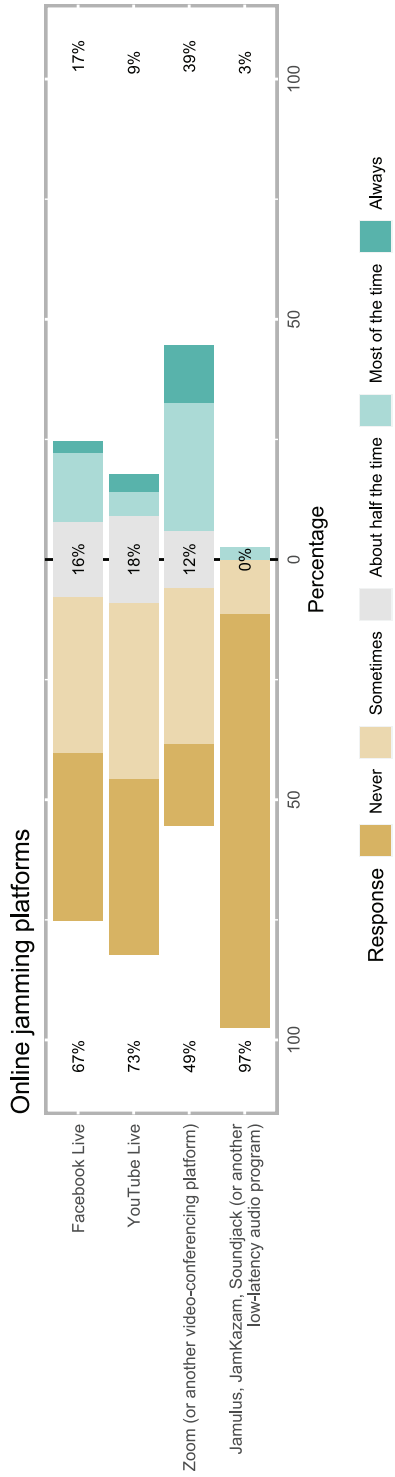


Figure 1: This figure depicts responses to questionnaire item 9.

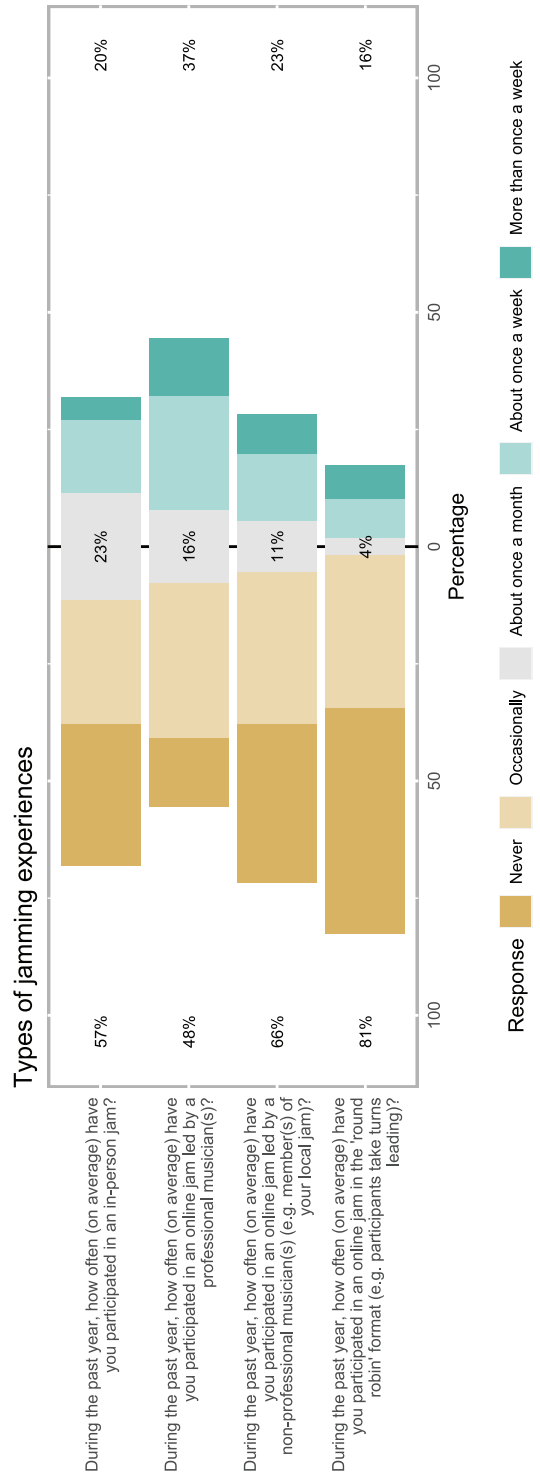


Figure 2: This figure depicts responses to questionnaire items 5, 6, 7 and 8.

One response encapsulated what was clearly a common sentiment:

Online jamming with professional musicians feels like rewarding PRACTICE, not really jamming. With that as my goal, the experience is ideal for me as a guitarist. I can:

- find a jam without a guitarist and work on the skill of figuring out chord structures to tunes new to me
- find a jam with a guitarist, listen & watch carefully and learn new skills.

(Q12, int., FBL and YTL)

This participant set aside expectations associated with in-person jamming and cultivated a new approach, selecting online environments that would allow them to learn and grow as a player.

Apparently recognizing online jamming as a learning opportunity, several respondents preferred to play an instrument on which they were still developing skills. One response in particular clearly delineated the respective roles of in-person and online jamming: 'I really like in person jams with my fiddle and I really like online jams with my banjo. I also feel much more confident going to an in person jam with my banjo after this year' (Q14, adv., Zoom). For this individual, online jamming served as valuable preparation for in-person music-making. Another respondent was less enthusiastic about online jamming, but still found it valuable as a learning tool, whether employed for tune acquisition or skill development:

I almost never play my 'main' instrument. [...] [I]t is just not satisfying to do so except for trying to learn a new tune. [...] I have been taking advantage of on-line jamming to learn a new instrument – back-up guitar and for that, I have few complaints.

(Q14, adv., YTL and Zoom)

'Getting to learn new tunes' was the most-valued benefit in terms of Likert-type item rankings (Figure 3). A player might learn new tunes at any jam, but the likelihood of encountering unfamiliar material is much greater in the average online jam – especially if it rotates leaders, such as Slow Jam Fizz – than in a local jam with an established repertoire.

Learning advantages of online jamming

There are many ways in which online jamming made learning easier for some respondents. The most prominent theme to emerge from the open-ended responses concerned the participant's inaudibility to other players, which proved to have many learning benefits. This affordance was reflected in three of the Likert-type items, which ranked sequentially: those concerning the ability to 'noodle' and experiment without disturbing other players, and that concerning the inaudibility of one's mistakes. Each of these benefits was reinforced by answers to the question, '[w]hat are your favorite things about online jamming?'. Some respondents reported significant musical development as a result of their inaudibility:

Ability to experiment: I have grown a lot in playing by ear & credit online jamming during COVID for this.

(Q12, int., FBL)

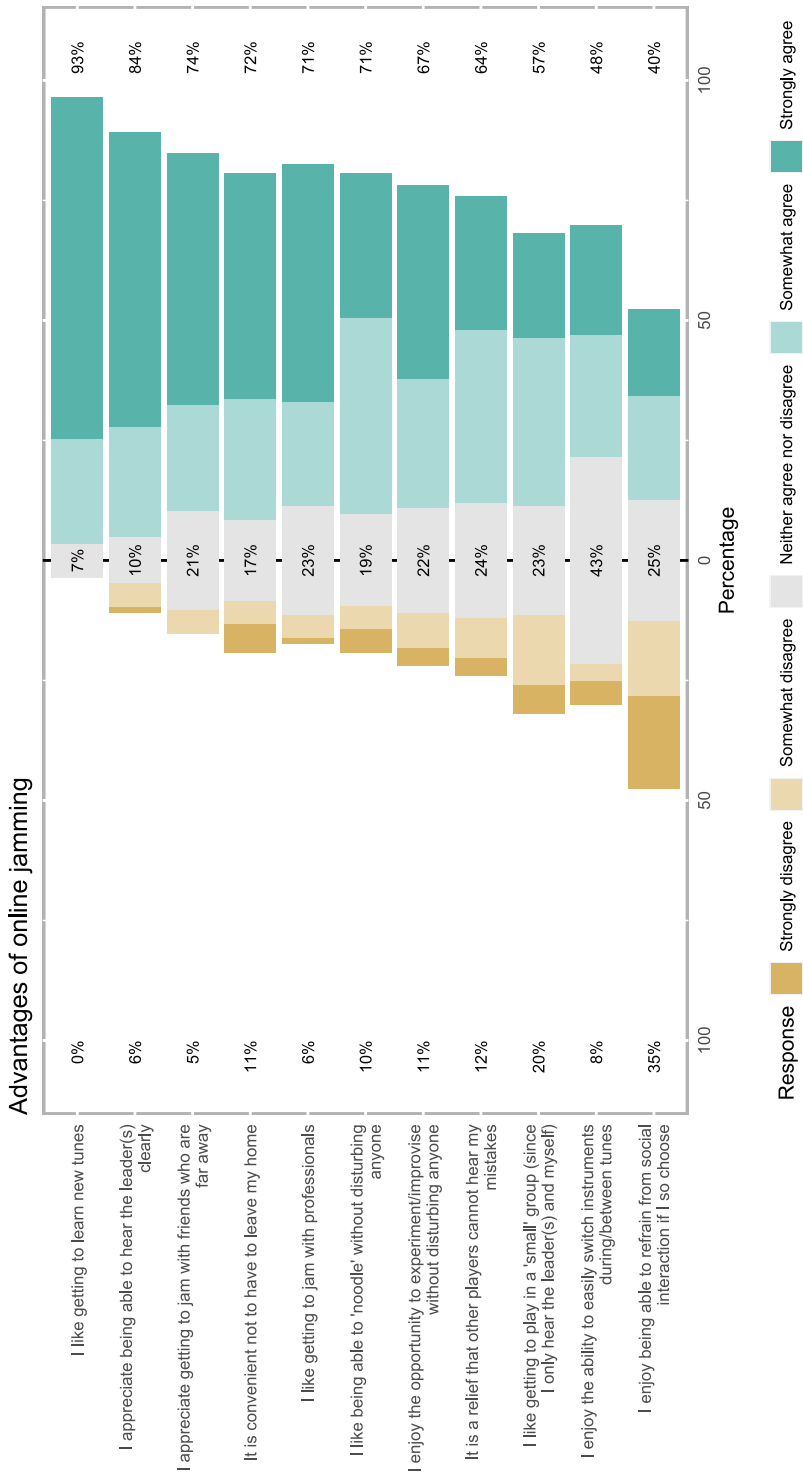


Figure 3: This figure depicts responses to questionnaire item 11.

Figuring new tunes out 'on the fly' has tripped me up for YEARS because I was mortified to make mistakes! Online jamming liberated me from that self-consciousness and I got over that 'hump' almost entirely.

(Q12, int., YTL)

Other respondents, perhaps primed by the Likert-type items, emphasized the liberation that comes from not having to worry about disrupting the jam:

Playing harmonies or weird stuff without annoying anyone.

(Q12, adv., Zoom)

Learning from others without stress of keeping up, or making mistakes that bug others.

(Q12, int., Zoom)

It is certainly typical for developing players to feel self-conscious in jam settings, and even advanced players might feel constrained when it comes to treading outside of the norms (e.g. harmonizing). Some respondents specifically highlighted the negative feelings that can come from playing poorly or inappropriately in a social context:

I also appreciate being able to make mistakes without feeling bad and pushing my limits and trying new techniques.

(Q12, int., Zoom)

I particularly like the opportunity to learn a new instrument in a low pressure way.

(Q12, adv., YTL and Zoom)

It is clear that online jamming removes several stressors typical among developing players.

Next in frequency were expressions of appreciation that online jams are usually recorded and made available after the fact. It is typical for players at in-person jams to make recordings of unfamiliar tunes for the purpose of learning them later, but these are usually audio-only and require active intervention (Morgan-Ellis 2019: 44). FBL and YTL videos, in contrast, are automatically preserved. Some Zoom jams were simultaneously streamed on a social media platform, while others were recorded and uploaded to YouTube. If a video is available on YouTube, the playback speed can be easily adjusted – something that several respondents reported taking advantage of: 'If the jam is save[d] to You Tube I can review the jam later to practice or learn new tunes. Being able to speed up or slow down the re-play' (Q12, int., FBL, YTL and Zoom). The fact that jams were recorded also allowed players to 'attend' jams with which they had conflicts and take breaks as needed, knowing they could return to the recording at their convenience. In response to a later item, most participants indicated that they were likely to play along with the recording of a jam they had missed, and a substantial minority even indicated that it was not important whether they played with the live broadcast or the replay (Figure 4). This indicates that many participants valued online jamming more as a learning opportunity than a social event, given that one cannot interact with other participants or imagine their simultaneous participation when engaging with a recording. Elsewhere, I elaborate on the differences between synchronous and asynchronous forms of mediated participation (Morgan-Ellis 2024).

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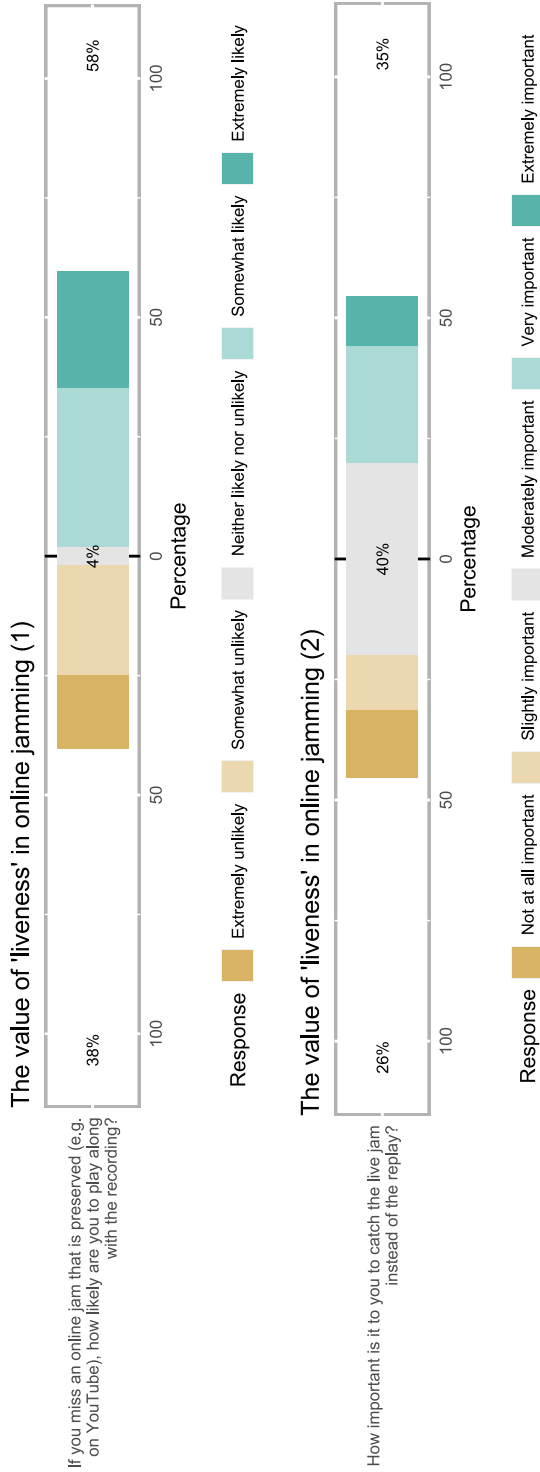


Figure 4: This figure depicts responses to questionnaire items 16 and 17.

FBL, YTL and Zoom jamming facilitate different modes of seeing and hearing than are available in physical settings. To begin with, no matter how large the jam, everyone is 'up close' to the leader (and, in the case of Zoom, the other participants). This can create a sense of intimacy (Carvalho and Goodyear 2014: 217), but it can also enhance learning, since participants are usually capable of 'seeing the leader's hands clearly' (Q12, adv., Zoom). It is well-documented that visual learning is an important part of transmission in old-time (Morgan-Ellis 2019: 34), and on several occasions I witnessed a situation in which a jam leader was asked to move so that their hands would be more visible.

Although the sound quality of online jamming is usually compromised, the participant is presented with several unique sonic opportunities. Even if hundreds of musicians are involved in a FBL, YTL or Zoom jam, each individual will only hear themselves and the jam leader(s), which provides a small-group experience not always available to players. In addition, all platforms allow the participant to control the volume of their musical partners – a convenience for everyone, but an essential component of access for some disabled players (Williams 2020: 53). Several respondents commented on the advantages of the online sonic environment, each indicating unique ways in which their ability to hear was improved:

The ability to learn new tunes is enhanced because you can hear the leader more clearly.

(Q18a, adv., FBL and YTL)

What I like about online jamming is that I can hear myself. I can also hear the leader clearly. I am still low intermediate so sometimes the cacophony around me [during an in-person jam] can be distracting and I lose my place. I love to try to improvise and change up a tune and it seems a little harder to do when I am hearing a lot of people around me.

(Q18b, int., FBL, YTL and Zoom)

I use JamKazam so can hear everyone as clearly as I like (or mute them if they're totally out of whack).

(Q12, prof., JamKazam)

None of these learning advantages were available to the respondents in in-person settings.

Respondents also expressed gratitude for the increased autonomy and privacy that come with virtual participation, which grants each player the ability to remain invisible (by turning off a Zoom camera) or to conceal their presence altogether (by following a FBL or YTL stream without comment). Although 'I enjoy being able to refrain from social interaction' ranked last in significance among the Likert-type items, it was highly valued by some:

I'm not always as social as many jammers are so I also enjoy being able to not talk! The more pressure a leader put on us to use zoom so we could interact between tunes, the less likely I was to do so.

(Q12, int., YTL)

Even players who might enjoy socializing appreciated the freedom to interact with the jam environment on their own terms without causing embarrassment or disruption: 'If I don't want to play a particular song I can walk away

without appearing rude to others' (Q12, int., FBL and YTL). Some also revelled in their increased level of control over the jam experience: 'No one else can speed up your tune, which I consider rude' (Q12, int., Zoom). Although the loss of casual socializing caused profound harm to many participatory musicians, the constraints of virtual platforms also conferred benefits.

Jamming online offers a few advantages related to the fact that participants are sitting in front of a computer. One of these is the 'ability to Google tunes online I don't know for sheet music' (Q12, int., FBL and YTL). It is not uncommon for novice players with classical training to rely on sheet music, which is not always welcome in jam settings (Blanton 2016: 66–67). Participating online both facilitates access to sheet music and destigmatizes its use. The chat/comment functions in Zoom and FBL also facilitate the sharing of links to sheet music (such as the tune transcriptions available online at TuneArch.org), source recordings, and informative websites, even though some participants found the chat cumbersome or distracting. Links cannot be shared in YTL chat.

Finally, 'round robin' Zoom jams provided both opportunities and pitfalls for the developing player. One respondent reported the benefits of being called upon to lead tunes in Zoom: 'You have to up your game to lead a tune which is a growth experience' (Q12, int., Zoom). This resonates with findings regarding online Sacred Harp singers, who similarly reported musical growth as a result of leading songs in Zoom (Morgan-Ellis 2021a). Some participants, however, found it frustrating to play along with leaders who could not hold a steady tempo:

Leaders, especially those playing solo fiddle, often have irregular rhythm that is hard to play along with. This is especially true in round robin jams. This irregular rhythm occurs often when amateurs lead tunes, but some of the unaccompanied pros are also guilty of this! It is the main complaint I have, and often is bad enough that I sign off.

(Q14, int., YTL and Zoom)

Interestingly, Sacred Harp singers did not register complaints of this type, despite similarly being called upon to sing with leaders with inconsistent pitch and/or rhythm. Instead, respondents remarked on how meaningful it was to hear the individual voices of other singers (Morgan-Ellis 2021a). This variation might indicate a significant difference in the participatory motivations of old-time and Sacred Harp musicians, especially in online settings during the pandemic.

The continuing role for online jamming

Virtual jams provide essential access to otherwise isolated or homebound individuals. This has been documented in other contexts, and participants in various pandemic-era studies have made it clear that they want music-making opportunities to remain available online (Norton 2024; Morgan-Ellis 2021a). Excerpts from a single lengthy response aptly illustrate this point:

I live in an isolated rural area. As a beginner to old-time jamming I was looking for a slow jam. The nearest is approximately 150 miles away. Being able to jam without having to drive 300 miles round trip is wonderful. I am able to join every month instead of having to skip in bad weather. [...]

I have seen the size of my 'local' jam triple with people from all over the US and a few from other countries. There are very few old-time slow jams nationwide so many of us are hoping that the online jams will continue after the pandemic for those of us who don't have a close one.

(Q12, int., Zoom)

Responses such as this both explain the continued demand for online jams and should encourage facilitators to maintain virtual offerings. Online jamming can also improve access for individuals with physical or psychological disabilities related to vision, hearing, focus or social interaction, as detailed above.

At the same time, online jamming presents new barriers to access. These include issues concerning equipment and connectivity that might be addressed, such as the poor sound quality that results when jam leaders use a cheap microphone or do not optimize their Zoom settings; indeed, '[t]he sound quality detracts from my experience' was the top complaint registered in both the quantitative and qualitative data (Figure 5). Most respondents reported having adequate internet speed and a suitable device, as well as access to a private domestic space in which to play. This last result contrasts with findings from a study of Sacred Harp singers, who reported lack of access to an adequate space as the most significant barrier to participation – a variation largely explained by the fact that Sacred Harp singers are in the habit of vocalizing at maximum volume (Morgan-Ellis 2021b: 228–30). Concerns regarding the fundamental limitations of available platforms (e.g. the inability to hear other players) are not easily addressed, although they reflect values associated with in-person jamming and lose significance when online jamming is reconceived as a learning experience.

CONCLUSION

Online jam facilitators and participants do not need to be told that what they are doing is valuable. The fact that, as of this writing in 2022, online old-time jams still take place every single day demonstrates that the benefits are widely appreciated. However, this study elucidates specific benefits in ways that can guide facilitators in providing the best possible experiences, and also serves their efforts to promote and sustain online jamming. Additionally, this study constitutes an argument for increased learning-oriented, online play-a-long and sing-a-long opportunities across communities and traditions. The findings of this study are limited by the structure and practices of the old-time CoP, and the techniques described are not applicable to all instances of music teaching and/or rehearsal. However, jam leaders in other traditions, as well as community music organizers and music therapists, can learn from the activities of the old-time CoP. The available technology, despite its limitations, promises unique learning benefits and can make music learning accessible to more individuals.

Responses recorded in this study indicate that attitude was a central factor in determining an individual's experience with online jamming. If an old-time player looked to replicate their in-person experiences and benefits, they were disappointed. If, however, they accepted online jamming *not* as a poor substitute for in-person jamming but as an entirely new mode of musical activity replete with learning advantages, then they were likely to both enjoy themselves and experience musical growth. This supports Camlin and Lisboa's conclusion, made in their editorial introduction to a Special Issue of *Music*

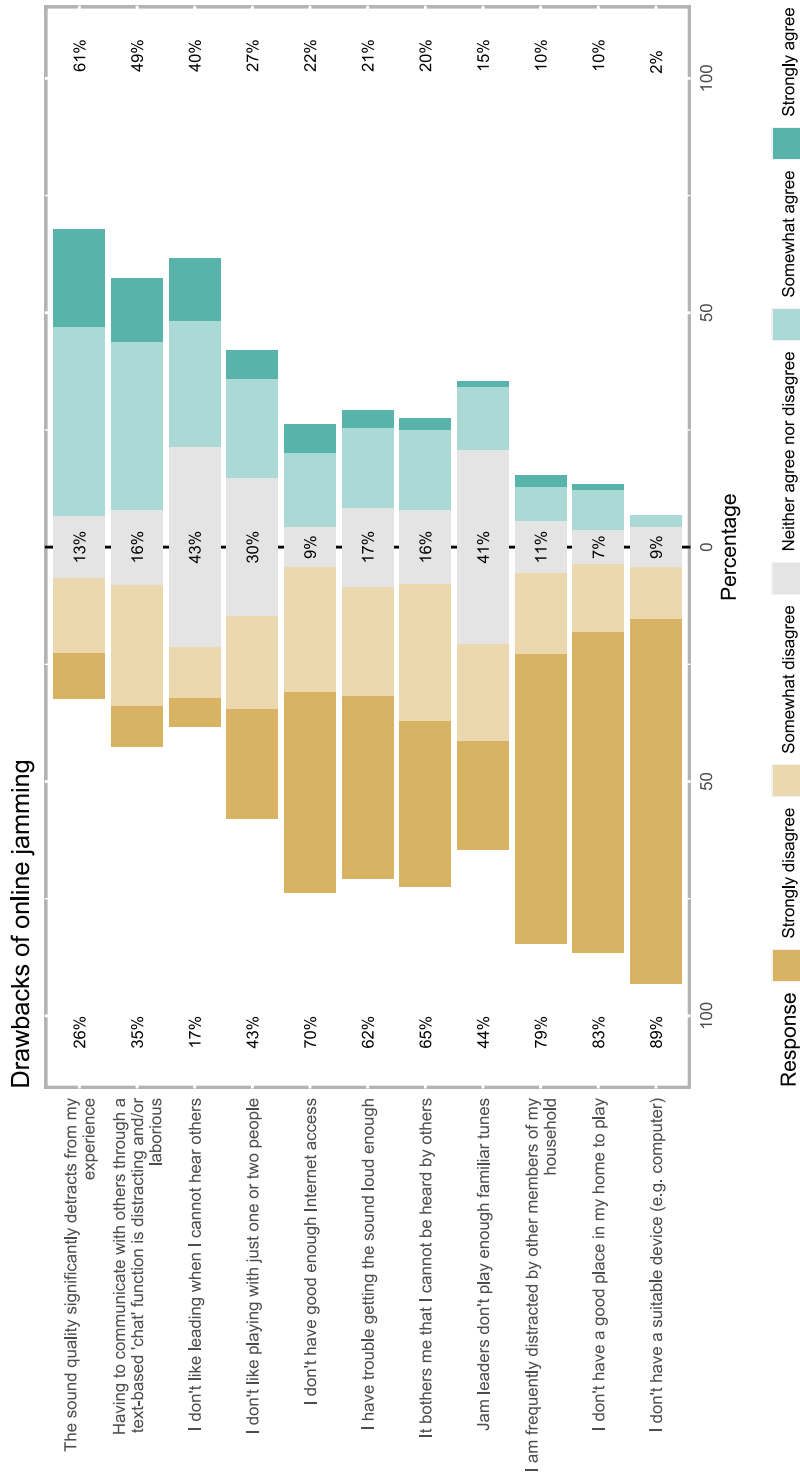


Figure 5: This figure depicts responses to questionnaire item 13.

Education Research, 'that there are clear benefits of both online and offline music education, and both domains need to be considered in the devising of music curricula' (2021: 137). The old-time community of practice has long valued in-person jamming as a primary mode of tune acquisition and skill development. It appears that online jamming is now becoming established as a unique learning tool in its own right.

It will be interesting to see how attitudes and practices change in the coming years. This study was conducted during a transitional period in the pandemic, just as many old-time players were returning to in-person music-making. At the time participants completed the questionnaire, most had been jamming online for a full year, meaning that they had adapted to the affordances of the online platforms described. Most also had few or no opportunities to jam offline. A repetition of this study might produce different responses, now that in-person jams have largely returned. Technological developments, which have been accelerated by the pandemic, will also continue to transform the ways in which musicians play and sing together online.

APPENDIX 1

Questionnaire: Participant Experiences with Online Old-Time Jams

1. How many years have you been playing old-time music?
2. What instrument(s) do you play?
 - Banjo
 - Bass
 - Fiddle
 - Guitar
 - Mandolin
 - Mountain dulcimer
 - Ukulele
 - Other:
3. Considering your primary instrument, what level of player do you identify as?
 - Beginner
 - Intermediate
 - Advanced
 - Professional
4. Before the onset of the pandemic, how often (on average) did you participate in an in-person jam?
 - Never/occasionally/about once a month/about once a week/more than once a week.
5. During the past year, how often (on average) have you participated in an in-person jam?
 - Never/occasionally/about once a month/about once a week/more than once a week.
6. During the past year, how often (on average) have you participated in an online jam *led by a professional musician(s)*?
 - Never/occasionally/about once a month/about once a week/more than once a week.
7. During the past year, how often (on average) have you participated in an online jam *led by a non-professional musician(s)* (e.g. member[s] of your local jam)?

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- Never/occasionally/about once a month/about once a week/more than once a week.
8. During the past year, how often (on average) have you participated in an online jam *in the 'round robin' format* (e.g. participants take turns leading)?
Never/occasionally/about once a month/about once a week/more than once a week.
9. *Please indicate the frequency with which you have used each of the following platforms to participate in online jamming (never/sometimes/about half the time/most of the time/always):*
Facebook Live
YouTube Live
Zoom (or another videoconferencing platform)
Jamulus/JamKazam/Soundjack (or another low-latency audio program)
10. Please list and/or briefly describe the online jams you have participated in:
11. *The statements below concern possible advantages to online jamming. These advantages might contribute to positive experiences with online jamming. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each of the statements (strongly agree/somewhat agree/neither agree nor disagree/somewhat disagree/strongly disagree):*
It is a relief that other players cannot hear my mistakes.
I like being able to 'noodle' without disturbing anyone.
I enjoy the opportunity to experiment/improvise without disturbing anyone.
I enjoy the ability to easily switch instruments during/between tunes.
It is convenient not to have to leave my home.
I like getting to jam with professionals.
I appreciate getting to jam with friends who are far away.
I like getting to play in a 'small' group (since I only hear the leader[s] and myself).
I appreciate being able to hear the leader(s) clearly.
I like getting to learn new tunes.
I enjoy being able to refrain from social interaction if I so choose.
12. What are your favourite things about online jamming?
13. *The statements below concern possible drawbacks to online jamming. These drawbacks might contribute to negative experiences with online jamming. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each of the statements (strongly agree/somewhat agree/neither agree nor disagree/somewhat disagree/strongly disagree):*
The sound quality significantly detracts from my experience.
I do not like playing with just one or two people.
I have trouble getting the sound loud enough.
Jam leaders do not play enough familiar tunes.
I do not have a good place in my home to play.
I am frequently distracted by other members of my household.
I do not have good enough internet access.
I do not have a suitable device (e.g. computer).
It bothers me that I cannot be heard by others.
I do not like leading when I cannot hear others.
Having to communicate with others through a text-based 'chat' function is distracting and/or laborious.
14. What are the things you most dislike about online jamming?

15. *Online jamming is not in-person, but it can offer ways for players to connect in real time. Please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements (strongly agree/somewhat agree/neither agree nor disagree/somewhat disagree/strongly disagree).*

I feel socially connected to the person(s) leading the online jam.

I feel socially connected to the other participants in the online jam.

Seeing other participants (e.g. in Zoom) helps me feel like they are 'present'.

Reading comments from other participants helps me feel like they are 'present'.

Seeing a high viewer count (e.g. on YouTube) helps me feel like I am participating in a communal activity.

When jamming online, I feel like I am 'with' the other players.

I have made significant new social connections through online jamming.

I have had 'transcendent' experiences in online jamming, equal to the best in-person experiences.

Online jams are often preserved in a way that allows participants to 'join in' even after the jam has concluded.

16. If you miss an online jam that is preserved (e.g. on YouTube), how likely are you to play along with the recording?

Extremely likely/somewhat likely/neither likely nor unlikely/somewhat unlikely/extremely unlikely.

17. How important is it to you to catch the live jam instead of the replay?

Extremely important/very important/moderately important/slightly important/not at all important.

18. *Consider the social and musical elements you value most about in-person jamming. Of these:*

a. Which have carried over into online jamming? Please explain how online jamming successfully replicates your in-person experience:

b. Which have *not* carried over into online jamming? Please explain how online jamming fails to replicate your in-person experience:

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