

Playing Well with Others

Teamwork Onstage

By Don Carr inSync



When you're playing music onstage, communication and cooperation are essential. When everyone is playing tight and really listening to one another, the groove is infectious. You hear your part in the larger context, where and how it fits, and you sense what minor rhythmic or melodic adjustments you can make to help the whole thing feel even better. That, in turn, pushes everyone else to do the same, and the entire band sounds more cohesive. The more each player onstage gets into and enjoys the process, the better the band sounds. That translates to the audience. They respond, which pushes the band even more, and it continues upward exponentially. The whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts.

Get Out of Your Head

Making this happen involves quite a few steps, first and foremost, though, is to change your way of thinking. Instead of focusing solely on yourself – your gear, sound, performance, etc. – you have to pay attention to everyone onstage. Your thought process has to begin with “how is what I'm playing fitting with what everyone else is playing?” Listen from the audience's perspective, but remember that you have the advantage of being able to do something about it! If everyone in the band has adopted this new way of thinking, communication among performers will start to open up.

Play Less

When you play by yourself, the tendency is to play one continuous solo to keep it interesting. When there are more people involved, you take turns. That concept seems rudimentary, but when your focus is inward, toward yourself, no matter what's going on around you, the continuous solo concept is alive and well. It's surprising how NOT filling in every 16th note lets the groove breathe. It also allows other parts to stand out; remember, it's not all about you.

Be Humble

Beginning this new way of thinking in a rehearsal setting is easier. If you hear a section of a song that's not working, you can stop, figure out what everyone is playing, discuss what changes might make it better, and experiment with options. This looks great on paper but is very tricky in reality. It involves a lot of humility on everyone's part and a desire to have the best end result. Pointing out a part that someone in your band has crafted — and may think is the coolest riff ever — and telling them it's wrecking the groove can be a major blow to their ego. Music and creativity are emotional; be tactful and consider the other person's feelings before you totally shoot down an idea. Get a consensus from everyone in the band that this is the answer, and work together to make the part better. Offering alternative ideas that may or may not be based on the changed direction is always better than just saying "no" to something. If it happens to be your part that needs to be fixed, let it go and trust the people you're working with. The end result is what matters.

Be Prepared

Obviously, the more prepared you are individually going into a performance or rehearsal, the easier this will be. If you aren't proficient on your instrument or if you're struggling with either your gear or the song specifically, it will be difficult to shift your attention outward.

Have (a) Good Time

Playing with good time is EVERYONE'S responsibility, not just the drummer. Even if your drummer has excellent time, the rest of the band can push or pull the groove all over the place. Time is more than downbeats, as well. Having a good understanding of subdividing the beat is what makes a groove. Different styles of music approach subdividing the beat in a different way — pushy, laid-back, swung, etc. — so that gets down to interpretation. Trust your drummer to interpret the groove and time properly and play to him or her. As a drummer, make it your business to know your stuff. If there's a problem, discuss it in rehearsal or after the show.



Turn Down

If your level is drowning out everyone else from your perspective, you're too loud. Whether that means playing quieter, turning yourself down or everyone else up in your mix, or turning down or moving your amp further away physically, make sure you can hear everyone onstage. That's the only way you'll be able to understand how every part fits together.

Play with Dynamics

Play the loud parts loud, the soft parts soft, and do it all together. Dynamics add feel, flow, drama, and a whole range of emotions to a song or performance. The band has to communicate with one another to make that happen.

Find the Right Place

If your band is not on in-ear monitors and is instead using traditional monitor speakers and amplifiers, you have the advantage of being able to put yourself in closer physical proximity. As a guitarist, I like to stand near the bass player, get a sense of that artist's view, and listen to what that instrument's playing. Even better, have the whole band set up as close as possible, in a semicircle or arc, so everyone can see one another and all play toward the center.

Watch Your Bandmates

Making eye contact or watching each other onstage is intuitive for cues, such as endings or solos, but paying attention to what someone else is playing can be highlighted simply by looking at them. I like to watch the drummer's high-hat hand or kick foot to really dig in to the groove. Watch the keyboardist's hands to see what octaves they're playing in. Their rhythmic approach is also apparent. This can affect a rhythm guitar part drastically.

Avert Your Gaze

On the other hand, looking away or even closing your eyes can make you focus harder on what you're hearing because you're not distracted by what's in your field of vision.

Be the Ball

Be completely in the moment while you're playing onstage; you have to be all in to do your best. If your brain is anywhere else – pizza, NBA scores, what time your girlfriend gets off work – you're only giving partial effort. That affects not only you, but the rest of the band and everyone watching.

About Don Carr

With a three-decade career as a professional guitarist in Nashville, Tennessee, Sweetwater's Don Carr has a long list of album credits in multiple genres of music. His resume includes hundreds of radio and television appearances, as well as thousands of live performances in America and abroad as lead guitarist for the legendary Oak Ridge Boys. Don provides Sweetwater with professional insight through product demos, reviews, how-to's, and group instruction. He is also the first-call session guitarist for Sweetwater Studios.