

Jamming and Performing

At a graduation party, a local group, the lead singer of which was the graduate's sister, entertained the guests. They were relaxed, comfortable, well practiced, and very professional, never missing a cue.

The next day, I was teaching a seminar and mentioned the group to a student whom I knew was a professional musician. In our discussion, he mentioned that he'd much rather jam than perform. He didn't like the bar-band-scene anyway, but he also felt jamming was more fun for him, less demanding, and produced some really creative moments. Of course occasionally, when the jam turned momentarily into undisciplined jelly, it also produced numerous suggestions like "Let's take it up again at..." But the mistakes eventually yielded to really inspired and thrilling music.

Late in the seminar, I drew an analogy to musicians jamming in order to perform. Whether or not they prefer one to the other, professional musicians do not get paid for practicing, they get hired to perform in public, away from the private practice sessions, out in the real world.

There is a similarity between a martial artist who performs and a performing musician. If the martial artist is to do a kata, she wishes to make her mistakes in private, either when her sensei is there to correct her and offer suggestions, or when she is practicing alone with only the mirror as an audience. It is similarly true, if a martial artist is preparing an semi-free one-step sparring exhibition for an exam, that he wishes to play with his reception and retaliations privately, or at least in a class drill, well before the day of the exam when there will be guests and a board of examiners watching. Out in the real world (or the dojo that has been opened to the real world for a demo or exam), he wants to leave the jamming behind and deliver a flawless performance.

But what of the martial artist who trains for self-defense? How can one prepare for a perfect performance if one does not know when, where, how, or in what circumstances that performance will take place? There are two ways, I think, one akin to jamming and one akin to a prearranged performance.

When we practice kata or basics, we want to execute perfectly yet it is not a public performance in the outside world. Rather, it is a private or semi-private practice of perfectly performed technique. But, when we practice any sort of non-prearranged engagement match, we can experiment with techniques, knowing that convention allows our training partner only limited access to us and limited retaliations if we make a mistake. Even this sort of "jamming", however, is practiced in a situation that is set up like a performance.

Sometimes one-step sparring (*ippon kumite*) is called martial line sparring (*enbu-kumite*), but the word “enbu” is also used to imply a demonstration or, if in public, a performance. We can jam all we want, but we do it so that we will perform well in the public exam.

Another way to look at our training is that, unlike a musician who wants the performance to be perfect, we martial artists (at least those who train for self-defense) want to practice perfectly so that we will be able to jam outside of the dojo, out in the real world where no one cares to pay for admission to the ad lib performance we may have to do where the round of applause may come only from ourselves.