

Guest Editorial

Man Does Not Read By Tab Alone

BASED IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA, Fred Adams plays a variety of styles, including jazz, rock, country, blues, bluegrass, and classical. If you would like to share opinions, suggestions, or tips, or just get something off of your chest, send a brief, double-spaced article to the Editor (our address is on page 11), along with a summary of your experience and qualifications. If published, we'll pay you \$100.00. The opinions expressed here are not necessarily those of our staff.

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When I first began my study of the guitar in 1957, I was blessed to take lessons from Ralph Dougal, who was not content to simply show me how something is played; he taught me the musical theory that makes things work. (Ralph is a graduate of Duquesne University, and he has studied under Pittsburgh jazz virtuoso Joe Negri, frequently seen on PBS' *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*.) During the five years I was Ralph's pupil, he developed one of the first rock methods published in the U.S., which has been an influence on many of today's working guitarists; but the meat of what he taught his students was theory and musical literacy, in particular.

I now realize that the principle behind Ralph's approach is akin to the Chinese proverb about teaching a man to fish rather than giving him a fish to eat. Learning basic tools, instead of memorizing a solo or a lick off of this or that current record, enabled me to spend the past 30 years playing whatever music I choose (or am asked to play on the job), all because I can read music. Since 1963, I have worked with rock groups, stage ensembles, country bands, polka outfits, and others. I have appeared solo, performing standards, jazz, folk, bluegrass, country, pop, and classical music, and I have played for musical theater and cabaret troupes—all because I can read music.

I am increasingly disturbed by the number of young guitarists I meet who cannot read music. It's symptomatic of a society in which functional illiteracy continues to escalate at an alarming rate. I place working solely by tablature, fingerboard diagrams, or other such aids in the same category as functioning in everyday society by following universal signs with pictures but no words. It's a shortcut and a means to an end, but it's no free lunch. You pay by shrinking your horizons.

If you work strictly by ear, or from tablature, you must rely heavily on your memory. But, like a computer whose capacity is limited by a finite number of bytes, your


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mind can only hold so much before material starts spilling over the top. The answer for the computer is to retrieve information that has been stored on a disk. The musical analog is to retrieve stored information from a sheet of music.

Certainly tablature is valuable as an adjunct to standard musical notation if you wish to answer the question: "How did he play that?" I learn much from studying other people's techniques. The economy of motion that took another guitarist weeks or even years to develop is at my disposal in just a few minutes from a study in tab, but I wouldn't want to rely on tablature alone. If you can read only tab, you are seriously limiting yourself. The musically literate player can read any piece of notation written for any instrument, not merely what others have seen fit to translate into tablature. The inherent danger in reading only tablature is that it can leave you in a rut with everyone else who shares your limit of music literacy. You'll all be playing the same licks, solos, and moves, and you may ultimately sound alike.


When I am contacted to work with others through my local Musicians' Union directory, I usually get asked if I can read music. If I couldn't, I suspect that many would not call back. The distinction between a musically literate player and his less-educated counterpart frequently decides who gets the gig, whether it's performing with a group, or going solo. I'm currently working as a solo act, providing guitar and vocals for the resort and hotel community in southwestern Pennsylvania. A primary foundation of that gig is my ability to pull a requested song from a fake book and play it cold, although I may not have looked at it for years, if at all. It makes the crowd happy, it makes the boss happy, and it keeps me solvent. I've never seen a fake book of 1,000 standards printed in tab.

If you read tablature only, you are using the identical eye/hand coordination and cognitive skills that a musically literate musician employs when working from standard notation. If you can learn to read tablature, you obviously can learn to read music, which I strongly advise. It involves no magic, and there is nothing bizarre about it. You simply put in the time, and reap the benefits of opening your musical horizons. ■





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