

Bass Fundamentals

Column #6 – Learning To Read Notation, Pt. 1

For a Bass player, learning to read music notation actually makes a whole lot of sense. Here's why...

Tablature is certainly a nice aid in figuring some things out, such as position on the neck of the instrument something is being played. It is useful for those who do not have a well developed ear to listen to what they're hearing, and for them who are just getting started. However, in the bigger picture and in the long run, Tablature is a crutch that will impede progress, period.

It is actually quite easy to learn to read notation because all the information you require is right there in one place, on one line. You have the note you'll play, the value/time duration of the note, if vibrato is applied, even the way you should play the note - everything - all contained right there without any distracting graphics or separate element you need to look at to understand what and how you are supposed to play.

Tablature does not provide this information in a way that can be quickly and easily understood. With Tablature, you are bobbing your head up and down between the notation staff (assuming you can read music even a little bit, to know note values), and the TAB staff to understand what string and what fret you're supposed to play on at that moment. It's a counter-productive approach to playing music, dividing your attention, because in the real world, you will never, ever encounter Tablature.

And learning to read notation doesn't take years. Learning to sight read a sheet of music does take some time, but with practice, becomes easier and even allows you the ability to read a piece of music "cold", having never played it before, which you simply cannot do with TAB.

In other words, with notation, you can play a song you've never heard or played before, and do a respectable job of it if you're even reasonably competent to sight read an unfamiliar chart. It's how studio musicians operate. You will not find TAB in a studio. And you will be expected to read notation in many "for hire" gigs you might want to play, particularly of the Standards and Jazz variety; no TAB there either. And in both situations, you will be expected to be ready to perform the music in question within a very short time, sometimes less than 20 minutes after arriving to the studio session or live date.

I teach all my Bass students to read music. It's mandatory because, while I do use TAB in the beginning, I wean them off it as soon as I can so they are soon able to read notated charts to songs they do not know and doing so with some degree of assurance they are playing things right. I will occasionally correct a positional approach, but after a while, they get the sense of where and how a passage should be played.

So for a Bass player - any musician, really - reading notation becomes an essential skill. You begin learning to read ahead a few measures and get a sense of where the music is going, which in turn helps you understand where on the fretboard you should be playing a given part.

This leads a player to learn to do something else that is rather important: you stop looking at the fretboard so much and learn to play by "feel" and with the application of muscle memory how to navigate up and down the neck. It's necessary when reading charts to not have to look at the instrument, which risks losing your place in the process.

In Part 2, we'll lay out the basics you need to learn to read music and provide a few exercises to get you started.