

## Reading Music vs. TAB for Guitar Players

by Billy Jones

**Should guitar players learn to read Music (standard notation)?** New students and parents frequently have the expectation that they should learn to read music (also called standard notation) in order to play the guitar. In fact, the physical act of playing the guitar and the act of reading music have little correlation with each other. You do not need to know how to read music in order to play the guitar. The large majority of everyday guitar players to include such greats as: Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Eddie Van Halen, Stevie Ray Vaughn, Paul McCartney, and John Lennon, learned to play by ear, by imitation, or by one of the tools mentioned below.

**How does one learn to play the guitar?** There is no ONE way to learn to play the guitar. There are many common practices used such as: tablature, chord diagrams, chord charts, by ear, and standard notation when appropriate.

At Bones Jones Music, we believe that a combination of tablature, chord diagrams, chord charts, and learning by ear is the most efficient, fun, and rewarding way to learn to play the guitar. This style of teaching enables our students to stay engaged in the process, while having fun and ultimately reaching their goals on the guitar.

When you see a guitarist perform - if they are not playing from memory - they are most often reading a chord chart that contains a combination of chord names and/or chord diagrams, and have learned any rhythmic picking or strumming by ear.

I have numerous students - adults and kids - who have come to me after taking lessons elsewhere having spent months on one or two strings learning to read standard notation using a Guitar Method book. They may be able to play Ode To Joy or Aura Lee, but no chords, no songs, and definitely nothing of interest to them. I'll talk about Guitar Method books another time.

While TAB can be considered a short cut, it is by no means less valuable than standard notation when it comes to learning to play the guitar. I started reading standard notation at the age of 5 or 6 while taking piano lessons, and like most I grew disenchanted with the process and quit. At age 12 I started learning the snare drum and began reading again, but this time the focus was on rhythm. At 13 I picked up the electric bass guitar and was immediately introduced to TAB. In no time I was playing my favorite songs. I could find TAB to songs in countless music books and magazines and was on my way...

Throughout high school I studied music theory where I began delve deeper into the construction of music and of course reading music. This is one place where reading standard notation is absolutely necessary. The academic pursuit of music and it's applications requires one to be able to read and interpret standard notation for a variety

of instruments on the various clefs, etc.

This also holds true for someone wishing to continue studying music in college. I spent four years at Berklee College of Music mostly focused on reading bass clef as I was an electric bass player at the time. I also found reading standard notation necessary while studying theory, harmony, ear training, counterpoint, arranging, conducting, ensembles, improvisation, and more. While the four years I spent at Berklee were the most intensive, all in all I have spent over twenty years developing the art of reading music.

While in college I began working in various cover bands, original bands, doing recording projects, rehearsals, and many performances and do you know how many times I was asked to read standard notation for bass or guitar? None.

In 2004 I moved to Los Angeles where I performed with, auditioned, wrote, and recorded with all types of musicians from Rock to Folk, Jazz to Blues, Funk to Pop, and do you know how many times I was asked to read standard notation? None.

Saying that I wasn't asked to read standard notation doesn't mean that I wasn't reading music in some fashion. There are many different ways to read music including: the Nashville System, TAB (tablature), and chord charts to name a few.

Below are some parameters you can use to decide whether or not you should learn to read standard notation.

**If your goal as a guitar player is to do any of these, you DO NOT need to focus on reading standard notation:**

- play songs (pop, rock, folk, blues, indie, prayer, jazz) - play in a band - write songs - accompany yourself while singing songs
- play along with your favorite songs
- play like your favorite guitar player (Hendrix, Clapton, Eddie, Stevie)

**If your goal as a guitar player is to do any of these, you SHOULD focus on reading standard notation:**

- play classical, flamenco, jazz guitar (exceptions to jazz apply)
- play in your school's jazz band (exceptions to jazz apply)
- attend a higher learning music school (i.e. arts high school, prep school, college/university)
- become a composer for film, TV, symphonies, opera
- become a musical director for an organization, church, etc.

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