

Understanding Tablature

Tablature, otherwise known as TAB, is a popular form of music notation for most fretted instruments. I'm not sure why it hasn't caught on in the four-string banjo world, but I'm going to do my best to change that. Everything in this book is written in standard notation and TAB. I think it's a better way of notating music than the standard chord diagram approach: Chord diagrams of course only show chords, leaving the reader to guess at the fingerings for single-note passages. TAB takes care of both equally well.

Anyway, my objective in this short chapter is to turn you into a TAB pro! Let me show you an example:

The image shows a musical staff in treble clef with a key signature of one flat and a 3/4 time signature. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. Below the staff is a four-line tablature staff. The first measure of the tablature is annotated with 'Fourth fret' and an arrow pointing to the second line (B string). The tablature numbers are: 0 4 4 0 | 0 3 5 2 | 0 3 5 2 | 0 4 0 4 | 5 2 5 2 | 0 4 0 4 | 5 2 5 2 | 0 4 0 4.

The TAB staff is a graphic representation of the banjo fretboard. The top line is the first, or D string, the next line down is the second, or B string, the next line down is the third, or G string, and the bottom line is the fourth, or C string. Using the first measure of the music as an example: The first note "0" means play the 4th string open, the "4" means to finger the 4th string, 4th fret, the "0" is the 3rd string open, etc. If you know how to read music, you can easily see how this relates to the standard notation staff above it. TAB really is that simple! Now let me show you an example of chord TAB:

The image displays seven jazz 7th chords: C M7, D m7, E m7, F M7, G 7, A m7, B m7b5, and C m7. Above each chord name is a standard musical staff showing the chord voicing. Below the names is a tablature staff with fret numbers: 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14. At the bottom, there are eight chord diagrams, each a 4x4 grid representing the fretboard. The diagrams are numbered 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 12, and 14, corresponding to the fret numbers in the tablature above.

I will concede that chord TAB is not quite as easy to read as chord diagrams, but with just a little experience, you'll get it. I've reluctantly added in the chord diagrams here to help you visualize the TAB; this is the only place you'll see it. I hope you can see why I'm doing this: TAB is legitimate musical notation; chord diagrams are a visual shortcut that don't have anything to do with notation: They "give you a fish" instead of "teaching you to fish." By the time you've worked this book a bit, you'll understand the context.

A quick note about the standard notation: This is actually written an octave higher for ease of reading (standard procedure in the four-string banjo world); see the little "8" hanging below the treble clef? I hope you'll take the time to learn to read it, but if you understand the TAB, that's all you need for this book.