

EncycloMedia Man

by Mike Overly

The Whole Truth About Bass TAB

Webster's defines **tablature** as "an obsolete form of music notation...". Boy, would he be surprised to discover that **TAB** has again become the preferred method of musical notation for bass players in the 21st century. Why is that?

The simple answer is, it's so easy! However, if the "whole truth" about TAB were known, its popularity would probably diminish. To understand this more clearly, let's go back in time when sound was thought of as being *isotonic*.

To the ancient Greeks, *iso* (isos) meant "identical" and *tonos* (tonic) meant "sound", therefore, isotonic meant "identical sound". In other words, **isotonic** is "one sound with one location or sound source". In the 7th century B.C. this appeared logical, especially to a "bass player" of that time, the "lyre" player. Figure 1.

The *lyre* is a small stringed instrument of the harp family which dates back to the ancient Egyptians. It was thought to be isotonic, that is, to produce only one sound for each string, or said another way, the sound and the string were *identical*. Here's an interesting fact: *words* sung to the accompaniment of the lyre were called *lyrics*.

Amazingly, this "isotonic perception" of sound did not change until *Pythagoras* discovered harmonics in the 6th century B.C.. Simply stated, **harmonics** are "multiple sounds produced on one string". **Intervals** are the "distance between those sounds", and **unison** is the same sound (identical sounds) in two or more locations or sound sources. Notice that "iso" is in the middle of "unison"! As we have previously learned, unison also means "one sound" from the Latin: *uni* (one) and *sonus* (sound). Remember, Romans after the Greeks.

Let's think of it this way, the *piano*, being an extension of the lyre, is 100% isotonic, it can not

play unison! There is only one sound for each piano key and no two keys can produce the same sound. The **bass** however, is almost 100% unison. To see this more clearly, let's look at the sound notation system called *TAB* or *tablature*.

The system of bass tablature used today is a combination of 16th century French, Italian and Spanish *lute* notation systems. TAB comes from "tabula", which is Latin for "table or tablet" upon which you notate or tabulate. Here's Webster's definition of tablature: "an *obsolete* form of music notation used for string instruments in which the *horizontal lines* symbolize the *strings*, and the *numbers* on the lines symbolize the *frets*". Figures 2 and 3.

Figure 1. the lyre

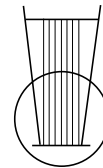


Figure 2. Tab strings

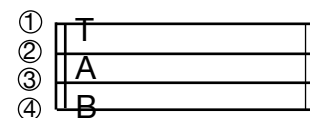


Figure 3. TAB frets

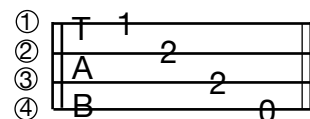


Figure 4. G staff-note



Figure 5. G as unison TAB

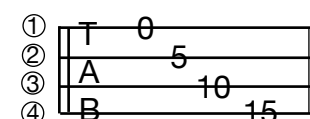


Figure 3 presents TAB as an “isotonic event”, one sound with one fret location, and it is this *isotonic* TAB view that has enabled tablature to gain its present day popularity. However, if TAB is presented as the “unison event” that it most often is, one sound with two or more string and fret locations, the “easiness” of TAB quickly disappears! Let’s illustrate a “G staff-note in the bass clef”, and then show its “one sound” as “multiple unison TAB” string and fret locations. Figures 4 and 5.

Now, while it’s true that the vast majority of the bass fretboard “sounds in unison”, it does have a few *isotonic* sound locations. Figure 6.

The following is a simple melody (Jingle Bells) written in “staff-notes” and illustrated in both

isotonic TAB and *unison* TAB. Figures 7 and 8.

Do you think that anyone would prefer TAB if it was presented as *unison* TAB? Probably not. The point is, isotonic TAB is easy because it shows only “one path” through the sounds on the fretboard, when in fact there are “many paths” for the same identical sounds! This is significant, because *where* you place the sounds on the fretboard has tremendous consequences on your *technique* (skill and ability). In other words, you can place sounds on the fretboard in such a way that it is *impossible* to play them, or, you can place those same sounds in different locations and “shred”!

Till next time, have some *TAB fun*, now matter what path you take...I’ll be listening.

Figure 6. Bass isotonic and unison sounds as staff-notes and TAB

Figure 7. Jingle Bells as isotonic TAB

Figure 8. Jingle Bells as unison TAB