



# GUITAR

## An Approach on Single Note Playing

by Jason Vanselow

In the winter issue, I discussed some possible ways to introduce chord playing to guitar students. In this article I'd like to talk a little about introducing melodic playing and note reading.

One of the challenges in teaching standard notation to beginning guitarists is the need to convince the student that the staff is not a visual representation of the fretboard. This is harder than it sounds. This is partly because the staff really does look a lot like a fretboard turned on its side, but also because of the guitar specific tablature system (sometimes just referred to as TAB) that is used in much formal and informal guitar education.

TAB was originally a notational system developed in the Renaissance and Baroque eras by players of the lute, vihuela and baroque guitar. In this system each line did represent one of the strings on the instrument and numbers or letters were printed on the lines to represent the fret that needed to be played. For the most part tablature died out in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as guitarists of that day sought to be a part of the keyboard-driven music scene of that era. But in the early 1980s, a DIY spirit resurrected TAB in the guitar community so that self-taught players could learn the intricate riffs of the hard rock and heavy metal players of that time. TAB has survived and along with YouTube videos has remained one of the major ways that people teach themselves guitar and how many teachers present guitar music in notation.

There is nothing inherently wrong in using TAB. Many accomplished players first learned guitar from this style of notation. But it has a major drawback in that a TAB trained guitarist will not be able to relate to other musicians who learned standard notation. This hurts guitarists who want to expand their horizons and collaborate with any other musicians.

Figuring out which pitches to teach first is the next piece to this puzzle. Most method books start by teaching the three open position notes on the first string (the highest sounding string) and then present

the three open string notes on the second string and so on:

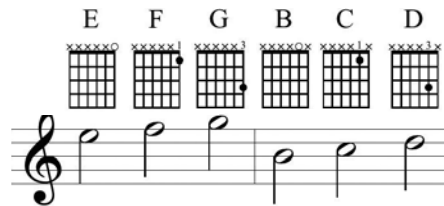


Figure #1.<sup>[1]</sup>

I would like to suggest an alternative for the very beginning of this process. Instead of teaching the three notes in open position on first string in one lesson and then the notes on the second string in a second lesson, I recommend leaving out the F on the first string and the C on the second string and learning the remaining four notes in the first lesson.

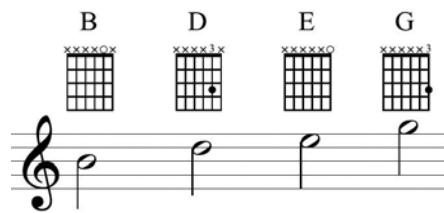


Figure #2.<sup>[1]</sup>

This gives the student two line notes (the B and D) and two space notes (the E and G) to get used to but it spreads them out a little so there isn't so much confusion over the line and space notes that are right next to each other.

Because the D and the G are both on the same fret, the student is only using one finger to play both notes. I recommend having them use the third finger for both. This promotes first position fingering habits in general and gives exercise to the weaker third finger.

This approach also has the potential of providing more interesting melodic possibilities for the songs and studies that are generally presented in the first lesson. There is a larger melodic range, a minor sixth rather than a minor third on the first string alone, and there are more possibilities for skips between the four notes.

These notes also are four of the five

notes of an E minor pentatonic scale and therefore any melodies that you use can be harmonized with the E minor and A7 chords that we talked about in the last column. That means that the first songs that you present to your students can be duets in which they are able to play both the melody and the accompaniment parts.

Generally, I will go even one step further in this approach and have the next set of notes the student learns be the third string open G and second fret A rather than picking up the C and the F that we skipped earlier. Playing the A gets the second finger involved and continues to encourage good first position playing habits.

The continued use of notes in the E minor pentatonic scale also means that whatever songs that you play can be accompanied by the simple E minor, E major, A7 chords that were used earlier and even add G major and D major chords as well. This means that your class can participate in both the melody and accompaniment of any song that you are using.

This approach has been very successful with my students. I think that they enjoy being able to apply both single note playing and chords in songs in the earliest steps of the process.

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1. In reading TAB, the right most vertical line represents the highest sounding string (the string closest to the floor) and the left most vertical represents the lowest sounding string (the string closest to the ceiling). The thick horizontal line right underneath the finger numbers represents the nut and is not a fret. Horizontal lines from there represent the frets in ascending order. A zero in the fingering area means that the string is played open (with no fingers on the frets), an X means that the string is not played. The number 1 represents the index finger, 2 the middle finger and so on.