

## **Why Learn to Read Music?**

by Dennis Winge

"How do you get a guitarist to turn down the volume?"

Put a piece of sheet music in front of him.

So the joke goes and it unfortunately is true: guitarists in general, compared with most other instruments, are notoriously poor readers. But before I go any further with the benefits of learning to read music, let me defend guitarists and say that there are so many things we as guitarists can do that are way cool that other instruments can't do.

We can take wicked cool solos, which require a variety of techniques to be studied and mastered. We can accompany singers with chords (like other polyphonic instruments such as piano and ukulele) and there is a huge variety of rhythmic vocabulary we can employ there. We use different effects and amps and get a huge variety of timbres and tones... You get the idea. So this article is NOT going to trash-talk guitarists and complain about how we all should become better readers.

In fact, let me take it one step further and say that if you are an adult student who does not know how to read music and you are already playing chords, soloing, and jamming, so be it. You do not have to know how to read music in order to enjoy playing. In fact there are many great bands who never knew how to read music, including the Beatles.

Having said all that, then why WOULD you learn to read standard notation (i.e. sheet music)?

1. **Universal Language** - Tablature has serious limitations. It is only a graphic representation of where to put your fingers on the fretboard, and doesn't typically have rhythmic values, which means, if you don't know the song, you can't play it! Not only that, but only guitarists can read it. With standard notation, any instrument virtually anywhere in the world can read it. So picture this: you go to a foreign country, you don't know anyone, you don't speak the language, so you simply set up your music stand in the public square and start playing your favorite tunes or sight-read melodies. Pretty soon a violinist joins you, then a flute, then a guy wheels out a grand piano... But seriously, any stranger can read your music, and you can read theirs.

2. **Composition** - In the rock world, endless hours are spent learning and the material, arranging the sections, etc. and that is fine if it's part of the creative process, but if the song is already written and you simply need to teach others to your song or learn someone else's, then reading goes a long way. Similarly, if you write your songs down in standard notation, it could be 4 decades later and you may have completely forgotten about that particular piece of music, but you can play it just like it was yesterday.

3. **Accompaniment** - Even if you are just reading chords for a singer or saxophone or whatever, knowing a bit about the melody part can help you. For example, say there are 31 bars of just a "G" chord. Well, instead of having to count bars, you can simply follow the melody as it is sung or played by the other instrument(s). It can also inform which chord voicings or extensions you can use and which you should avoid. Suppose the singer's last note is a major 7<sup>th</sup> (ex: "b" in the key of C), then playing a 2<sup>nd</sup> inversion C with the root on top might not be the best choice because it could clash.

4. **Rhythm** – There is no music without rhythm. Even if the song is “free” or “rubato” there’s still some kind of rhythm. Therefore rhythm is king. If you really want to dig in to understanding how rhythm works in music, it is best to see them on paper, at least in Western culture. Not doing so would be like trying to navigate the ocean without a navigation system.

These just scratch the surface. Learning to read music is an extremely rewarding and worthwhile accomplishment.