

June 1995: Troubleshooting Tab

When the Earl Scruggs book came out in the sixties, it was the first definitive instruction manual on playing the banjo in his style. The music was written out in both regular notation as well as tablature, with the timing contained in the music and the tab acting as a supplement to indicate finger positions. This was a somewhat awkward arrangement and since that time, the banjo world has moved toward using tab exclusively. Publications such as this one, instruction books and written supplements to video and cassette courses all use tab to convey their ideas. It offers a simple, straight forward method of putting music on paper and has the advantage of indicating right hand patterns and left hand positions that regular notation does not.

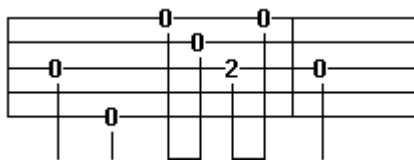
However, while they all use the same principle, not all tabs are created equal and this can be very confusing. You often have to use your experience to figure out a tab and this can be difficult for beginners with little or no experience to fall back on. So we are going to take a look at tab and learn how to read between the lines and deal with some of the problems you will encounter. But first, a very quick primer on how tab works. Tab consists of five lines, each one representing one of the strings on the banjo. The top line represents the first string, second from the top the second string and so on. When a number appears on a line, you play the string represented by the line while holding it down at the fret corresponding to the number on the line.

This leads us to the first variation you will encounter. Some people put the numbers on the line while others place the number in the space, sitting on top of the line representing the string you play. Whether the numbers are on the lines or in the spaces, they are played the same.

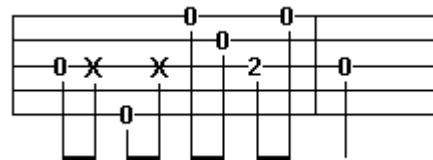
Most tabs use eighth notes, but occasionally you will find sixteenth notes instead. Eighth notes are counted 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + and the sixteenth notes are counted 1 e + a 2 e + a , however you can count the sixteenth notes like eighths or vice versa, depending on what you are used to.

One of the major differences between tabs is that some use notes of different time values, (quarter notes, eighth notes, etc.) while others put eight notes in a bar and use x's as rests to show variations in timing. *Example 1* and *Example 2* show the same bar written in each style:

Example 1



Example 2

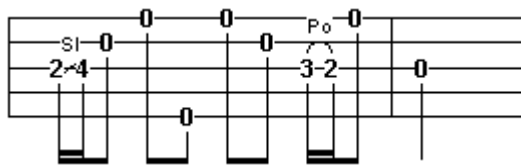


Using x's is a simpler system in that it allows you to count out each bar without having to learn to distinguish between the different types of notes. However, using notes and rests of different time value allows you to more accurately put down on paper what you are playing. For the banjo player, it is important to be comfortable with both.

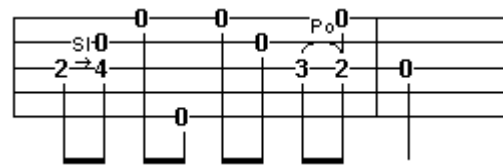
Having dealt with the major differences that various tab systems present, let's take a look at some of the ways in which tab can be misleading. The bounce, which was discussed in the last two Beginner's Corner columns, is not indicated in tab. Virtually all tabs are written with equal spaces between the notes while many of the songs they represent are played with alternating long and short spaces. You should refer to the original recording or use your own taste to decide how to execute the song.

Another confusing aspect of tab is the method used to show left hand techniques. Many books show the left hand note directly underneath the next right hand note, implying that they are played at exactly the same time. More often than not, the left hand note occurs in the middle of the two right hand notes. *Example 3* and *Example 4* show the same lick written two different ways with *Example 3* being closer to the way the lick is meant to be played.

Example 3



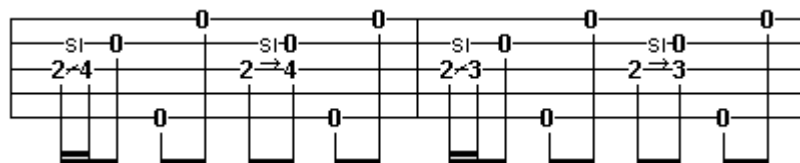
Example 4



The first instruction book I had was written like *Example 4* and for months I tried to do the pull-off at the same instant that I picked the next note. It was a long time before I realized the pull-off went in between the two picked notes. (I later discovered that sometimes it *is* played exactly as shown in *Example 4*.)

One technique that shows up in more different forms than any other is the slide from the second fret of the third string and it's a good example of how the same lick can look very different with various tab systems. *Example 5* shows a common lick using that slide, followed by some other ways it might appear in tab. They should all sound exactly the same, even though they look different in the tab.

Example 5



Tab is a useful tool for communicating information, but it is only a representation of what is actually played. What is written is not always exactly what is meant, so it's better to trust your ears. Being aware that tab can be misleading will help you avoid spending time practicing things that were never intended. You should expose yourself to as many different styles of tab as possible so that you will become comfortable with whatever you encounter. If you are unsure about a tab, ask a teacher or more experienced banjo player about it. If you ever have a problem with a tab, send me a copy and I'll help you out if I can.