



February 2008

Jazz

Visualization: Applying the Technique to Reading Music

Cultivating Your Ability,
Knowledge, and
Musicianship

by Lynn Wiles

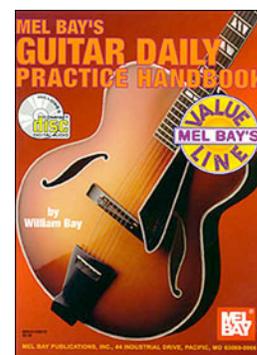
Well, here we are for the third article in the saga of "*Visualization, and the Guitar Fingerboard*". I hope everyone who has followed this series had a wonderful holiday, and made a few constructive New Year's resolutions. Maybe one of your resolutions has been to start, apply, hone, or practice more note-reading on the guitar- or any instrument for that matter!

Note-reading! Why bother? Can't I just read tab?

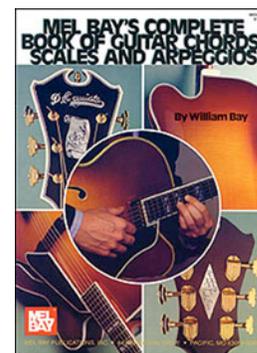
Well, have you been to any jam sessions lately? Not many tunes are written out in *tablature* for us poor guitarists! I don't know of any piano player or sax player who has written out tab for their latest composition- just for the guitar player. Don't get me wrong; tab has its place for us guitarists. When learning an arrangement in an open tuning, nothing beats tablature, but music notation is our common language.

Later this month I'll be presenting a guitar workshop and performance in the Philippines, and all the music that I take with me to present will be- you guessed it- written out in plain old music notation. In other countries, the language is the same. I believe that note-reading is more than just playing what's written on the page.

When I teach note-reading to my students it involves more than reading and identifying notes on the guitar. With reading I heavily incorporate the *Three T's*: Tone, Timing, and Technique. Whenever I'm working with a private student on reading with any of the method books I use, I consistently stress the three T's. Having the ability to read music puts you in touch with your instrument, and contributes to the musicianship needed to communicate with other musicians.

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Enough said. You don't need to know how to read music in order to play well, but to be able to really understand the music you're playing and to relate to other musicians at a higher skill level, you'll be doing yourself a huge favor by taking the next step and honing your reading skills. If you're a jazzer, it's essential to read music. *Can you imagine how thick the Real Book would be if it were all in tab?*

In this month's article I'll discuss different ways you can use the visualization technique to improve your note-reading and sight-reading skills. I look at *note reading* as a tool to help recognize, figure out, play or work out a piece of music, whereas the term *sight reading* refers to having the ability read through a piece of music with minimal mistakes on seeing it for the first time. Due to the layout of notes on the fretboard, guitarists in general are not known for their forte as sight readers. I'm asking your help in changing this stigma by working hard at reading so we can prove the nay-sayers wrong!

If you're not familiar with the visualization technique as applied to the guitar, it's advisable to review my November *Guitar Sessions* article, "[Mastering the Guitar Fingerboard Through Visualization](#)" in the archives of this website; that way you'll have a better understanding of the visualization approach.

Remember that throughout this process, you will be *visualizing*. I quote the great Howard Roberts on this topic:

Sight-reading is not an automatic process. It is rather the ordinary learning process sped up and refined so as to appear to be automatic. The learning process is a completely mental one. Physical practice is applied only after something is learned.

The Three T's

As I've stated before, when practicing your reading skills, it's very important to give special attention to **Tone**, **Timing**, and **Technique**. The Three T's are a huge part of any style of musical performance, even if it's just for you in your practice room.

Tone

When practicing note reading or in any playing you do for that matter, you must always be aware of the tone that you're producing on your instrument. Whether you're playing a single note or a concerto, *listen* and get in the habit of producing beautiful tone. This may come from a lighter attack with the right hand. Even the type of pick you use can produce a different sound. Be very aware of the amount of pressure you're using when fretting the note as this will have an effect on your tone and intonation.

When practicing reading, put the guitar down and visualize yourself playing the music as you read the notes. Try to "hear" what you're visualizing. Try to feel the way you are picking and fretting. Whether it's jazz or death metal, when the note leaves the instrument it must sound perfect. Then when you're note reading with the instrument actually in your hands, include listening to each note carefully so as to produce a beautiful tone.



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Timing

Always be aware of your timing when playing. When reading, you must understand the rhythmic notation of the piece in order to play it in correctly. At first, you don't have to play the music fast; you just need to play it in time. To get the timing correct, first visualize yourself playing it, trying to hear it in your mind's ear. You can also tap or clap out the rhythmic figures to feel more comfortable with them. Now, play the passage slowly on the guitar. If you're having difficulty with a section or phrase, isolate that part, slow it down, being sure you understand the time values and that you are executing them properly. Do this not by playing, but by visualizing.

I'm going through this process with the Charles Mingus tune, "Goodbye Porkpie Hat." This tune has some tough rhythmic figures, but if I can visualize them, knowing that I understand the figure correctly, it will be easier to physically execute them on the guitar when it comes time to actually play the piece.

A metronome is an essential tool to own. The best type is the kind that can be set in a way that features a bell or distinct sound on the first beat of the measure, letting you know where that all important *one* falls. Yeah, I know that all metronomes slow down, but let's face reality; it's us, not the machine.

Technique

When practicing note reading on the guitar, it's important to use correct technique. The way you execute the notes you are playing has a direct result on the tone you produce. Again, visualize yourself playing the piece using correct hand positions and body posture, and visualize how you are actually attacking and playing the notes with the right and left hands. Visually feel the fingers of your right hand being placed directly behind the correct fret, arching the fingers so as to not interfere with the other notes, especially the open strings. Visualize how the pick is attacking the string. Be sure it's gliding through and over the string, not digging into the string. Visualize yourself using the correct pick direction while playing; *picking down* on the *downbeat*, *picking up* on the *upbeat*. As you visualize playing the note, you should also try to hear what the notes are sounding like. It's also important to visualize where the note falls on the staff, and its rhythmic value.

Where to Read the Notes on the Fingerboard

When reading throughout the fingerboard, I apply the appropriate major scale pattern and read from that fingering. You can refer to my December article, "[Mapping the Fretboard With the Use of Three Major Scale Patterns](#)" to get a jump on knowing three of the six important major scale fingerings on the fretboard.

Here are the steps to use when reading:

1. Without the guitar in hand, look over the music to be played while considering:
 - Time and Key Signature
 - Clef Sign

- Tempo Markings
 - Dynamics
 - Difficult rhythms
 - Complex note passages
2. Find a place that you feel the piece will play easily considering:
 - In which octave will it be played?
 - What major scale pattern will be used?
 - What key is it in?
 3. Use the visualization technique to play through the piece
 - Slowly, feeling and hearing each note.
 - Picture the notation of each note.
 4. Isolate difficult passages.
 - Review these passages until you see and feel them going smoothly.
 5. If memorizing the piece, use your favorite memorization technique.
 - See more on this topic in my February article "Memorizing and Performing a Piece of Music."
 6. After visually playing the music, pick up the guitar and show them who's the boss!

Good luck, and I hope this makes reading more beneficial and enjoyable for you. Reading on the guitar is not an easy task; some have said that the guitar is the most difficult instrument to read with, so hang in there and follow the steps I've outlined slowly and patiently.

If you have any questions or comments, feel free to contact me at:
guitarstudio@twcny.rr.com

Special thanks to Dave Wiles for proofreading and providing excellent feedback.

Until next time, Happy New Year!

Lynn Wiles

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About the Author

Lynn Wiles has been performing and teaching guitar for over 35 years, drawing from many styles and performing situations. He is a graduate of the Musicians Institute, Hollywood, CA and is a registered Suzuki Guitar instructor. Throughout his career Lynn has studied with many well-known musicians in his field. He is

the founder of a not-for-profit music school, and has taught at The Interlochen Guitar Institute on the campus of the Interlochen Center for the Arts, as well as other seminars and workshops throughout the country.

Lynn has two CD recordings to his credit, *Autumn Fire* (2002), a jazz guitar and piano duo, and *Hasty Pudding* (2006) which includes various styles from blues vocals to jazz. He also written and released the *Wiles Home Guitar Course* on VHS (out of print). Lynn has an active performance schedule and is dedicated to teaching in his own music studio in Ithaca, NY.

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