

Notation Convention for Tablature

Tab is short for tablature and is the term you'll usually see. Tab is a shortcut notation that indicates *how* to play *which hole* on the harmonica. This is different from standard musical notation, which indicates *what note* to play, including its relative duration. The difference is between *how* to play a *hole* and *whatnote* to play. How to play a note on the harmonica is specified by several things:

- which hole to play,
- whether you are inhaling (i.e. drawing) or exhaling (i.e. blowing), and
- what alteration to apply,
 - be it a bend,
 - overblow,
 - other harp specific effect.

Of course, how to play a note on a harp is equivalent to what note pitch gets played, so tab is a kind of shortcut or aid to standard musical notation. What tab doesn't show well is timing and rhythm, which is why standard notation is better for really communicating just how something is supposed to sound. Ways to show timing for tab include providing the lyrics, when possible, or indicating the measures (bars) and

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the beats. Tab can also be used in conjunction with standard musical notation to augment the standard notation with harmonica-specific techniques and effects.

I have considered several important factors for good tab notation conventions, including:

- Using standard ASCII characters (instead of arrows or other special graphic characters, as is seen so often) so the tab can be easily typed on a standard keyboard and e-mailed or posted on web pages, etc.
- Keeping all the characters for a note or chord on the same line, for ease of reading
- Not using letters like B, D, b, etc., which can be confused with note names
- Selecting characters that maximize “white space”, which makes the tab easier to scan
- Minimizing the number of characters needed to specify the way a hole is played
- Making it as obvious as possible.

Here is the notation I use for describing how to play a hole:

Notation Convention	Example	Meaning
A number name by itself means a draw note	3	3 draw
A number followed by a greater than sign “>” means a blow note	3>	3 blow

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each apostrophe ' means a 1/2 step bend	3' 3" 8>'	3 draw half step bend 3 draw whole step bend 8 blow bend
a sharp sign "#" after a number means overbend	6># 7#	6 overblow 7 overdraw
a tilde "~" before a number means a dip bend	~4	smooth bend from 4' to 4
an ampersand "&" between numbers means play them at the same time	1&4 1>&2>&3>	octave on 1 and 4 draw chord on 1, 2, and 3 blow
a slash / between numbers means a slur	2/3	2 draw with a little 3 draw
a percent % before a number means "tongue slap" the note	%4	slap the 4 draw
2 percents %% between two numbers means "flutter tongue"	2%%5	draw 2, 5; flutter on 3, 4
an equal sign = between two numbers means a two hole shake	4=5	shake between 4 and 5 draw
a vertical bar " " separates measures	2 3 3 2	1st bar: 2 3, 2nd bar: 3 2

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a lower case "v" after a number means add vibrato to the note	3>v	3 blow with vibrato
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Here is an example of some tab.

- Blue Midnight as by Charlie McCoy in his "Tribute to Little Walter"

"Misty"

Lyrics by Johnny Burke, Music by Erroll Garner

Listen to my version in Real Audio.

verse:

Look at me,

~4 3 2'...

I'm as helpless as a kitten up a tree,

1 2> 2" 5>.. 5> 6> 5> 4.. 3 2 2>...

And I feel like I'm clinging to a cloud;

1> 1 2> 2 3 4 4 4 4' 4..

I can't un-der-stand, I get misty just holding your hand.

(repeat for 2nd)

4> 3 4> 4 2 3" 3 4> 2> 2> 2' 2 3" 2

Bridge:

You can say that you're leading me on

2 3" 3 4 5> 5 5 5 5...

But it's just what I want you to do.

5> 5 ~6 6> 4 5> 5> 6> 5>

Don't you notice how hopelessly I'm lost,

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6> 6 7 8 8> 9>' 9>' 9>' 8> 9>'...

That's why I'm foll-ow-ing you. (DS for 3rd verse)

9>' 9>' 8> 10>" 9>' 8> 8 (fill for turnaround)

I just wanted to add a couple comments about Jerry Portnoy's rendition of *Misty*. I heard him do it at SPAH 97, and—despite not being that fond of the song before hand—I was blown away by how great a job that Jerry did. He was so attentive to the details.. rhythmic, pitch—especially on the embarrassingly exposed intermediate bends (3 draw whole step (3") and 2 draw half step (2') bend), and tone (see note with pitch). It's a piece where "the slow" is definitely in evidence, less is more. His tone on the bends was just killer.. very horn like I thought. It's great practice for those intermediate bends because 1)the melody is so well known, you're familiar with what the note must sound like, and 2)the bends are right out there on important sustained notes.. you've got to get them clean and strong and pure. There is also some good work on the top end. The 9 blow bend (9>') is the key note of the melody on the bridge.. you have it hit it without ever getting the unbent 9 blow.. same with the 10 blow whole step bend (10>").. but you go from 9>' to and from 8>, so you've got to keep hitting the 9>' plain, without bending into or out of it.

How to Make Your Own Harp Tab

Here's a great way to easily make your own harp tab.

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1. Get the shareware program, Melody Assistant, from <http://www.myriad-online.com>
Available in several languages for Mac or PC.
(**1a.** If you like it and use it, send them the \$20 registration fee. Unbelievably reasonable price.)
2. Search the web for any MIDI song you like, and download it.
There are thousands of MIDI files out there for just about any music style you could want, including blues, jazz, classical, pop, rock, country, hymns, etc.
3. Open the MIDI file in Melody Assistant, select the part with the melody, and give the *"Edit Tab"* command.

Melody Assistant offers 3 different harp tab styles (as well as guitar tab), and will optionally optimize for breath direction and show overblows. You can specify the key of the harp, so you can get the tab for any position you want. Plus, it supports all the standard commercial special tunings, or you can define your own tuning!

Presto! That's it! Now you've got tab for any song you can find in MIDI, in any position, for any tuning of harp!

You can even play the MIDI and follow the tab along with the melody as the song plays. This is a great way to learn new songs. There are even options that allow you to color the notes, say making blow notes, draw notes, and bends a different color, making the music easier to read.

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AND, you can learn to associate standard notation with the harp tab! This is a super way to learn how to read standard notation, since the harp tab's right there with the music notation. It's also nice because you can get the timing and rhythm information from the standard notation, and use the tab to get the right pitch.

If you don't find the MIDI song you want, you can always go buy a book of sheet music, quickly enter in the melody, then use Melody Assistant to generate the harp tab.

Links to Harp Tab

Here are a couple of links to collections of harp tab. Note that the notation is different from that shown above.

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