

SONG KEY

The three posted versions of *E Ku'u Morning Dew* are a study in transposing. We have one in the key of D, one in F, and another in G.

The “key” of the song is simply its center, or starting point. For example, when we say the key of G that means we are using chords that are related to the G scale and the G chord. The “usual suspects” are the 1, 4 and 5 chords, with the 6-minor and 2-minor as the next most common. What does this mean?

Western music uses tones and chord progressions that we have decided sound pleasant together. In folk music, country music, rock & roll, blues, and other styles, the 1 – 4 – 5 chord progression is very common. The chords do not necessarily appear in that order, and not all of them are always used, but that is the basic structure. So for the key of G, the usual suspects are:

1	2m	3m	4	5	6m	7	8 (or octave)
I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii	I
G	Am	Bm	C	D	Em	F#m	G

So when we say the key of G, take a moment and run through the mental exercise, or write it down. Then look at the song that you are working on. The chords appearing in the song are in the list. There are always a few variations, as with any rule. Many songs use a “two” chord that is a major (A major) or a 7th (A7) instead of the minor, which gives them a certain characteristic sound or tension. “Five Foot Two” is one example. But let’s worry about that later.

Here is the list of most common keys that we use for ukulele:

I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii	I
G	Am	Bm	C	D	Em	F#m	G
C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am	Bm	C
D	Em	F#m	G	A	Bm	C#m	D
F	Gm	Am	Bb	C	Dm	Em	F

How do you know which key the song is in? The easiest way is to look at the chord that ends each verse or chorus. 98% of the time, that is the key of the song. It naturally wants to resolve on the primary or “root” chord.

Do you really need to know all of this stuff to make music? No, you don’t. But it will help you to understand why things fit together and sound good, and how to play on the fly with others. If you are sitting at a campfire jam, and someone says, “This next song is in the key of C”, you already know a whole lot about the song.

You know that C, F, G and Am are the most likely chords. Dm and Em are possible but somewhat less likely. Now you can watch the other player’s hands and read the chords they are playing, because you know what to expect. You can follow along quite effectively without having the writing in front of you. That’s pretty cool. Did you ever wonder how people were just winging it by ear at a song circle? Now you know part of the secret