

Introduction to UKULELE



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This booklet is designed to get you started playing the ukulele, to help you develop playing skills, and to enhance your understanding of music. The contents are based on written handouts normally provided during the first few months of basic instruction.

Both strumming and fingerpicking techniques are introduced. Some practical music theory is covered in easy to understand terms (don't panic). This is all about learning to have fun with this happy little instrument. After all, we pick up the ukulele to make music, not to practice boring drills and scales. Have you ever seen anyone frown while playing a uke?

With some guidance from a friend who plays, or an instructor, this packet is almost everything you need. There should be no need to buy instruction books, chord charts, or anything else right away. But this material is not intended to be a complete substitute for guitar lessons, or instructional books, or video lessons. For example, a basic instruction book would have pictures of the hands holding various chord shapes. We skip over the truly introductory items like that. The contents cover the practical information that a beginner needs to get started and then move toward the intermediate level of play. The ultimate goal is to be able to get together with friends to play and sing some songs.

Well-made instructional videos such as those from Homespun Tapes are also quite effective. There are also numerous books, particularly those by Jumpin' Jim Beloff, available from Fleamarket Music. We highly recommend a DVD called, "*Beginning Ukulele*" by Keoki Kahumoku. This is one of the best beginner level instructional videos available for any instrument. (www.thegt.com)

Aloha, and happy playing!

INTRODUCTION

Can you play the ukulele? Let me counter with another question: do you have enough manual dexterity to type or text message? If so, you can play the ukulele.

Ukulele is probably the easiest stringed / fretted instrument there is to learn. It uses nylon strings, so it is not as painful on tender new fingers as a steel-string guitar. There are only four strings instead of six, and we have four fingers. Coincidence? Ukulele is popular in part because you can make music quickly compared to many other instruments. You don't have to spend years learning lots of scales or music theory. Just learn a few chord shapes (many using only two fingers) and a couple of strumming patterns, and you are making actual music.

Playing any instrument is a new and complex motor skill -- you have to re-wire the brain and fingers to work together in new ways. The left hand is making complex shapes -- "target practice" for individual fingers, while the right hand is either strumming or fingerpicking. There are a lot of things going on at once.

** 10 minutes of practice every day will show good results in just a few weeks **
(this is much better than an hour of playing once a week)

Speed, smoothness, steadiness, and reliability will come with repetition, but you should be practicing the correct things to start with. Practice does NOT make perfect -- ***PERFECT practice makes perfect.*** It is far better to practice the right thing ten times than the wrong thing a thousand times

If you are a true beginner, some of the information on the coming pages falls into the "good to know eventually" category, rather than "must know it right now". But being aware of how certain things work will help you progress to the intermediate and advanced levels faster, and both understand and enjoy making music even more right now.

GETTING STARTED

tuning to standard pitch and standard ukulele tuning [**G C E A**]
using frets 2nd string, 5th fret = open 1st string
 3rd string, 4th fret = open 2nd string
 3rd string, 7th fret = open 4th string
electronic tuners -- accurate, quick and inexpensive

position of the ukulele and the hand, for best technique and tone
centered on the body is best, and higher on the chest is better than lower toward the belly
less bend and less stress on the fretting hand, wrist and shoulder, allows for freer movement
thumb centered behind the neck, aligned somewhere between the index & middle finger
fingers should arch over and come down onto the strings almost vertically
start with good habits -- bad habits will develop soon enough
press hard enough for good tone, but no harder than needed

basic chord dictionary
the handout called "uke chord groups" is arranged by key. Each row across is the group of chords that are related to that key. Example for the key of C = C, F, G (or G7), and Am
study the simple chord chart showing the alphabet of major, minor and seventh chords

FINGER POSITION TERMINOLOGY

The first string is always the one closest to the floor. The fourth string is the one closest to the ceiling.
"Hopping over" means moving to the next adjacent string, staying on the same fret.
"Slide up" means the next fret up in pitch, away from the peg head.
"Slide down" means the next fret down in pitch, toward the peg head.

UKE BASICS

There are four basic sizes of ukes:

soprano (standard):	scale length ~13½"
concert:	scale length ~15"
tenor:	scale length ~17"
baritone:	scale length ~20"

Scale length is the distance between the saddle (the white part where the strings tie on to the bridge) and the nut (the white part near the peg head). The string vibrates between these two points.

Soprano ukulele (also known as standard size) gives the high “plinky” sound that some say is the true ukulele sound. Concert sized instruments are a little louder and fuller of tone, plus there is some extra room between the frets for larger fingers. Players with large hands often like the tenor size, which gives even more room between frets, and a bit more low-end tone. Modern players who play solos or “lead” will most often play a tenor model with a low G string, but not universally.

Baritone is essentially a three-quarter size guitar with only four strings (guitar has a scale length of about 25"). Baritone uke is a great way to start kids out if they intend to eventually move into standard six-string guitar later. It fits their smaller hands better than a guitar, and most “kids” guitars are very poor quality and virtually unplayable. Since the baritone tuning is the same as four of the guitar strings, all of the chord shapes and note positions they learn will transfer directly over when they move up to six string guitar. They will just have to learn what to do with those two new bass strings that they never had before.

While on that topic, guitar players have an easy time picking up the ukulele. Many of the chord shapes are the same. But because the tuning on the ukulele is higher on each string, the chords have a name that is three full notes higher than the guitar shape would indicate. For example, on guitar the D chord shape is the exact same shape as the G chord shape in standard “C” ukulele tuning.

Soprano ukulele or “C” tuning:

G -- C -- E -- A
4th 3rd 2nd 1st string

remember: "Guys Can Eat Anything"

Although it is often called the soprano tuning, the concert and tenor ukulele are normally tuned to C tuning.

D Tuning: Some older music or instruction books will show the standard ukulele tuning as A -- D -- F# -- B. Each string is one note higher than the “C” tuning listed above. This is called “D” tuning, and is pretty much a soprano tuning from the old days. It is still widely used in Europe.

Baritone ukulele or “G” tuning:

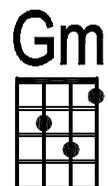
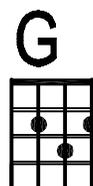
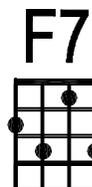
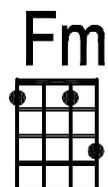
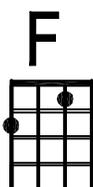
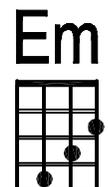
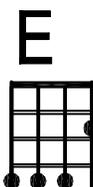
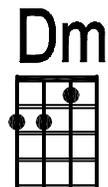
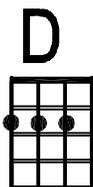
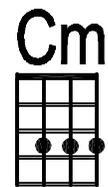
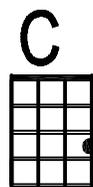
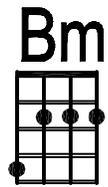
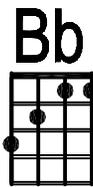
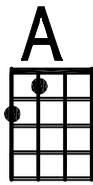
D -- G -- B -- E
4th 3rd 2nd 1st string

Baritone is tuned like the 1st – 4th strings of the guitar (the four highest in pitch). Tenor ukes can also be tuned to the baritone tuning using a different set of strings. The shorter strings of the concert and soprano ukulele do not lend themselves to baritone tuning, however.

Note: Most of the references in these materials are for C-tuned soprano, concert or tenor ukulele. We apologize to our friends playing the G-tuned baritone uke. We had to pick a convention and stick with it.

standard tuning

G -- C -- E -- A



standard tuning

G - C - E - A

I

IV

V

ii-7

vi-m



vamp

A

D

E7

B7

F#m

C

F

G7

D7

Am

D

G

A7

E7

Bm

E

A

B7

F7

C#m

F

Bb

C7

G7

Dm

G

C

D7

A7

Em

SWITCHING BETWEEN CHORDS

often one or more fingers do not move, or don't move very far

examples: F to Am F to G7 G7 to E7

sometimes entire groups of fingers will often move together as a shape

examples: B7 to Em G to F#m7

try to use "anchors" or reference points when moving between chords

often one finger will lead, the others will follow

as you build muscle memory, your hand will just "grip" the complete chord shape as a unit

The best way to learn new chord shapes is from a chord diagram, using it to help figure out where to put your fingers. Beginner ukulele books will often have photographs, so you can readily see how the fingers arrange. At first, you will have to methodically place each individual finger into the correct position, something we refer to as target practice. Some of the stretches and positions will feel awkward at first, but stick with it. Once you have the shape fingered, grab it over and over. Eventually the fingers will seek that chord shape automatically when you think "Fm", or whatever chord.

Exercise:

Grab the open B7 chord shape. Once you are settled, squeeze the strings down to make the entire chord sound out clearly. Then release the pressure but do not lift your fingers off of the strings, so they sound dead or muted. Now squeeze the whole shape again. Next, keep the shape intact while lift the fingertips just off the strings, maybe 1/8", and press down again. Repeat a few times. After a few repetitions, lift the fingers 1/4" above the strings, and grab the chord again. Keep the chord shape intact when lifted off the strings – don't let your fingers relax into random patterns. Next lift the whole shape 1/2" off the strings, and grab the chord a few more times. Then lift up 1" off the strings. Eventually, work your way up to letting the hand relax and fall away from the neck completely, with no effort to retain the chord shape. Then swing your hand up to the neck and grab that chord. This is probably the quickest way to train the muscle memory for your fingers to automatically go to the right positions.

Think about economy of motion. Where are your fingers going to next? One example is going from F to G7. The index finger stays in the same place for these two chords. Use it as a reference point, rather than letting the shape fall apart and finding the next chord.

When moving from G7 to the C chord, the ring finger is already on the first string, but sitting on the second fret. Simply slide the ring finger up one fret while letting the rest of the G7 chord shape lift.

Think also about differential positions. For example, consider the E7 chord. The triangular shaped G7 chord is a good starting place, and a shape that you already know. The E7 chord only moves the index finger from the second string to the fourth string. It is often easiest to relate a new shape to one that you already know. Another good example is the F#m chord. That one sounds complicated, but it is really just the G7 shaped hopped over one set of strings. No big deal.

INCREASING YOUR CHORD VOCABULARY

Go slow -- so painfully slow at first that you cannot make a mistake. Give yourself some time to figure out where the fingers go and when the strum motion occurs. ***If it sounds good, it is correct!***

Work through the music alphabet daily with:

major chords:	A	through	G
seventh chords :	A7	through	G7
minor chords:	Am	through	Gm

This is a systematic and disciplined way to tackle new chords. But for some people that is too boring. A more enjoyable approach might be to pick a song that you want to learn, then list all of the chords in the order that they appear. Practice forming these chords individually, then practice switching between them. This will be less tedious than just working through the chord alphabet, and will also get you some experience with changing between particular chords. Plus you'll learn the chords to your favorite songs.

Once you have command of the full alphabet of major, minor and seventh chords, you can play almost anything in popular music, except maybe some complex jazz songs.

Hint:

If you go through the chord alphabet using a different strumming or fingerpicking pattern each time, you are actually practicing two things at once, and getting double value from your practice time.

(A more advanced drill does exactly the same alphabet exercise, but with second position chords. Every chord is available in at least three different positions moving up the neck. An even more advanced drill works through the entire alphabet of major-seventh chords, sixth chords, and ninth chords. Now we're really into jazz territory).

Some of these chords will present challenges (Bb and Fm come to mind). The B-flat chord (written Bb) is probably the hardest chord shape for beginners. You need to cover both the first and second strings with your index finger kept flat, then arch over to fret the third and fourth strings. That is a little tricky at first. Sorry, but it only comes with practice. There is no substitute for repetition here.

Don't avoid songs with new chords just because they are tough right now. Look at it as an opportunity to add to your library of chords. You would never try to write a book using only 15 of the 26 letters from the alphabet. Most beginners deliberately avoid the more challenging chords, but eventually the problem chord cannot be avoided. For example, I avoided the Bb chord for a long time until deciding to learn the acoustic version of "Layla" by Eric Clapton. The chord progression starts with Dm – C -- Bb – C -- Dm. My first thought was to move everything up to Em, yielding: Em – D -- C -- D -- Em, which are easier chords for the chorus. But the other chords in the verses did not transpose to anything any simpler than the original key. So I just swallowed hard and mastered the couple of new chords that were needed, and became a much better player for the effort.

CHORD SUBSTITUTIONS, ALTERNATE CHORDS, AND JAZZ

In many popular songs, a 7th chord can substitute for the major chord, especially as the "V" chord at the end of a musical phrase like a verse or chorus, and almost always in a blues turnaround. You could take it to extremes and play your favorite song with nothing but 7th chords, in place of all the major chords. (Try it). Minor chords usually cannot substitute for other chords.

The key of the song and the melody note usually determines whether the underlying chord is a major, minor, seventh, minor 7th, or some other flavor of chord like suspended or augmented.

Where a really weird jazz chord is called for (such as G-5b-7# -add13) you can often simplify to either the seventh chord (G7) or the minor seventh chord (Gm7). The primary melody note is typically what dictates such a weird chord, and you don't always have to play that note -- that's what singers, piano players, and other instruments are for! As you advance, you can start working on these extended chord voicings. Extended chords are often much easier on the ukulele than on other instruments.

TABLATURE

- has four lines, one for each string on the ukulele
- the highest line on the page is the highest string in pitch
- TAB is simply a physical map --- "this string held down at that fret"
- tablature does not show you which finger to use: 3 = third fret, not third finger

Notice that there are four lines, and four strings on the ukulele. When reading tablature, hold the page in front of you. Then lay it down on top of the strings so that you can still read it from above while holding the uke. Bingo! The string nearest you (#4) is the G string, and corresponds exactly to the tablature line nearest you (#4). String #1 represents the highest pitched A string (closest to the floor) and is also the #1 or top line on the tablature.

F chord, represented in tablature from

1-----0----- ---	<---	open string or "zero" fret
2-----1----- ---	<---	fret on the second string, first fret
3-----0----- ---	<---	open string or "zero" fret
4-----2----- ---	<---	fret on the fourth string, second fret

Standard musical notation requires that you recognize a note written on either a line or a space, then mentally translate that into a fret position on a given string. Tablature is just a simple physical map of the strings to be fingered and plucked. It tells you to press this string at that fret.

In the example above, the "2" that appears at the bottom of the stack (on line #4) translates into a physical position. Fret the second fret on the fourth string. The "0" on line #1 means "zero fret" or "open", whichever you prefer. There you play the open string and don't fret anywhere. That happens to be an "A" note, but we don't need to know that right now.

The letter "F" written above the lines is simply a shorthand clue that you happen to be holding an F chord shape. Sometimes it is easier to think in terms of a chord shape rather than just placing fingers down haphazardly to fit the tablature. It is often easier to memorize a chord shape.

Tablature generally does not show the time values of notes (half note, quarter note, eighth note, etc). Sometimes TAB shows the stems and beams that connect pairs of eighth notes  but normally it does not. The main clue about time is that the tab notes will either line up vertically or fall in between the main beats. If they line up they are usually quarter notes, occurring on the down beat. If they appear in between bass notes or downbeats, they are eighth notes occurring on the upbeats.

There is yet another way to express chords. The "F" chord shown in tablature above could be described numerically as:

2 - 0 - 1 - 0

Starting always at the fourth string (nearest the ceiling) we go in order across the fretboard and simply list the frets to be pressed. The numbers tell you nothing about which finger to use, only which string and fret "coordinates" need to be held. Some people find this approach very intuitive, and others get confused by it.

RYTHM

Strive to maintain an even, steady beat. Always.

Speed will come with practice. Right now, you might try strumming at a very slow 30 beats per minute. Gradually work your way up to higher speeds as your skills grow. Remember, speed is useless unless the beat is rock steady and the playing is fluid.

Any mistake or unevenness should be a signal to back off about 30% and gradually work it up faster again. Remember, it does not help to practice mistakes -- unless you really want to get better at your mistakes.

Use a metronome. Most players eventually wish they had started using one earlier. Rhythm takes practice, just like hearing pitches, singing, and other musical skills. No one is "born" with rhythm -- we all learn it along the way. Playing with a metronome will help ingrain a steady beat into your brain and your playing. It will also keep you from speeding up or slowing down unconsciously. It is very common to slow down the tempo during a more difficult passage, or rush a song that is very familiar. As you get more and more familiar with a particular piece over time, you usually speed up. Try not to break your natural speed limit / current skill level.

When you play only by yourself, it is not critical if you speed up or slow down somewhat at certain parts of the song. It is pretty normal to slow down during a hard section of the song, then speed back up when the going is easier. But a steady tempo matters a lot once you start playing with other musicians, or if your audience is dancing. The ability to keep a steady beat makes everything musical work better.

The ability to count the right numbers of beats per measure is also very important. Once again, if you are playing solo it won't really matter that you count out only three of the four beats of the measure -- you already know what's coming next, and when. But everyone playing along will expect that fourth beat, and you'll jump ahead if you don't count the measures out fully. The rhythm section (bass and drums) and your audience will thank you. It is perfectly valid to count in your head during the empty spaces: **strum**, *two*, *three*, *four*. Then move on to the next measure, which usually involves the next chord.

Everything done with a straight rhythm can also be done with a shuffle rhythm too. Straight rhythm is like Morse code that only uses short dots..... dot – dot – dot – dot. Shuffle rhythm is like using both long dashes and short dots.....dash – dot – dash – dot. It gives a loping feel to the timing. Think about the song "Happy Trails".

Play along with the radio or a CD for practice, repeating over and over until you internalize the strumming patterns and rhythms. Get the feel for different rhythms by playing with different songs and styles of music. Country will use one kind of rhythm, rock will use another, and reggae will be something completely different. Rhythm is probably best learned by imitation and feel, rather than from complex written charts, methodical counting, and rote patterns. Do whatever sounds fluid and consistent, and feel free to mix and match patterns.

Hint: You can practice strumming even without your ukulele. Keep a guitar pick handy when listening to the radio. Strum across the seam on the outside of your pant leg. It makes a distinct click, and has similar resistance to the ukulele strings. Try to stay with the beat of the song on the radio using simple down-up strums. Then as you get better, try to copy any rhythm and tempo that you hear.

STRUMMING & FLAT PICKING

To pick, or not to pick? (flat pick, that is)
most ukulele players do not use a pick, preferring fingernails and flesh
picks for the ukulele are most often made of hard felt or rubber
hold the pick between the thumb and index finger

Strumming movement -- at fingers, wrist or elbow? (each has pro's and con's)
use either the finger or the thumb as the "key" for the strum -- one will feel more natural
strokes should be as perpendicular across the string as possible
strum somewhere between the sound hole and the uppermost frets for best tone

Don't let your strum strokes go way beyond the strings. Keep the strums to within about one inch above and below the outermost strings. This will help with both control and accuracy. Controlling the excess motion is easier to do using the "wrist pivot" technique, rather than the "elbow pivot" strum stroke. You don't need to wind up, or stroke through until you hit your knee. If you are trying to get that much volume, use an amplifier.

All down strokes, one beat per measure, hitting all the strings in the chord.

1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and
▼ -- ▼ -- ▼ -- ▼ --

Then go to a more complex strum on both the down beat and the up beat (eighth notes).

1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and
▼ ▲ ▼ ▲ ▼ ▲ ▼ ▲

The first variation combines the two, with a quarter note on the first down beat, followed by eighth notes on the rest of the beats. This is a common country and pop strum (Eagles).

1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and
▼ -- ▼ ▲ ▼ ▲ ▼ ▲

Pay attention to the down and up strokes, and keep them as shown. It helps to verbalize and count out loud. The first beat of a measure is almost always a down stroke. If it helps, say "miss" instead of the word "and" on the stroke that you are skipping.

Example above: one – *miss* – two – *and* -- three – *and* -- four -- *and*

When skipping the first up beat, keep the "up-down" wrist motion going smoothly. Don't stop and start the motion. Instead, work at hitting the strings on the down stroke, and missing them on the first up stroke. Think of an oval shaped stroke, rather than a simple up and down across the strings. It takes some practice, but will come quickly.

The basic country / folk strum is often called "**boom-chuck**". Boom-chuck = a bass note (boom) on beats 1 & 3 plus a down strum (chuck) on beats 2 & 4. There are also more elaborate patterns:

Boom-chuck-a	bass note plus quick down & up strums on the 2 and 4 beats
Boom-chuck-a chuck-a	slightly more complex, fuller (the "Eagles" example, above)
Boom-chuck-a boom-chuck-a	and build complexity from there.....

The emphasis is on the "boom" portion of the pattern, on the first beat. The "chuck-a" part of the strum only brushes the two or three strings highest in pitch (or closer to the floor) rather than strumming the entire chord.

Once you get the hang of basic "boom-chuck" and its variations, mix and match them. You can also spice things up with connecting runs, pull-offs, suspended notes on the "chucks", and other embellishments.

BASIC STRUMMING PATTERNS

4/4 TIME

count:

one	and	two	and	three	and	four	and
------------	-----	-----	-----	-------	-----	------	-----



all down strokes, on the down beat
can be used on any song in 4/4 time but might sound a bit plain



all down and up strokes, downstrokes on the down beat, upstrokes on the up beat ("and")
a little busier and fuller sounding than all down strokes

sample song: Jambalaya Sloop John B



one down beat, miss on the first up beat, then three pairs of downs & ups
basic country strum, almost universally useful for most songs

sample songs: Brown Eyed Girl Hanalei Moon



two down beats, two pairs of downs & ups

sample songs: Five Foot Two Hukilau



three down beats, one pair of downs & ups
march time feel

sample song: Yesterday Ghost Riders



back beat, or emphasis on the up beats

sample song: La Bamba
(one pattern 4, one pattern 6)

1. keep the hand going up and down all the time, even if you "miss" on that stroke
2. emphasize the first beat of each measure
3. you can mix and match patterns in alternating measures
4. you could use any of these patterns on almost any song
5. other more complex patterns will use different "misses" and strokes

BASIC STRUMMING PATTERNS

3/4 TIME

count:

one	and	two	and	three	and
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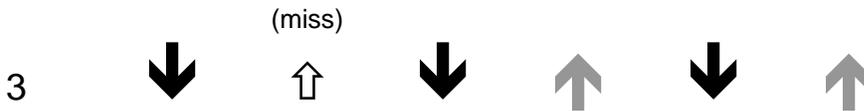


all down strokes, on the down beat
can be used on any song in 3/4 time but might sound a bit plain



all down and up strokes, downstrokes on the down beat
upstrokes on the up beat ("and")

sample song: Only Fools Rush In Edelweiss



one down beat, miss on the first up beat, then two pairs of downs & ups

sample song: Amazing Grace



two down beats, one pair of downs & ups

sample song: I'm So Lonesome

The "IZ" strum, used for "Somewhere Over the Rainbow"

4/4 TIME

count:

one	and	two	and	three	and	four	and
------------	-----	-----	-----	-------	-----	------	-----



KEY SIGNATURE

Key signature simply means the reference or starting point for the song. When we say the key of “C”, that tells us that we will be using the C major scale for the melody notes. We will also use and chords related to and/or built from the C scale: C – F – G – Am. (These are the I – IV – V – vi chords, those most commonly appearing in songs in the key of “C”).

What key is this song in? It might be the first chord (and often is) but not necessarily. Most songs have a structure of verses and choruses. The final chord in each verse or chorus generally wants to resolve to a stable place, with no tension and having a sense of closure. That chord is the root or “one” chord, and the key of the song. This is true in 97% of the cases, but like every rule, there are exceptions.

When you are given the key of the song, take a few moments and figure out the “usual suspects”. You have actually been told nearly everything you need to know with that one simple statement of the key. In most cases, you will encounter the I chord, the IV chord, and the V chord. If a song is slightly more complex than just three chords, you will also encounter the relative minor or vi chord. Other minor chords may appear too.

Here is the fundamental chord alphabet, shown for the keys of G, C, D and F:

<u>I</u>	<u>ii</u>	<u>iii</u>	<u>IV</u>	<u>V</u>	<u>vi</u>	<u>vii</u>	<u>I (octave)</u>
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

It is worthwhile to pause and do this exercise every time you hear the key that a song will be played in. The hand is a good reference, since there are five fingers. The thumb becomes the “one” chord. The ring finger is the “four” chord, and the pinky is the “five” chord. The “six” chord is just one letter higher than the pinky. Index and middle fingers are the “two” and “three” chords, respectively. It is fairly unusual to use the vii (seven) chord.

For sheet music written in standard notation on staff paper, the number of sharp symbols indicates the key:

no sharps = C one sharp = G two sharps = D three sharps = A four sharps = E

There is an easy way to remember this: just count the number of sharp corners in the letter. G has one sharp corner, and has one sharp on the musical staff. “D” has two sharp corners, and two sharps on the staff. “A” has three sharp corners, and three sharps on the staff. “E” has four corners, so is written with four sharps. The letter “C” has zero sharp corners. Knowing this trick will help to quickly identify the key of the song if no chord symbols are provided. If in doubt, look up the “Circle of Fifths”.

There is no corresponding easy method for flats, but most stringed instruments don’t like to play in “flat” keys much anyway – the chord shapes are often challenging and awkward. The two most common flat keys used with the ukulele are the key of F (one flat on the musical staff) and Bb (two flats on the staff).

UKULELE 102

Moving Beyond Beginner

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This booklet picks up where “Uke 101” left off, and helps you to transition to the advanced beginner / new intermediate level of player. There is no need to buy instruction books, chord charts, or anything else right away. There is more material in here than we will cover in the six weeks of class, but you can study on your own later.

This material is not intended to be a complete substitute for basic lessons, or introductory instruction books, or even video lessons. For example, a basic instruction book would have pictures of the hands holding various chord shapes. We skip over the truly introductory items like that, but cover the practical information that a beginner needs to toward an intermediate level of play. The ultimate goal of all of this effort is to be able to get together with friends to play your ukulele and sing some familiar songs.

Well-made instructional videos such as those from Homespun Tapes are also quite effective. There are also numerous books, particularly those by Jumpin’ Jim Beloff, available from Fleamarket Music. In particular we highly recommend a DVD called, “*Beginning Ukulele*” by Keoki Kahumoku. This is one of the best beginner level instructional videos available for any instrument. (www.thegt.com)

Aloha, and happy playing!



BASIC CHORD PROGRESSIONS & SONG STRUCTURE

Many popular songs have fairly simple structures, usually only three or four chords.

I – IV – V This is the most common chord progression in rock, blues, country, and folk songs
(these chords often appear in that order – but not always)

Your Cheating Heart, Hank Williams
Pride & Joy, Stevie Ray Vaughn
Twist and Shout, Beatles
any 12 bar blues song

Folsom Prison Blues, Johnny Cash
Margaritaville, Jimmy Buffett
Old Time Rock & Roll, Bob Seger
and literally thousands of other songs...

When we say a **I – IV – V** chord progression, this is what we mean using the key of C as an example:

The C is the “one” chord, also called the “root” or the key we are playing in. Then count up to the fourth note – C, D, E, ***F***. The “four” chord is an F. And the G is the “five” chord. Regardless of the key, the “one - four – five” chord progression has the same relative sounds between chords. Try these combinations:

	I	IV	V
For the key of C, this means:	C	F	G
For the key of D, this means:	D	G	A
For the key of E, this means:	E	A	B
For the key of G, this means:	G	C	D
For the key of A, this means:	A	D	E

Remember, the chords may not appear in quite this order, because that would quickly get boring and limiting. But the “I”, “IV” and “V” chord of the key will almost always appear somewhere in the song. Also remember that the V chord can almost always be a V7 chord – the seventh version of the chord.

Moving beyond the basic I – IV – V chord structure, we most often add the **vi** (six chord). “Six” chords are almost always minor chords. In the key of G, the **vi** chord is the Em. For the key of C, the **vi** chord is the Am. These are often referred to as the “relative minor” chords. A more complex song can also add the **ii** (two chord) or the **iii** (three chord). These are also normally minor chords. When written, upper case = major chord, and lower case = minor chord. Here is the fundamental chord alphabet, shown for the keys of G, C and D:

I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii	I (octave)
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

For example, there is a classic “50’s” chord progression, based on C – Am – F – G. This progression works for “Little Surfer Girl”, “Unchained Melody”, “Duke of Earl”, and about 4,000 other songs from that era and style. Using the number system, this is a “I -- vi – IV – V” progression, which can be easily translated into any other key. That is the beauty of thinking in terms of the numerical chord progression.

Hints: the last chord played in a verse or a chorus is almost always the key for the song
(the first chord played may or may not be the song’s key)

for a simple I – IV – V song, if you are already on the “I” chord, even a guess has a 50-50 chance when switching – it’s either the IV or the V chord. You will quickly learn to hear which one is coming next

many blues, folk, rock, and pop songs have a I - IV - V structure, or a slight variation

TRANSPOSING KEYS

Sometimes the normal key of a song is just too high or too low for your voice range. Sometimes you want to play in a different key to avoid that one chord you just cannot get right. For example, if the Bm chord is giving you fits, transpose the song down one full step so that chord becomes Am.

Caution: you might escape certain difficult chords for a little while using this trick. While some chords get easier, the other chords can often get ugly, making the piece even harder to play. By avoiding one barre chord or a tough chord shape, you might add three new ones!

Transposing exercise:

C	Am	F	G	original key
D	_____	_____	_____	up one whole step
E	_____	_____	_____	up two steps
A	_____	_____	_____	down 1½ steps
G	_____	_____	_____	down 2½ steps

To transpose a song, we just count the number of letters for the change. Moving from A to C means moving everything up by two whole letters.

But the intervals between the notes B – C and notes E -- F are special. In our normal major scale (“do re mi”) there are only half-steps (one fret) between these pairs of notes.

one whole step up from B is actually a C#
one whole step up from an E becomes an F#
one whole step up from a Bb is a C

If you count the change in half-steps, the sharps and flats work out automatically. If you change keys by the letters, you have to remember these two special cases when landing on either B or F notes. It may sound confusing at first, but you quickly get the hang of it.

FINGER PICKING

Fingerpicking can be used instead of strumming. Accompaniment for songs is often based on simple and repetitive finger picking patterns.

Go SLOW! pick so painfully slow (at first) that you cannot make a mistake
speed and smoothness will come with time and correct repetition
this is a complicated new motor skill, so take your time

Building it up from scratch – the parts:

- alternating thumb
- pinches -- bass & melody note “pinched” together
- separated bass & melody notes, melody notes in between bass notes, on the “and”
- mixing pinches and separated notes

finger assignment

At the beginning, we want to assign fingers to certain strings. The thumb handles the fourth (or top) string, index finger hits the third string, middle finger covers the second string, and ring finger covers the first string. Try to stay with that arrangement. You will almost certainly deviate from it later – most fingerpickers use thumb and two fingers, not three fingers. But let’s start off with good finger discipline and all three fingers. Otherwise, you won’t build skills in all of your fingers, and you might wish for those skills later.

thumb plays the fourth string
use one finger for each of the highest three strings (treble / melody)

finger dexterity patterns, that also reinforce finger assignments:

	i = index	m = middle	r = ring finger
fingers	i - m - i - m	i - r - i - r	m - r - m - r
strings	3 - 2 - 3 - 2	3 - 1 - 3 - 1	2 - 1 - 2 - 1

alternating thumb -- plus fingers (based on a “F” chord)

	pluck pairs together quarter notes	alternating strings eighth notes
1	-----0-----0-----	-----0-----0-----
2	-----1-----1-----	-----1-----1-----
3	-----0-----0-----	-----0-----0-----
4	-----2-----2-----	-----2-----2-----
	▼ ▼ ▼ ▼	▼ ▲ ▼ ▲ ▼ ▲ ▼ ▲

Most of the time, you either pluck the melody strings together with the bass on the beats, or alternating bass on the beat with melody in between the beats (the “ands”)

Finger assignment variation: alternating thumb

Guitar players, with six strings to worry about, often use an “alternating bass” pattern with melody patterns on top of that on the high strings. We can do alternating thumb too, but it does not sound quite as full on ukulele. It might be easier to think about an alternating thumb pattern, with index and middle handling the first and second strings. The thumb action needs to be completely ingrained until you can do it without thinking

First picking pattern: arpeggio (3/4 time)

R -----x-----x-----
M -----x-----x-----x-----x-----
I -----x-----x-----x-----x-----x-----
T -----x-----x-----x-----

count: one two three four five six one two three four five six

sample song: House of the Rising Sun

Second picking pattern: outsides-insides (4/4 time)

-----x-----x-----
-----x-----x-----
-----x-----x-----
-----x-----x-----

count: one and two and three and four and

sample song: Ain't She Sweet

Third picking pattern: evens & odds (4th & 2nd strings, then 3rd and 1st strings)

-----x-----x-----
-----x-----x-----
-----x-----x-----
-----x-----x-----

count: one and two and three and four and

sample song: Hanalei Moon

Fourth picking pattern: pinch, rest, insides-outsides-insides

-----x-----x-----
-----|-----/-----x-----x-----
-----|-----/-----x-----x-----
-----x-----x-----

count: one and two and three and four and

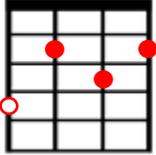
sample song: Somewhere Over the Rainbow

Hint: practice the patterns while watching TV, talking, reading the comics, etc. You have to put in 17,000 repetitions until they are happening on "auto-pilot", without thinking about the order of the fingers

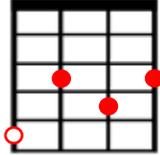
MOVEABLE CHORDS

- any shape where you cover all four strings is moveable
- very powerful & useful concept
- an “inversion” is just a restacking of the notes in the chord
- learn the first three versions (inversions) of each primary chord

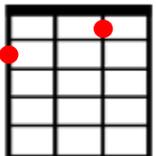
G shape



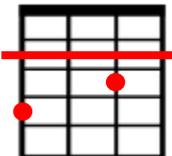
Ab



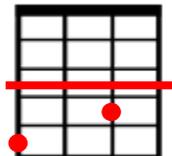
F shape



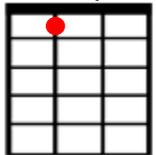
G



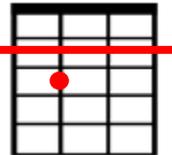
G# or Ab



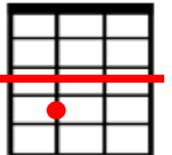
A7 shape



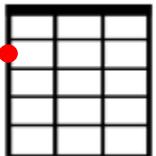
B7



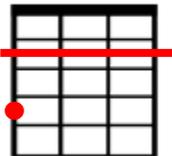
C7



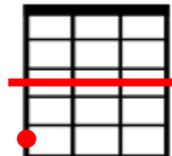
Am shape



Bm



Cm



Exercise: play a familiar song using second versions of each chord

example: play “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” using only frets 3-8

C = Bb shape on third fret

F = E shape on frets 3-5

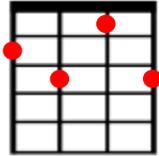
G = E shape on frets 4-6

Am = F#m shape on frets 3-5

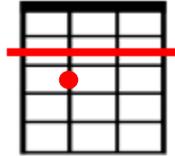
MOVEABLE SEVENTH CHORDS

four basic shapes are available for all 7th chords
when covering all four strings, they are moveable

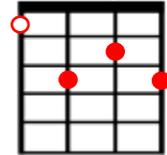
F7 shape



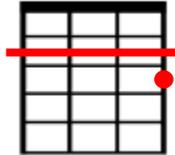
barre B7 shape



G7 shape



barre D7 shape



PLAYING WITH OTHER MUSICIANS

In any group session, someone is always taking the lead. It may be pretty subtle, and it can change from song to song -- but someone is definitely in charge. That person chooses the key, starts the song off, sets the tempo, and keeps things moving along if the group stumbles. They also indicate who will take the solo or sing the next verse, usually with a nod toward that person, or eye contact. They also end the song. The ending is often indicated with a foot kick during the last line or two of the song, since your hands are already busy.

It's OK to ask someone next to you what the chords will be, or to ask someone what their "A" chord looks like, so that you recognize it when it comes by. For example, some players will use alternate fingering or positions that you might not recognize immediately.

Sometimes, there are verbal descriptions of the structure. "This is a one-four-five song in the key of A", or "This is an eight bar blues in F".

Example: "12 bar blues in E, with a quick change" tells us that we are:

- playing in the key of E (chords used = E, A, and B or B7)
- using a standard blues structure, 12 bars long, with a predictable pattern of chord changes
- going to the A chord on **measure 2**, then going back to E (the "quick change" or "fast four chord")

12 Bar Blues Form		4 down beats per chord		
basic format				
E	E	E	E7	7th chords are optional here, but add "spice"
A	A	E	E	
B7	A	E	B7	the final B7 is a "turnaround"
with a "quick change"				
E	A	E	E7	a song might use the basic form for
A	A	E	E	the verse, and the variation for the chorus,
B7	B7	E	E	or vice versa

JAM SESSION TRICKS AND ETIQUETTE

Let's say you are a complete beginner with maybe three or four chords shakily at your disposal. Hang back and watch for a while, and get the feel of the jam first. Most jam sessions are quite open and will welcome everyone, including the beginners (and we were ALL there once).

It is a very useful skill to be able to "read" the chords from the hand position of other players. If there is another ukulele player, that is fairly easy. But it is helpful to be able to identify the guitar player's chord shapes and hand positions too.

If you don't know a chord or get lost, lay off until the song moves on to something you do know. We all get confused sometimes, and it's OK to sit one out, rather than mess up the group. If all you know is a G chord, wait for it to come, strum along like mad, then drop out again once they move on to another chord. If your chord changes are not quite fast enough to keep up, try hitting every other chord.

It helps to memorize a few songs. It is important to wean yourself away from the written page as soon as practical. After all, you might not have enough light to read the sheet from the back row around the campfire, or you might have forgotten your song binder at home when you want to impress your friends with your playing.

UNDERSTANDING SCALES

There are only 12 notes in the standard musical scale – it ain't rocket science!

A A# B — C C# D D# E — F F# G G#
 Bb half-step Db Eb half-step Gb Ab

The next note above G# in the series is an A, one octave higher than where you started. Then the scale repeats all over again.

Whole steps and half steps occur in certain patterns to make up our standard or “major” scales. There is nothing mysterious or magic about these intervals – this is just the pattern of pitches that we are accustomed to hearing in western music. Music from other cultures uses different intervals and more than 12 notes, what we would call micro-pitches. The combination of micro-tones, different common chord progressions, and different rhythms make these styles sound so different from popular music in western cultures.

All “major” scales have the same pattern of whole and half steps. The familiar “do - re - mi” sequence is a major scale. If you don't have this pattern of whole and half steps, then you simply don't have a major scale. It might be a minor scale or a modal scale, a pentatonic scale or a blues scale, and it will definitely have a different feel.

Each fret is one half step, and two frets is a whole step. On a piano, moving from any key to the very next adjacent key (either white or black) is a half-step. Moving from one white key across a black key to the next white key is a whole step.

A# is exactly the same pitch as Bb, and ditto for D# and Eb. They are just two different ways to name the same tone value. Because of the half steps that occur at certain points in the scale, there is technically no note named B# or Cb, nor a note named E# or Fb.

Major scale pattern, starting on “C”

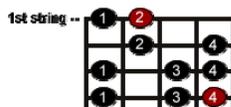
 W W H W W W H
C **D** **E** **F** **G** **A** **B** **C**
 do re mi fa so la ti do

Major scale pattern, starting on “A”

 W W H W W W H
A **B** **C#** **D** **E** **F#** **G#** **A**
 do re mi fa so la ti do

Note that sharps (or flats) are needed to get the whole-step and half-step intervals to come out correctly on any scale other than “C”. The key of C has no sharps or flats (all white keys on the piano).

There are certain fingering patterns, often called “boxes”, that make up a major scale. Different boxes are used for major scales, minor scales, pentatonic scales, etc. (We won't get into playing scales right now, but it is easy enough to look up when you get interested). Here is a major scale box for guitar, as an example.



CHORD CONSTRUCTION

Using the major scale (“do-re-me”) to build C chords:

Major chords	1 -- 3 -- 5	<i>first, third and fifth note in the scale</i>
C major	C – E – G	“do mi so”
7 th chords	1 -- 3 -- 5 -- 7 ^b	<i>add the flatted 7th note of the scale</i> “ti”
C7	C – E – G – B ^b	“do mi so ti”
Minor chords	1 -- 3 ^b -- 5	<i>flat the third note of the scale by one-half step</i>
C minor	C – E ^b – G	

Hint: What we normally call a 7th chord actually uses a *flatted* 7th note, two half steps down from the octave or “eight” note. This is also sometimes called the *dominant seventh* and written as a plain G7.

Chords using the normal “unflatted” 7th note (only one half-step down) are called the **major 7th** chord, most often written as Gmaj7 or GΔ7. Major sevenths have a different tonal character or “color”, compared to the tension of a normal 7th chord.

Don’t confuse the “1 – 3 – 5” sequence of notes from a given scale used to build a chord, versus the “1 – 4 – 5” chord progression used for songs. They are two different things.

Ukulele or guitar chords are sometimes referred to as “broken chords” because they don’t always stack the notes in a standard 1 - 3 - 5 order, and usually double certain notes. Stacking the notes in a 3 – 5 -- 1 order is equally valid, and has a fancy musical name -- an inversion. For example, a first position F chord with open strings and a barred fifth position F chord use the same notes, but they are stacked a differently and go higher up the scale into the next octave. The two forms have a slightly different character or texture, but are really the same chord, and are interchangeable. You might choose one version over the other to emphasize a melody note. If you are playing with someone else and they play the first position chord, you can play the next inversion to make a much fuller, richer sound.

Suspended, Augmented, Diminished and Demented chords

These special chords have different textures to them since they do not have the major chord’s standard 1st – 3rd – 5th note construction. Instead they drop out some notes, add other notes, and even sharp or flat the added note.

Suspended chords have no third, instead using the fourth note on the scale, spelled out as: 1st – 4th – 5th. “SUS” chords give a mysterious or ambiguous feeling like a minor chord, only more pronounced. You can have Sus2 and Sus4 chords, adding either the second note or the fourth note of the scale, in place of the third.

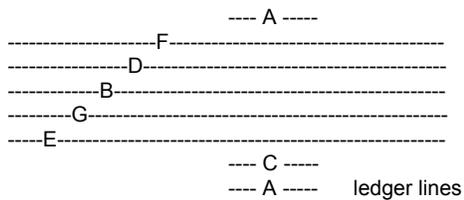
Diminished chords flat the third, fifth, and seventh notes of the scale. “DIM” chords (also sometimes written with a degree symbol -- °) have a very tense edgy sound, and strongly lead you back toward a resolved major chord. Diminished chords are often used as momentary passing tones, to get back to the “I” chord or the “V” chord in a jazzy or melodic way. They are not chords or tones that you would normally hang out on for several measures.

Augmented chords sharp the third, fifth or 7th notes of the scale. This note most often follows a melody note.

OK, there isn’t really such a thing as a “demented” chord. But try to finger a G13 and you might not be so sure about that.

STANDARD MUSICAL NOTATION (treble clef)

Five lines E G B D F every good boy deserves favor,
 Four spaces F A C E



Time values of notes – whole, half, quarter, eighth, sixteenth, etc

	whole note	= four beats = four quarter notes
	half note	= two beats = two quarter notes
	quarter note	= one beat = two eighth notes
	eighth note	= one-half beat = two sixteenth notes
	sixteenth note	= four per beat, two sixteenth notes per eighth note

When counting out time, quarter notes are counted on the downbeats or numbers themselves, ie: 1, 2, 3, 4, repeat. Eighth notes have one-half the time value of a quarter note, and are counted on the upbeats or “ands”…… 1 *and* 2 *and* 3 *and* 4 *and*……

Time signatures:	4/4	count 1 -- 2 -- 3 – 4	emphasis on the “one” beat
	3/4	count 1 -- 2 – 3	waltz time
	2/4	count 1 – 2	

The upper number tells you how many beats per measure, and the lower number tells you what note value will get one full beat. So 4/4 means four beats per measure, with a quarter note getting one beat. 4/4 is the most common time signature, used for most rock & roll, jazz, and blues. 3/4 time is used for waltzes or polkas, and is often called the “oom-pah-pah” rhythm. Other times signatures are often used too, such as 6/8 (Nights in White Satin) which gets six beats per measure, each one being an eighth note. You could also think of 6/8 as “3/4 time, twice as fast” with an accent on the first and fourth notes.



There is also something called a triplet, where three notes occur in the space of one quarter note, dividing the duration into thirds. Count them out as “**one** – trip – let, **two** – trip – let, **three** – trip – let” and so forth, with each phrase lasting one beat. One common occurrence for triplets is in a blues turnaround or embellishment. There are a total of twelve triplet notes in a four beat measure (4/4 time).