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UKULELES

AN INTRODUCTION
for beginners



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Acknowledgements & Thanks

This introduction to ukuleles has been assembled with the help of many ukulele groups and individuals, too numerous to mention.

In the interest of welcoming and helping newcomers to the world of ukuleles, we may have 'borrowed' (whole or in part), information, recommendations, suggestions, articles, and of course numerous song sheets. For the purposes of clarity, we may have rearranged info or data in order to ease the learning process.

We will be eternally grateful to all who have wittingly or otherwise contributed to our cause, which is the total enjoyment of the ukulele.

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WHAT IS A UKULELE ?

The first 'ukulele was probably made in the 1880s by Portuguese cabinet makers from the Madeira Islands who emigrated to the Kingdom of Hawaii in 1879.

Recruited to work in the Hawaiian sugar cane fields, Madeirans and other natives of the insular possessions of Portugal and Spain began arriving in large numbers in 1878, and thereafter for a period of about thirty years. Immigrants from the second boatload of Portuguese made quite an impression on Honoluluans. Two weeks after the docking of the Ravenscrag in late August 1879, the Hawaiian Gazette reported that the *'Madeiran Islanders who recently arrived here have been delighting the people with nightly street concerts'*. The writer also commented on the *'very sweet music played on strange instruments which are a kind of cross between a guitar and banjo'*.

In Hawaii the name ukulele roughly translates as 'jumping flea', perhaps due to the action of one's fingers playing the ukulele resembling a 'jumping flea'. Legend attributes it to the nickname of an Englishman, Edward William Purvis, one of King Kalakaua's officers, whose small size, fidgety manner, and expertise at the instrument fitted the description.

Ukuleles are generally made of wood, although variants have been made composed partially or entirely of plastic. Cheaper ukuleles are generally made from ply or laminate woods, in some cases with a soundboard of an acoustically superior wood such as spruce. Other more expensive ukuleles are made of solid hardwoods such as mahogany. Some of the most expensive ukuleles, which may cost thousands of dollars, are made from koa, a Hawaiian wood.

Ukuleles are available in a number of sizes, each having a different tone and volume. Which one to buy is very much a matter of taste, although the Soprano is the most common size to start with.

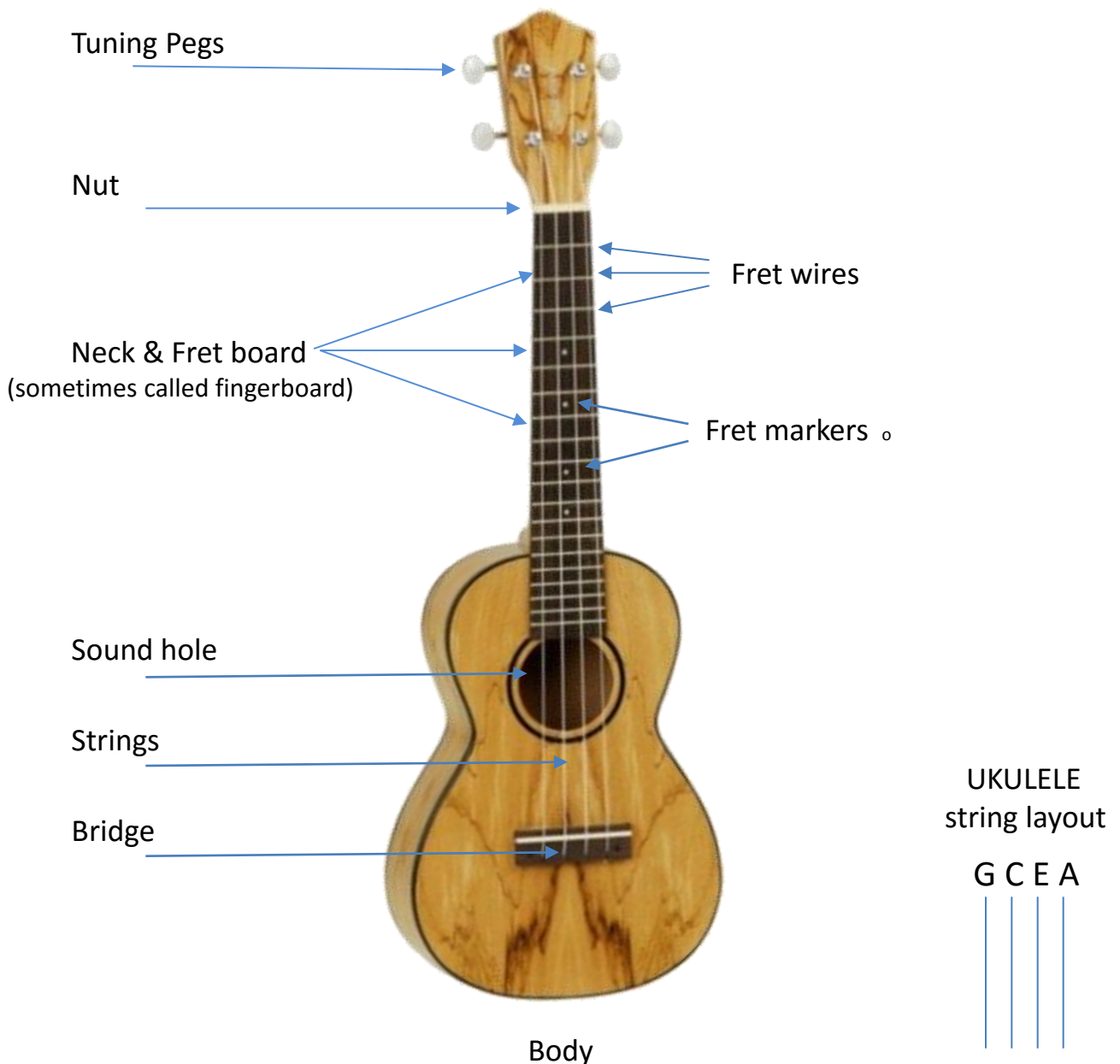




UKULELE COMPONENTS

Ukuleles are obviously similar to guitars, however there are some fundamental differences. In general ukuleles are smaller and have only four strings compared to six or more on a guitar. It follows therefore that string layout will be different.

When strumming a ukulele, all four strings are normally strummed. A guitarist may strum any combination of three or more strings up to the maximum (normally six).



UKULELES FOR BEGINNERS

This is an absolute beginners guide to playing the ukulele and assumes no prior musical knowledge. The idea is that it'll get you singing and playing lots of tunes, and it won't have been a struggle. The ukulele is an easy instrument to learn, and is quickly rewarding. The most important thing to remember is to have fun with it and not get bogged down. If you're finding anything tricky, go and have a cup of tea.

BUYING A UKULELE

A 'soprano' ukulele is probably the best to get started on. There are a lot of good ukuleles out there, but I would advise you to get one with geared tuning pegs (that stick out of the side of the uke, rather than friction pegs (that come out of the back of the uke) because the geared tuning pegs tend to be better at keeping the strings in tune, and one with good quality strings. If you're wondering which ukulele to buy, a cheap but good one will cost about £30.

HOLDING IT

Assuming you're right-handed, hold the neck of your ukulele with your left hand, so you can strum the strings with your right. If you're left-handed, hold the neck with the right hand and strum with the left. I tend to play sitting down, resting my ukulele on my lap, but to play it standing up you can employ a variety of methods. A strap is a popular option, or you can also tuck the body underneath your forearm.

TUNING IT (GCEA layout)

Getting your ukulele in tune is VERY important. If it's not in tune it will sound horrible, and may put you off the whole idea, so pay close attention to this bit... There are many different ways to tune a ukulele, but the most common tuning arrangement is GCEA. This means that the string closest to your nose (if you're right handed) is a G, then (moving away from your nose) they are tuned C, E and A.

To tune each string, you need to twist the tuning peg that the string is attached to. Tightening the string will make the note go higher, and loosening it will make the note go lower (just like when you twang a rubber band). I would recommend that you buy an electronic tuner, which you can buy at any music shop these days. Just clip it onto the head of your ukulele, switch it on, switch it to 'Uke tuning' (as opposed to guitar tuning) and with a bit of twisting, it tells you when the string you pluck is in tune:



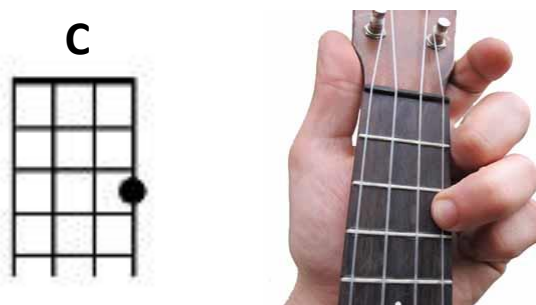
If you have a ukulele with friction pegs (without gears), you may find that the screws in the back of the pegs need to be tightened up, to stop the strings from slipping. Just take a screwdriver and tighten them so you can still twist the peg, but so that it stays firmly in place once you let go. Remember, all ukuleles go out of tune, so if it starts sounding rubbish, check your tuning

STRUMMING

Take your right forefinger and brush it across the strings. this should already sound quite nice. In fact, you've just played your first chord, it's called C6 so you can feel pretty pleased with yourself already. You can use your fingers or a plectrum to play your Uke. We use both, and they both sound great. You should feel free to use nail, flesh, leather or plastic picks/plectrums. Whatever sounds or feels right for you.

CHORD BOXES

A simple way for ukulele chords to be written is by using chord boxes - see below. These are graphic representations of the first few frets of the neck of the ukulele, and they show you where to put your fingers to make a chord. The vertical lines represent the strings, and the horizontal lines represent the frets. So to play the chord of C, we have a chord box that looks like this:



If this doesn't make sense, just take your ukulele, and place a finger on the third fret of the top A string (the one furthest from your nose). This is a C chord. If you compare this to the chord box above, it should begin to make sense.

To make life easier later on, it's good if you can learn to use your third (ring) finger for this chord as it makes changing chords a lot easier. This is great, you've now learned your first Major chord, and it's a C. This is a great chord to know because we use it a lot, and it's very easy to play. Don't rush it.



STRUMMING IN TIME

When you play music, it's important to play on the beat. Most popular music has a 4/4 beat, which means there are 4 beats in every bar. That's why you often hear people saying "A-one, a-two, a-one, two, three, four," to count into a groovy tune. So by thinking of music as evenly spaced groups of 4 beats, we can begin to get going. Now you can use the C chord to play a song.

DIFFERENT STRUMS

There are lots of different ways to strum your ukulele. We can split basic ukulele strumming into two strokes: the downstroke (when your finger moves down across the strings) and the upstroke (when your finger moves up across the strings). Let's split our four beats up, and think of them as: one and, two and, three and, four and.

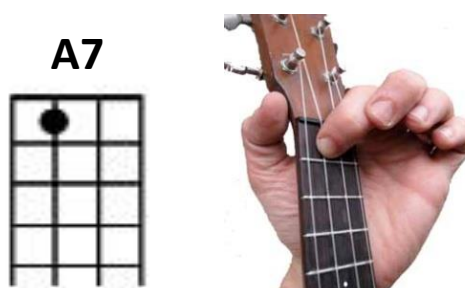
I should also mention a waltz. This is a tune which only has 3 beats per bar, so we count 1,2,3, 1,2,3, 1,2,3 etc, with the emphasis on the 1 beat. Some famous pop songs in waltz time are 'The House of the Rising Sun' made famous by The Animals, and 'Norwegian Wood' by the Beatles. A waltz can be played as one downstroke and two upstrokes, to get that boom cha cha, boom cha cha, boom cha cha, feel.

The different ways to strum a ukulele quickly become endless, and there are masses of great tutorials on YouTube and other sites which give much more detail about triple strokes, fan strokes, and more complicated strums. Even a C, F and G7 chord can sound pretty fancy if you practice your strumming:

CHORDS: Major, Minor and Dominant 7th.

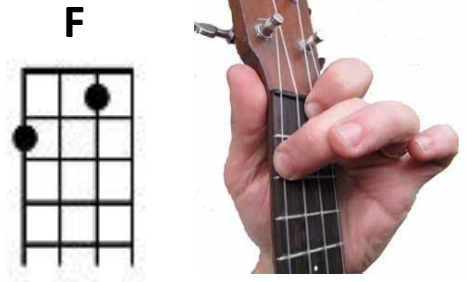
There are many many chords, but you will only need a few, and you can easily start off with just a handful (excuse the pun). Initially you will need to differentiate between Major, Minor and Dominant 7s which might sound complicated but it's not. When sheet music refers to a chord simply as A or B or C, this is a 'Major' chord, sometimes also referred to as Amaj, or Cmaj, etc. Minor chords are shown for example as: Am (note the small m). A dominant 7th chord is shown simply as A7, C7, or G7. At this stage don't worry about these definitions. If things get complicated, have a cup of tea.

Here is another example of a popular yet simple chord. Chord A7.



ANOTHER CHORD - F

For those of you who want to learn another chord, here goes. The next one is F, and the chord box looks like this: The easiest way to play this is to use your forefinger on the E string, and your middle finger on the G string, like so:



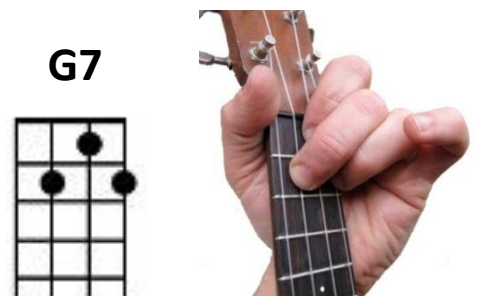
It may seem as if your fingers will never learn how to get into this position, but they will - it just takes a little practice. What you're aiming to do is put the C and the F chord together, so you can learn a song. A good way to get your fingers used to it is to practice playing 4 strums on C, and then 4 strums on F, trying to keep the rhythm steady as you change between the chords.

It doesn't matter how slowly you go to begin with, but getting used to changing chords is the KEY to playing the ukulele. Keep practicing, and take breaks in between. You'll find that every time you come back to practice again you'll be able to change chord a little quicker.

THE THIRD CHORD - G7

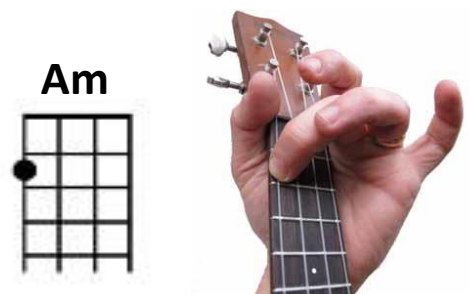
Nearly all of rock, blues, reggae and pop music is based around three chords. In the key of C, these chords are C, F and G. Now that you've learnt C and F, you're two-thirds of the way towards knowing about a million songs, so don't give up now. The third chord to try is a **G7**.

The easiest way to play this is to use your forefinger on the E string, your middle finger on the C string and your third finger on the A string, like this:



A minor - A SAD CHORD

So far you've only learnt 3 Major chords. Now for a Minor chord. A minor chord has its second note down a semitone, which has the effect of making it seem a bit more sad, or mournful, than a major chord. **Am** is a doddle to play.



CHORD Z

Chord Z is a great chord to know. This is a chord you can play at any time, in any piece of music, and it always sounds good. This is how you play it: All you have to do is rest your fingers gently across the strings, so they are touching them but not pushing the strings onto the fretboard. Then strum. Often a tune needs a good strong backbeat, and chord Z is just the ticket for this. Perhaps most importantly, it's also a great chord to play if you've completely lost your place in the music and have no idea what to do - chord Z always seems to fit.



PLAYING UKULELES TOGETHER

If you want to play with other ukulele players, the key thing to remember is that you don't all have to do the same thing. A gaggle of ukuleles all strumming away sounds fine, but it sounds so much better if you begin to arrange parts for yourselves. On its own, an individual part may seem boring or unchallenging, but put several simple parts together and it creates a unified whole that sounds better than anything one individual is playing. For example, playing a tune like 'When the Saints Go Marching In' with five ukulele players, you could divide up the playing like this:

One person strums along on all four beats. One person plays the 'off-beat' (this is playing a crisp, short chord on the 2 and 4 beats - which could also be chord Z). One plays only the first beat of the bar (a power chord). Another plays the tune. Another plucks a harmony to the tune. If you can induce a bass player to join in as well, playing root notes on beats 1 and 3, it'll start sounding like a real band.

CHORD SHEETS

An indispensable bit of kit for all ukulele players is a complete ukulele chord chart, showing finger positions. Attached is a chord sheet which has all the chords you're ever likely to need on one piece of A4 paper. Keep it in your ukulele case.

MORE MUSIC

Given the tools you now have at your fingertips you can start to write your own songs, or play other people's. On the internet you can find heaps of sheet music. Nearly all notated music has the chords written above or within the lyrics, and now that you have your chord sheet, you can simply mark in the ukulele chord boxes on the music and play any song you like.

GOOD LUCK

There are lots of good websites out there, as well as plenty of teachers and instructional books. My best advice would be, do what you want, and play what you want. Don't feel that there is a set repertoire to adhere to. If you like a tune, have a go at playing it.

Congratulations on finishing this guide to playing a ukelele. Go have a cup of tea !

Some Common (and not so common) Chords



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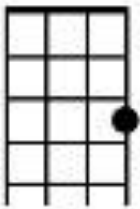
A	A6	A7	Am	Am6	Am7	Adim	A+5aug	Asus4	Am+C	A9
Bb	Bb6	Bb7	Bbm	Bbm6	Bbm7	Bbdim	B+5aug	B7	Bm	B
C	C6	C7	Cm	Cm6	Cm7	Cdim	C+5aug	Cmaj7	Csus4	C+
D	D6	D7	D7alt	Dm	Dm7	Ddim	D+5aug	C#Dim	C5	Cadd9
E	E6	E7	Em	Em6	Em7	Edim	E+5aug	Eb+	E7sus4	Ebdim
F	F6	F7	Fm	Fm6	Fm7	Fdim	F+5aug	F#m	F/C	Eb
G	G6	G7	Gm	Gm6	Gm7	G dim	G+5aug	G7sus2	Gsus4	



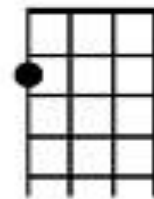
Some popular chords to practice strumming.

Practice makes perfect, and just 10 minutes a day makes all the difference. Mastering these few chords and being able to change continuously will open the door to many many songs.

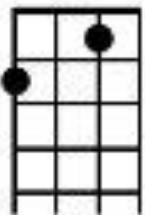
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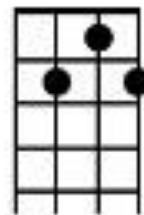
Am



F



G7



Z

