

Ukulele In A Nutshell

The Ukulele

Ukulele is pronounced oo-koo-lay-lay, not you-koo-lay-lay.

The ukulele didn't originate in Hawaii but was based on the Portuguese machete (pronounced ma-CHET) brought to Hawaii by Portuguese immigrants from Madeira Island in the late 1800's.

There are three common ukulele sizes. The smallest is the soprano which is the standard size, followed by the concert and tenor which are larger. The soprano has the familiar ukulele sound while the bigger ukuleles with their larger bodies have a fuller sound. Larger ukuleles also have longer necks, more frets, and more space between frets. If you're shopping for an ukulele, try out different sizes to see what feels the most comfortable. Figure 1 shows the major parts of the ukulele.

PARTS OF THE UKULELE

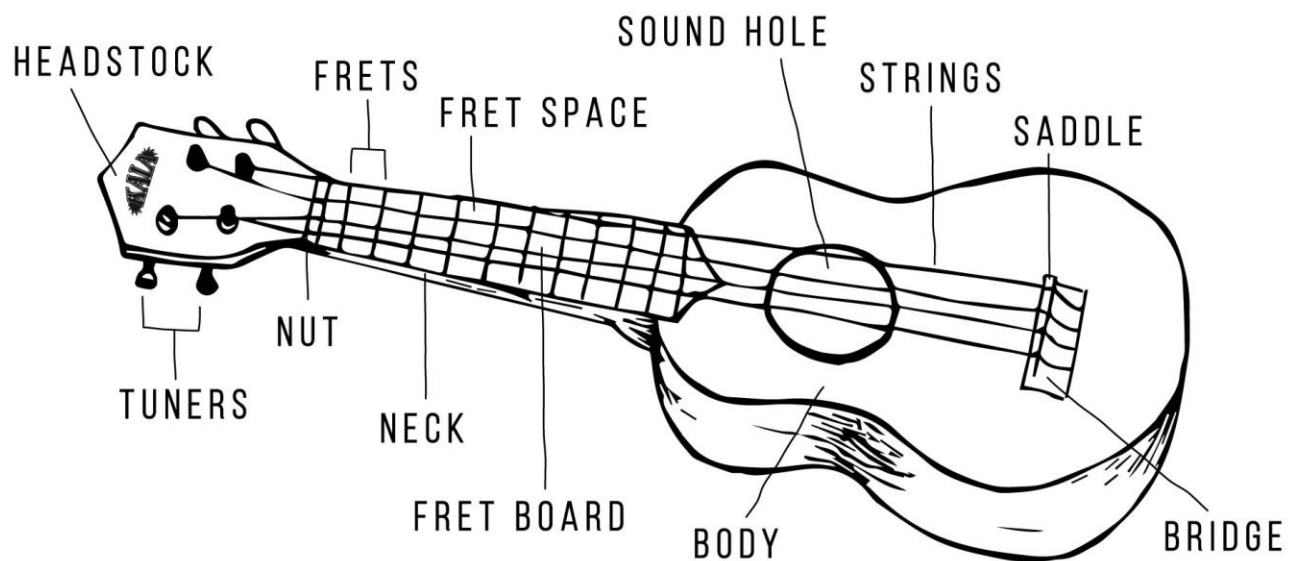


Figure 1 Parts Of The Ukulele

The Basics

Notes

Music is based on a repeating sequence of twelve notes each having a specific pitch. The notes are named after the letters of the alphabet starting with A and ending with G. After G the names repeat starting again with A. The entire series of notes in ascending order from low pitch to high pitch is called the chromatic scale:

A – A#/Bb - B - C – C#/Db - D – D#/Eb - E - F – F#/Gb - G – G#/Ab

The notes with a “#” (sharp) or a “b” (flat) sign (A#/Bb for example) have a dual identity as these notes can be referred to as either a sharp or a flat- same note, two names. Sharp and flat notes are pronounced “A sharp”, “B flat”, etc.

Tuning

Tuning refers to the process of adjusting a string’s tension to produce a specific note. Each string is played without holding it down at a fret, and it’s tightened or loosened until the desired pitch is reached. Playing a string without pressing a fret is known as a string’s open position.

Ukulele strings are numbered 1, 2, 3 and 4 with the first string being closest to the floor. This is easy to remember if you think of the first string as being analogous to a building’s first floor. The notes that we tune to are G, C, E and A, and these correspond to strings 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively (Figure 2.) Memorize these notes and string numbers! G-C-E-A tuning is known as re-entrant tuning since the lowest note we can play (C) is on the third string and not on the fourth. Re-entrant tuning gives the ukulele a unique sound.

An electronic tuner is commonly used to indicate when a string is in tune. Smartphone users can download the free Fender tuning app that serves the same function as an electronic tuner.

Electronic tuners are handy but you might still need to know the chromatic scale. For example, if you’re tuning the fourth string to G and the tuner reads F#, do you tighten the string or loosen it? F# is below G in the chromatic scale so you would tighten it to raise the pitch to G. If you have new strings, expect to tune frequently as strings will stretch until they stabilize.

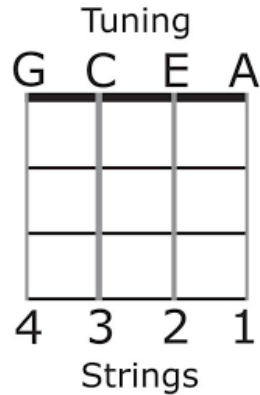


Figure 2 String Numbers And Tuning

Chords

Playing a single string produces a single note. A chord is a combination of three or more notes played together. There are many chord types, but the more common ones (using the C chord as an example) are:

Major (C major and written as C, Cmaj, or CM)

Minor (C minor and written as Cm or Cmin)

Major/Minor Dominant 7th (C seven or C minor seven and written as C7 or Cm7)

Major 7th (C major seven and written as Cmaj7 or CM7)

Diminished (C diminished and written as Cdim or C^o)

Augmented (C augmented and written as C^{aug} or C⁺)

You'll encounter the C, F and G7 chords frequently.

Chord Diagrams

Chords are typically shown on a chord diagram which represents a small section of the ukulele fretboard (Figure 3.) The diagram indicates which combination of strings and frets form that chord. The vertical lines on the diagram represent strings. The top horizontal line is the nut (also called the zero fret), and the other horizontal lines represent frets with the first fret being adjacent to the nut. A number next to a fret indicates that the diagram starts at that fret number and not at the nut. The diagram dots show where fingers are placed and may include suggested finger numbers (Figure 4.) If a chord is difficult to play with the suggested fingering, try using different fingers. An "x" above any vertical line means that the string is not played, and a circle

above a vertical line means that the string is played in the open position. A chord chart is a collection of chord diagrams. There are many online chord charts such as the one at <https://ukulelehelper.com>.

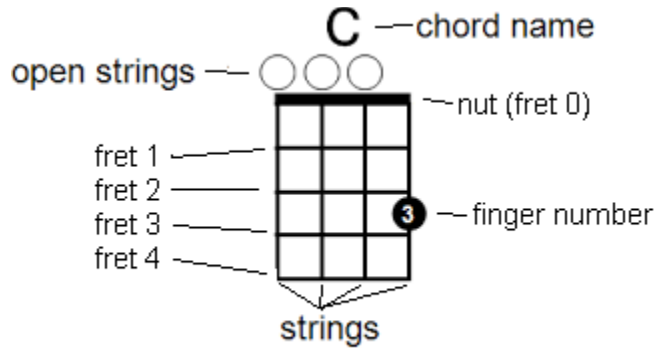


Figure 3 Chord Diagram



Figure 4 Left Hand Finger Numbers

Some chords require that a finger press on more than one string and these are called barre chords. D7 (Figure 5) is a typical barre chord, and the first finger covers all four strings on the second fret and not just strings 2, 3 and 4.

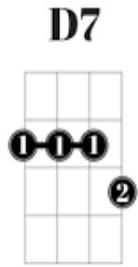


Figure 5 D7 Chord Diagram

Chord Diagram Alternative

An alternative system can be used to describe chords. It uses a row of four numbers, and each number represents a fret number. The left number corresponds to the fourth (G) string, and the right number corresponds to the first (A) string. A zero is an open string. Using this system, C is 0003, F is 2010, and G7 is 0212.

Playing a Chord

The left hand holds the ukulele neck and holds the strings down while the right hand strums or plucks the strings (Figure 6.)



Figure 6 Holding The Ukulele

The thumb is positioned behind the ukulele neck, and the remaining fingers press on the strings

in the fret spaces and as close to the frets as practical, not directly on the frets. Playing close to the frets is usually not a concern with soprano and concert ukuleles as their fret spaces are small. A buzzing or muffled sound when playing a chord indicates that a string is not being held firmly enough against the fretboard or that a finger is positioned too far away from a fret. A finger might also be touching an adjacent string. Play each string of the chord individually to identify the problem and adjust your finger and/or wrist position accordingly. Keep your left-hand fingers bent to avoid touching adjacent strings (Figure 7.) Having short left-hand fingernails also helps. Start with a one-finger chord like C and then try the F and G7. Barre chords like D7 and Bb are more challenging to play. Sometimes it's due to a lack of finger strength so try squeezing a ball with your left hand.

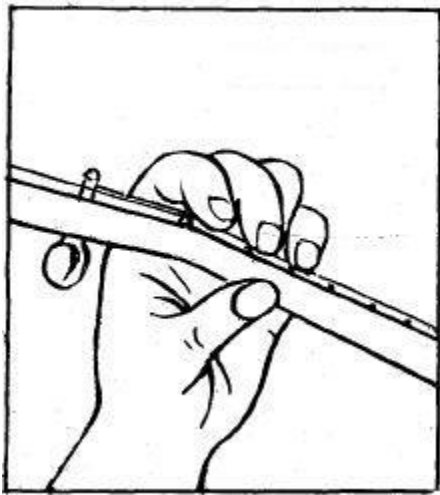


Figure 7 Keep Your Fingers Bent

Strumming

The strumming motion comes mainly from wrist rotation (imagine turning a doorknob) and not so much from moving your hand and forearm up and down. Keep your hand, wrist and forearm relaxed. Strings are strummed in the downward and upward directions and you can use any fingers you're comfortable with. Fingers should brush over the strings fast enough so that they all sound as one.

The strings are strummed in the approximate location where the neck meets the body and not directly over the sound hole. Learn to strum by tapping your foot at a steady beat while strumming only in the downward direction as your foot is moving down (the downbeat.) Pick an easy-to-play chord, start strumming slowly, and concentrate on maintaining good form. When your downward strums are uniform and in time with your foot, add an upward strum when your foot is moving upward (the upbeat) so that you're strumming in both directions. Practice your chord changes at the same time by strumming four beats of the C chord, four of F, four of G7, and four of C. When you're comfortable playing this basic chord pattern, mix things up and/or

add new chords until you're proficient moving between chords.

Don't attempt to strum faster until your strums are consistent. Strum along with a metronome if you have one. Smartphone users can download the free metronome app from Soundbrenner.

Putting It All Together

Now that you've learned how to read chord diagrams and can strum a few chords, you're ready to play songs. Every song has a tempo which dictates how fast it's played. Tempo is measured in beats per minute, and maintaining a steady tempo is one of the most important things to master. Get in the habit of tapping your foot to the beat to help you maintain a steady tempo.

Playing in a group is more challenging than playing alone because you have to be in synch with others. A leader starts the song and sets the tempo before the other players join in. Always be aware of the leader's tempo and ensure that yours matches.

Final Thoughts

The ukulele might be easier to learn than some other instruments, but the learning curve can still be relatively steep when you're starting out. Play as much as you can. Playing ten minutes a day is better than playing for an hour once a week.

Focus on good form and consistency and not speed.

When learning to strum, resist any urge to imitate the strumming patterns of your favorite songs. Spend that time practicing basic technique instead.

Have fun!