



YOUR FIRST

UKULELE LESSON

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO PLAYING UKULELE

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SO, YOU WANT TO LEARN HOW
TO PLAY A UKULELE?

Welcome! The first thing to notice is all the encouraging, happy people around you, cheering you on and helping you out. The ukulele is a social instrument, a song machine that magnetically draws people together to enjoy themselves. Be warned: The ukulele spirit is highly contagious. As soon as you master your first chords, strums, and songs you may find that you, too, are moved to share it with a friend.



A SIDE NOTE ON HANDS AND “HANDEDNESS”

Both hands have much work to do! One is the chording hand, holding down strings, while the other hand is the strumming or “speaking” hand. Most people, even some lefties, will strum with their right hands and chord with their left. But some lefties find expressing rhythm challenging with their non-dominant hand. They have two choices: to flip it around, play upside-down-backwards, and devise their own chord shapes, or to restring their instrument. Restringing is simple and can liberate a lefty from debilitating frustration. For our purposes, I may refer to the strumming hand as the right hand and the chording hand as the left. Also, chord diagrams are always drawn in the standard right-handed fashion. If you are a lefty who has restrung, you probably know what to do—flip all diagrams and instructions to make them left-centric.

All players will find things are much easier when the nails of the chording hand are cut very short. The strumming hand can have longer nails, as they can serve as picks—or plectrums as they are known in British countries.

HOLDING THE UKE

Start your musical journey on good footing and learn to hold your ukulele. In the Suzuki violin method, an enormous amount of time is spent learning the proper way to hold the instrument and bow. Kids begin with a box and a stick until the teacher knows they are ready for the real thing. Uke is much more forgiving, but it’s important to strive for good technique right from the start. A little mindfulness at first means you won’t have to unlearn bad habits later and may keep you from straining your tendons.

Standing or sitting, the instrument should be held close against your body. Many people use a strap to keep their instrument in an optimum position, but others prefer not to. Without a strap, the right forearm secures the instrument against the chest. For now, let your left hand hold the neck where it reaches the headstock, loosely. If you’re sitting, choose a chair without arms. Slumping back will make things harder, so until you are a confident player, sit up at the edge of your seat. Try crossing your right leg over your left and let it rest gently against your thigh. Allow your shoulders to relax. Don’t forget to breathe!

THUMB STRUM AND YOUR FIRST CHORD

The strings are numbered 4-3-2-1 from top to bottom. Gently stroke the strings with the pad of your thumb, one at a time. Anywhere you are comfortable strumming is fine, but the sweet spot is right in the area where the neck meets the body. Sing along with the numbers of the strings (4-3-2-1) and the pitches (G C E A). Now, play them again while saying the words to the classic melody associated with ukulele tuning, “My Dog Has Fleas!”

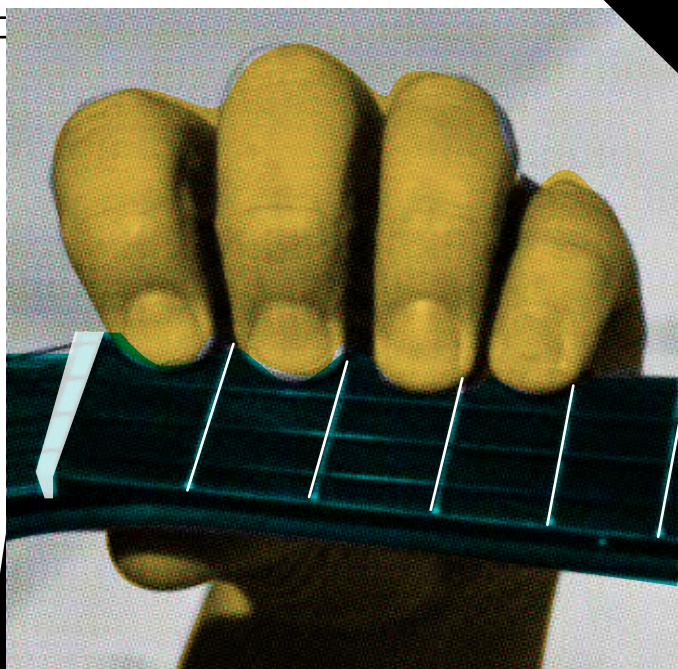
It’s a nice, soft sound. Now strum all four strings together while you count a steady rhythm: 1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4.... Sing the song “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” along with your strum. (Hint: if you’re having a tough time finding the first note, it is C. Pluck the third string to help get you started. Remember to count your strings upward from the bottom!) Over time, your strum will develop to use other fingers and patterns, but steady, rhythmic down strokes are the foundation.

When you play all the open strings together, the notes you strum make a chord called C6. The C6 chord is comprised of the notes G C E A. Sound familiar? Those are the notes we tune our ukuleles to! It’s called “C tuning” and is the most common way to tune a ukulele. (You may find old books that ask you to tune lower, to B₁ tuning, and in Canada, many people tune higher, to D. The music you find online and in contemporary books will invariably call for C tuning.) This chord is made up of all “open” strings, that is, there is no chording going on with the left hand.



Watch the video portion of Your First Ukulele Lesson at UkuleleMag.com





Place your fingers between the frets, with a gentle arch to each finger, with your thumb on the back of the neck, opposite your index finger.

THE CHORDING HAND AND THE C7 CHORD

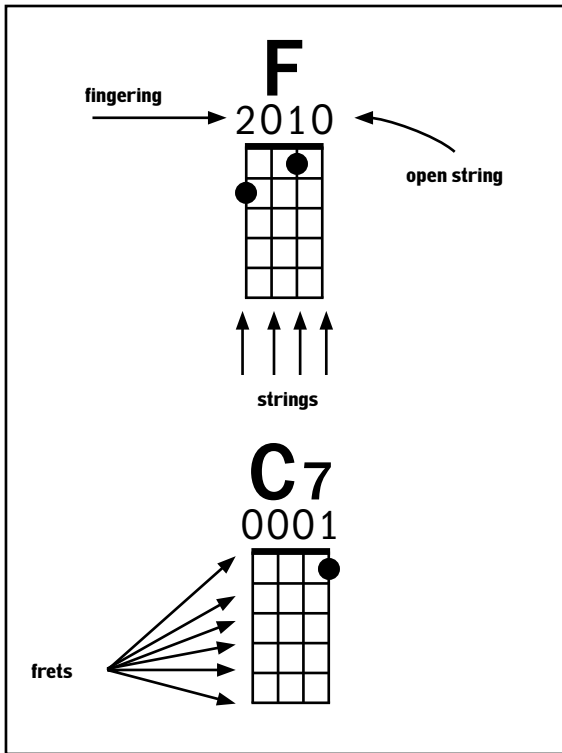
Pretend you have a sock puppet on your hand and you are making it talk. Most likely your wrist is straight, and your four fingers are in a line, tapping on your thumb. Make that puppet look at you. That's a great start for how your left hand should be aligned on the instrument.

Now, bring your hand around under the headstock and put the neck of your instrument in the puppet's mouth, and locate the first string (that's the one closest to the floor, the A string). Place the tips of your fingers in between the frets, with your index finger on fret 1, middle finger on 2, ring finger on 3, pinkie on 4. Let your fingers curve gently. Your thumb should be lined up with the index finger on the back of the neck, and your wrist should still be unbent. Remove all but your index finger. It should be on the first string, first fret. If you could make the instrument disappear, your hand would look like an "OK" sign, with the fingers gently curved, thumb touching index finger, wrist still straight. Now strum the strings. Congratulations, you are forming a C7 chord—now you can accompany yourself while you sing a one-chord song, like "Old Joe Clark." (You can hear and learn this old favorite in the related video content.)



HOW TO PLAY THE C7 CHORD





READING CHORD DIAGRAMS

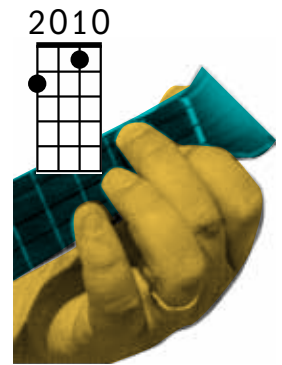
Chord shapes will become second nature after lots of practice, but until then, chord diagrams are handy reminders of how to finger a chord. The dark horizontal line on top represents the nut of the ukulele, and the four vertical lines are the strings, from left to right: 4 3 2 1. The thin horizontal lines are the frets. If you laid your instrument vertically next to a chord diagram they would correspond. The dots represent your finger on the string, and sometimes have a number inside to instruct your finger choice. Look at the C7 and F diagrams above and finger those chords.

Many times, familiar songs are written out “campfire style,” with chord names or diagrams above the lyrics. The chords should appear directly above the syllable where they change. “Happy Birthday to You” is the epitome of a song everyone knows, and a perfect song to play with your first two chords. Bring your uke to the next birthday party you are invited to and try it out. You may witness a miracle—everyone singing together in the same key!

The starting pitch is C. Find your note on the third string and sing the beginning of the song to yourself before you start. The rhythm of this song is 1–2–3, 1–2–3. Strum that rhythm, holding down a C7 chord and counting to get a feel for it, and then begin singing “Happy...” on the third beat. When you get to “Birth...” switch to F, and so forth. It may be hesitant at first, but the goal is to keep a steady rhythm while strumming and singing and changing chords. Play and sing along with this song and check out the video at UkuleleMag.com.

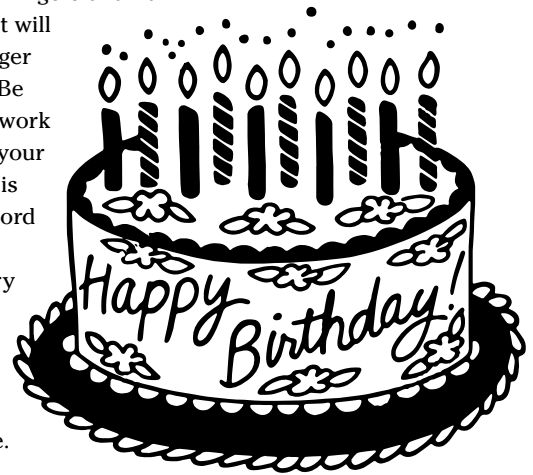
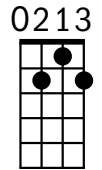
THE F CHORD

The fingers of the fretting hand are numbered 1–4, index through pinky, but for clarity, we will call them by name. When you are playing your C7 chord, the index finger is on the first string, first fret. Shift that fingertip up one string so it is now on the second string, first fret. Now take your middle finger and put its tip on the fourth (the top) string, second fret. That’s an F chord. Give it a strum. Make sure you are on your fingertips; if your fingers are touching other strings the chord won’t ring clearly. While you are exploring, keep an eye on your wrist and thumb. Keep them relaxed and in proper position. Now is the time to develop great habits. Experiment with changing between F and C7. You will notice that the middle finger lifts off, and the index can easily shift down to the first string. Create a map between them in your mind and find an economy of movement. Once you feel fluid, strum four slow, even beats on each chord, anticipating when you are about to change. Once that is successful, speed up or reduce the number of beats.



LEARN THE G7 CHORD

Position your fingers for an F chord (as always, check that rascally thumb!). To switch from F to G7, the index finger stays anchored on the 2nd string. The middle stays on the second fret but drops to the 3rd string. Now add the ring finger on to the first string, second fret. Being on your fingertips and proper thumb position will make this snug position possible. Notice that this chord shape looks like a triangle pointing towards the nut. Give a strum and adjust your fingers until it rings clear. Sometimes it will take a while to build finger strength and dexterity. Be kind to yourself as you work and know that training your body is a process. This is the most demanding chord in this lesson, so pat yourself on the back! Try switching from F to G7 in the manner you learned the transition from F to C7, and then work the G7 to C7 move.



C7 F C7 F

1.2... Happy Birthday to you Happy Birthday to you!

C7 F C7 F

Happy birthday UKULELE! Happy birthday to you!



PRACTICE WITH A SONG

Practicing is so much more fun when you are strumming a song, so let's play. F, G7, and C7, in that order, are the chords you need to play and sing "99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall." By the time you get to the last bottle you will be an expert on your chord changes (and perhaps tipsy). Another fun song to sing and play is a traditional song from Hawaii with the same progression, "Popoki Make a Cat," which comes with an extra bonus: a Hawaiian language lesson! If you don't yet read notes, you can learn by ear with the video.

F
2010

G7
0213

1. C - A - T po - po - ki make a cat, R - A - T 'i - o - le make a rat,
2.-4. See additional lyrics.

C7
0001

F
2010

play four times

M - O - N - K - E - Y ke ke - ko make a mon - key nō kē - i - a.

2. D-O-G 'ilio make a dog
P-I-G pua'a make a pig
D-O-N-K-E-Y kekake make a donkey nō kēia
3. G-I-R-L kaikamahine
B-O-Y keiki kane
O-L-D-M-A-M 'elemakule make an old man
4. Ha'ina 'ia maia na ka puana la
My country 'tis of Hawai'i nei
H-A-W-A double I spells Hawai'i

HOME BASE: THE C MAJOR CHORD

You have learned C6 and C7 chords, now let's learn a C major chord. Make your sock puppet hand, and again position it on your ukulele, thumb on the back of the neck, and all four fingers on the first string. Release all but the thumb and ring finger, which ought to be on the third fret. Strum! C major is a chord you will be playing *a lot of*. Because our instruments are tuned in C tuning, the C chord is like home base.

You can hear that a C major sounds different from the C7 and C6 chords. Without diving into music theory, an explanation: The "C" in the chord name tells us that these are all chords based on the note C. The number or word after the "C" tells us what *flavor*, or qualities they have, like a musical adjective. Major chords, because they are the most frequently used, and have a neutral "flavor" are usually written without an adjective, that is, we simply say "C" for C major.

C
0003

MAKE MUSIC

Using the chords in our starter pack, you can play thousands of songs. Really! Ask friends in your new-found ukulele community for their favorites, or search for your own online. You are hooked! Spread the joy and share this lesson with someone you love. Check out the videos from this lesson on UkuleleMag.com and play along, because music is always more fun when you play with friends!

