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Ukulele Workshop

So you want to play the ukulele? Congratulations. Good choice, what a great little instrument, so light, so transportable, so easy to play. And very popular too. If coming from playing the guitar the ukulele is easy-peasy, it's a delight. But if you are new to music persevere, hang in there, you will pick it up quickly on the uke, your efforts will be rewarded in no time. These notes are directed at the beginner to music so some paragraphs may be old hat if you have had previous music experience.

Because you will quickly come to love your little uke it is worthwhile getting a reasonable one to start the affair off on the right foot. There's a lot of cheapies around but, even if just starting out, try to purchase a half-decent one first because you will quickly get sick of the limitations of the cheapy, whereas you will make quick progress with a reasonable instrument and will keep it much longer. A good instrument will sound better, be more pleasing to play, and stay in tune longer. A good music store will have a range of instruments you can compare. You can spend \$300, \$500, \$800 on a ukulele, but \$70 - \$100 is where reasonable ukes come in. If you can only afford a cheap one then try for one actually made of wood, not painted MDF or some other stuff.

Once you have your uke you need a couple of other things to get going. Ukes need to be tuned often so an electronic tuner is essential, one that clips on the top of the neck, not those things you rest on your knee and keep falling off all the time. They are about \$20. Another must-have is a neck strap or cord to support it, especially when standing to play. A case to store and transport your little baby in is a good investment too. A cheap and easy enhancement you can consider down the track is a piezo pickup which will allow you to amplify your uke. They are less than \$10 on Ebay. A uke capo could be useful too in the future though not essential to start with. A capo will allow you to raise the pitch of a song to a more comfortable range for your voice while still playing the same written (perhaps easier) chords. Then there are two other things you will need - a repertoire of good songs to sing, and a voice to sing them with. Obviously. Hmmm, you should have the latter already. Because the ukulele is so popular there are many good sites on the net where you can find all sorts of material. Start here at Richard G's site: www.scorpex.net/uke

A ukulele is essentially an accompanying instrument, its lack of bass strings and elementary chord possibilities give it an adequate but limited sound. Yes, there are virtuoso ukulele players around who can finger-pick beautifully and use the uke for superb instrumental playing. But to the beginner the uke is mostly an instrument that provides a rhythmic and harmonic continuum to sing against. It also sets the pitch of your song. So, really, the voice is the primary instrument, the uke just helps your song sound a whole lot better. The uke is one half of a partnership, the other half is you and how well you present your songs. Build a repertoire of good songs that suit your voice, and find a good key to sing them in. The key a song is written in may not be the best key for you to do it in. A capo may be handy here.

The ukulele will make your songs sound much better and will be a key that opens a door to a world of new friends, lots of fun and ... well... you never know what. It is a great way learn about chord progressions, dynamics and rhythm. Accompanying on the ukulele is all about enhancing your splendid voice as you broadcast your songs to the world.

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Ukes are all about strummin' chords, so here's a few words about the chords you will most likely come across in any basic folk or rock or country or popular song.

First, an explanation of terminology which may be a little confusing for the raw beginner to music. The term '**C**' could mean one of three things, firstly the actual '**note of C**', which is a sound at a particular frequency and then its octaves. Secondly the '**key of C**' which is a pattern of 8 notes that start and end on the 'note of C', that's the Doh Re Me Fa So La Ti Doh' thing. Going from low Doh to high Doh is called an octave, there's 7 notes, or 8 if you count the second Doh. Third, however, the '**chord of C**' is the name given to a set of three notes, the lowest being the 'note of C', that when played together sound harmonious and give a colour or quality to the particular part in a tune that you happen to be at. For the uke player it is the name of a pattern you make with your fingers on the fretboard to produce those three notes that make up the 'chord of C'. With only four strings on a uke you will get no more than four-note chords, whereas a guitar can make nice rich chords of up to six notes (some notes are repeated of course). You will pick these patterns up pretty quickly. These definitions could also apply to any of the other notes as well such as the '**note of D**', or the '**key of F**', or the '**chord of A**', so I will try to use the prefixes. To summarise a **note is a sound at a particular frequency**, a **key is a horizontal scale** or series of notes used to make a melody with, and a **chord is a vertical stacking of several notes that sound harmonious together**. Got all that?

Have you heard the term 'the three chord trick'? This means that for many, many songs you can usually get by with just three simple chords (sometimes even less). It is sometimes called the 1, 4, 5, 1 progression. It means the most common chord will be the one based on the first degree of the key you are singing in, if you want to get technical it is called the **tonic** or root chord. The next two most common chords will be those based on the 4th degree in the key, called the **sub dominant**, and the one based on the fifth degree, the **dominant**. So a basic progression of chords will be from the 1 to 4 to 5 and back to the 1 to finish or resolve with, and not necessarily in that order. A good exercise is to practice strumming this 1 4 5 1 pattern in various keys as these three chords will be the foundation of many of your songs. The '1 chord' will also be the name of 'the key' you are in.

Usually the dominant chord, that's the fifth one, has an extra note added to it, called the 7th, so the chord will be called a **dominant seventh**. It is a little more unsettled than the plain old dominant and seems to say 'take me back to the tonic, I want to go home'.

A couple of other chords you could find in a basic song are the ones built on the 6th degree, and the 2nd degree. These are both moody minor chords, which add extra colour to a tune. There's many others chord types too but this will do to start with.

Putting all this together I will make a rather broad statement by saying that if your song was in the key of C then the most common chords found will probably be the 'chord of C', the 'chord of F', and the 'chord of G7'. You may also find the 'chords of Am and Dm' too.

A song of course can be pitched higher or lower than 'the key of C' or the one shown in your song-book. Depending on the range of your voice you may prefer it to be in 'the key of D' rather than in 'the key of C', so the most common chords found in 'the key of D' will be 'the chords of D, G, A7, Bm and Em'. Or if in 'the key of G' they will be 'the chords of G, C, D7, Em and Am'. And so on. This is for the familiar Western Major Scale system, there

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are many other scale systems around, including the Western Minor Scale system. Let's not get too technical at this stage, there's the rest of your life to find all about these mysteries.

Playing the chords for 'the key of C' tends to be easy on the uke, that is 'the chords C, F and G or G7'. 'The key of F' is pretty easy too, just two new ones to learn, Bb and C7. What about 'the key of G'? These will be 'the chords of G, C and D7'. And so on for all the other keys.

Let's get into the fun part, what the ukulele is all about. First we need to tune it. The most common tuning of a uke is G, C, E, A, that is uppermost string to lowest. Assuming you are right handed and the neck is pointing stage-left the top-most string is 'the note of G', the next down is 'the note of C', then E, then the bottom string is 'the note of A'. A bit odd actually, because the top string sounds higher than the next one down. Actually the top G string is really an octave high, because if it was tuned down to 'the lower note G' it would be too floppy and would not sound very loud at all. Some people do tune their top-most string to low G but they will probably use a thicker string with more tension on it. Check the tuning often, it can easily vary with temperature.

The attached chord charts show lots of chords but you only need to know a few to start with, so just learn the ones for a particular song. Songs can be transcribed to another key if too high or low for your voice, or you can also use a capo. You will be well on the way with the following summary which shows the 1, 4, 5 chords in four popular keys, with the minors shown as well.

Key of C -	C	F	G7	Am	Dm
Key of F -	F	Bb	C7	Dm	Gm
Key of D -	D	G	A7	Bm	Em
Key of G -	G	C	D7	Em	Am

See how the same chord gets used again in other keys? That's recycling, it's actually good for the planet! There are also various ways to play the same chord, you can make any chord further up the neck using different fingering patterns (or positions).

Enough on chords, now for the rhythm bit. Rhythm is the driving force that propels a song along and it is possible to add some pretty impressive strumming patterns to your music. But at the early beginning stage concentrate on finding a steady strum pattern for your song. You can use your forefinger, your thumb, the four finger tops on the right hand (claw hammer style), plucking using thumb and fingers (classical guitar style), a felt or guitar plectrum, even banjo plectrums when you are ready to advance to plucking arpeggios. Practice adding subtle emphasis and rhythmic variations.

Following is a selection of songs we will try out in this workshop, starting with simple ones and progressing to more challenging ones. Be sure to try the more complex songs and different chords so you can progress in your musical journey, then you will discover a treasure trove of beautiful and exotic and mysterious and moody and sublime and exquisite and ... well all sorts of interesting stuff. May the ukulele introduce you to the wonderful world of music. Anyway have fun in whatever you do.

Got a question? I'll try to answer it. Don Fraser donfraseris@gmail.com

Ladies and gentlemen, introducing... the Ukulele

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|----|----------------------------|----|--|
| 8 | Rock My Soul | C | Some easy songs in various keys to get acquainted with keys, chords, strums and the 1 4 5 progression |
| 8 | Que Sera Sera | C | |
| 9 | Pokarekare Ana | C | |
| 10 | Iko Iko | F | |
| 11 | I'll Fly Away | F | |
| 12 | Strangest Dream | D | |
| 13 | The Sloop John B | D | |
| 14 | My Walking Cane | G | |
| 15 | Coconut Island | G | |
| 16 | Pick A Bale Of Cotton | | guess the chord changes |
| 17 | Irene Goodnight | C | Accompanying a melodic instrument on dance tunes
a waltz, a polka, and a schottische |
| 17 | Shepherd's Hey | G | |
| 18 | Brian Venten's | C | |
| 18 | Angel Band, D, E, F, and G | | Find the right pitch or key for your voice |
| 20 | Blue Moon | C | Two showpiece jazz style songs
uses two versions of the D chord |
| 21 | Blue Bayou | D | |
| 22 | Five Foot Two | C | Some ragtime songs with a 1 6 2 5 progression |
| 23 | Lulu's Back In Town | C | |
| 24 | Wimowey | G | Continuum and melody |
| 25 | You Are My Sunshine | C | |
| 26 | Teddy Bear's Picnic | Am | A classic minor key song, looks tricky but uses easy alternating chords |

The ukulele is possibly the most benign use yet found for a lump of wood