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**Alistair Wood**

Founder of [ukulelehunt.com](http://ukulelehunt.com)





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**by Alistair Wood**

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**Ukulele For Dummies® 2nd Edition**

Published by: **John Wiley & Sons, Ltd**, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, [www.wiley.com](http://www.wiley.com)

This edition first published 2015. First edition published 2011.

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John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-119-13597-5 (paperback); ISBN 978-1-119-13598-2 (ebk);

ISBN 978-1-119-13599-9 (ebk)

Printed in Great Britain by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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# Introduction

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I'd like to share with you the best piece of ukulele playing advice I ever read: 'make a joyful noise . . . make a loud noise.' The aim of this book is to help you do both these two things. (In fact, the quote comes from the Bible (Psalms 98:4, King James Version), which I think proves beyond doubt that God plays ukulele.)

Most people who pick up the ukulele don't do so with dreams of rock-star fame or recognition as a virtuoso, but simply to have fun making music. This book doesn't go deep into the theory or insist on you practising endless scales. Instead, you get the confidence and knowledge you need to start enjoying making music as quickly, joyfully, and loudly as possible.

## About This Book

You don't have to read *Ukulele For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, dutifully from cover to cover. Think of it more as a reference that allows you to dip in and find the help you need at the time and focus on the parts that interest you most. So if you don't have a ukulele yet, you can skip straight to the buying information in Chapter 18. Or jump to Part IV if you want to start with the musical genre that gets you most excited.

To take full advantage of the book, use all the following methods:

- ✓ **Read the charts.** Songs in this book are presented in chord charts, which are a simplified way of presenting music that's much more immediate than standard musical notation. The charts indicate how to play the chords in the song and the strumming rhythm.
- ✓ **Copy the photos.** The position of your hands and fingers is really important for getting a good sound from your uke. The photos give you a better idea of what your fingers need to look like than just using the chord charts.
- ✓ **Listen to the audio tracks.** Grasping what something should sound like from the written word alone is difficult, and so I include audio tracks to demonstrate the examples. I recommend listening to each exercise a few times before trying it yourself. Head to [www.dummies.com/go/ukuleleuk2e](http://www.dummies.com/go/ukuleleuk2e).

- ✔ **Watch the videos.** Find helpful videos at [www.dummies.com/go/ukuleleuk2e](http://www.dummies.com/go/ukuleleuk2e) — from how to hold your uke to alternate picking, I hope you find these free videos really useful.

## Foolish Assumptions

The only large assumption I make is that you're using a standard tuned ukulele (soprano, concert, or tenor) rather than a baritone ukulele. The baritone ukulele is a very different instrument.

I don't assume that you have any knowledge of the ukulele or of playing music in general. I don't assume you're able to read music. You'll see some standard music notation in the early part of the book. This is just to show where the melody of the tune fits against the chords. You're not expected to play it until a bit later.

## Icons Used in This Book

This book uses the following icons to call your attention to information that you may find helpful in particular ways.



The information marked by this icon is important and worth remembering. This icon allows you to spot the info easily when you refer back to a chapter later.



This icon indicates extra-helpful information that can save you time or make something easier.



This icon marks places where technical matters are discussed. You can skip over this more technical material if you prefer because the book is designed to let you do so without missing out on anything essential.



Paragraphs marked with this icon call attention to common pitfalls that you may encounter or prepare you for techniques that may turn out to be difficult to master.



This icon indicates an audio track that demonstrates an exercise or tune.

## Beyond the Book

In addition to the content in the print or e-book you're reading right now, this book also comes with some access-anywhere goodies on the web. Check out the free Cheat Sheet at [www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/ukuleleuk](http://www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/ukuleleuk). Most importantly, you can find the audio and video tracks at [www.dummies.com/go/ukuleleuk2e](http://www.dummies.com/go/ukuleleuk2e). Find free bonus articles at [www.dummies.com/extras/ukuleleuk](http://www.dummies.com/extras/ukuleleuk).

The appendixes gather together loads of useful reference material that you'll be dipping into for many years to come: Appendix A gives you chord charts for the most commonly used chords on the ukulele; Appendix B is an introduction to reading music in standard notation; and Appendix C provides you with a guide to the audio tracks that accompany the book.

## Where to Go from Here

As with all *For Dummies* books, the chapters in *Ukulele For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, are written to be as self-contained as possible. In this way, you can devise and follow your own personal course through the book depending on your interests and skill level.

To help you plot your journey, here are a few pointers:

- ✔ If you don't have a ukulele yet, jump straight to Chapter 18 before you prise open your wallet. The sections contain lots of advice to ensure that you don't waste your cash.
- ✔ If you're a beginner eager to get playing, head to Chapter 2 to tune up your uke.
- ✔ If you're the proud owner of a shiny new uke, check out Chapter 20 for how to keep it in tiptop playing condition.
- ✔ If you're a little more advanced and are comfortable with chords, go straight to the single-note playing chapters in Part III.



## Part I

# Getting Started with the Ukulele

getting started  
with the

Ukulele



*For Dummies* can help you get started with lots of subjects. Visit [www.dummies.com](http://www.dummies.com) to learn more and do more with *For Dummies*.

## ***In this part . . .***

- ✓ Kick-start your ukulele playing with all the background information you need.
- ✓ Get to grips with ukulele terms and lingo.
- ✓ Tune up your uke.
- ✓ Know how to position your hands to be ready to play.



# Chapter 1

## Exploring the Ukulele

---

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Appreciating the advantages of the ukulele
  - ▶ Looking at different sizes
  - ▶ Getting to know the ukulele
  - ▶ Discovering what you can play on the uke
- 

**U**kulele virtuoso Jake Shimabukuro says something that makes a lot of sense to many ukulele players: ‘One of the things I love about being a ukulele player is that no matter where I go in the world to play, the audience has such low expectations.’ And it’s very true. Many people think of the ukulele as a toy and are unaware of the great music that can be made with it. People are often stunned that you can make real music on a ukulele at all. But the uke is very much a real instrument with a rich musical history, and it’s quite capable of producing everything from light melodies to riotous strumming.

This chapter fills you in on why the uke’s such a fantastic instrument, describes some of the global musical styles you can expect to play on it, and, I hope, inspires you to make some great music with your new best friend!

### *Understanding the Uke’s Advantages*

Why would you want to play ukulele when you could play another exotic instrument such as a saz, shenai, or sackbut? Well, as this section reveals, you can get certain things from a uke that other instruments simply can’t supply.

#### *Loving the sound*

The best reason for picking up the ukulele is its captivating, unique sound. Whether it’s a lilting Hawaiian song or some riotous jazzy strumming, no other instrument sounds quite like the uke.



The unusual arrangement of the strings gives you close harmony chords and harp-like tones that simply aren't available on most fretted instruments.

## *Joining a vibrant community*

A special community surrounds ukulele players, one that you rarely get with other instruments. You'd struggle to find a group of bass guitar players getting together to form a bass guitar orchestra, but all over the globe groups of uke players regularly get together to uke-out on a few tunes.

Don't worry about being too old or too young for joining the ukulele community. Most ukulele groups have members ranging in age from teenagers up to pensioners as well as a good gender balance. Most groups welcome beginners and some larger ones have a specific group for people just starting on the uke. No matter who you are, you'll get a warm welcome.



If you're looking to get involved in the ukulele social scene, check out Chapter 22.

## *Appreciating the uke's practicality*

I live in a small flat. There's not enough room to swing a cat (I tested, but Tiddles is just about fine now). So the fact that I play the ukulele rather than the church organ is fortunate. The uke's diminutiveness makes it a favourite instrument among travellers.



And don't forget the price. Ukuleles are relatively cheap and you can get a decent beginner ukulele for under £30, or around \$45. Read Chapter 18 for a full guide to buying a uke, Chapter 19 for stocking up on accessories, and Chapter 20 for maintaining your prized possession.

## *Getting started quickly*

Have you ever heard someone just starting out on the violin? It's not very pleasant (sounds a bit like the noise Tiddles made as he helped me test the size of my flat!). You have to put in a great deal of practice before you can make a musical sound on the violin.



Not so with the ukulele. With a bit of knowledge and a smidge of practice, you can start making a reasonable sound on the uke within a few minutes. Before long – in fact after learning just two chords (C and F, as described in Chapter 4) – you can be playing your first song. This fast-start aspect is very encouraging and a big motivator to keep you practising.

## Origins of the word *ukulele*

*'Ukulele* is a Hawaiian word, and as such it presents some spelling and pronunciation issues for English speakers.

Exactly how the ukulele got its name is lost in the mists of time, but that doesn't mean that people haven't made some interesting guesses. In Hawaiian, *'uku* means flea and *lele* means jumping, and so the most common explanation is that it was called the 'jumping flea' because of the movement of the player's fingers.

Another convincing explanation is that the name developed from a traditional Hawaiian instrument called the *'ukeke*. But my favourite is the suggestion offered by Queen Lili'oukalani, who translated ukulele as 'gift that comes from afar'.

I'd be willing to wager that ukulele is probably the most misspelled musical instrument

in existence. Even the English poet Rupert Brooke – in his poem 'Waikiki' – couldn't manage it and came up with 'eukaleli'.

The widely accepted spelling, and the one used in this book, is ukulele, which is also the spelling in most dictionaries. But the true Hawaiian spelling is *'ukulele* with an 'okina (the apostrophe) at the beginning. Using the anglicised version without the 'okina is perfectly acceptable, but many people like to use it to pay respect to the ukulele's Hawaiian roots.

Similar problems exist with the pronunciation. Most people go with the anglicised *you-ka-LAY-lee*, although the Hawaiian pronunciation is *oo-koo-lay-lay*. Outside of ukulele-playing circles, you're probably best to stick with *you-ka-LAY-lee* so that people know what you're talking about!

### *Enjoying a long-term challenge*

If you spend more than five minutes on the Internet, you're sure to see a gaudy ad saying, 'You can GET RICH/LOSE WEIGHT in only five days with no effort. Just send us £99.' Similarly, you may meet people who tell you that mastering the uke is easy so they can sell you something. Don't believe them.

Although getting started is easy and satisfying, I love the ukulele because it's such a challenge to play really well. The uke simply has so much less to it than most instruments – fewer strings, fewer frets, less volume – that these restrictions force you to be creative with rhythms and harmonies. As a result, you can come up with ideas you'd never have on another instrument.

### *Blending in with other instruments*

If playing with other people is what you enjoy, you'll be pleased to hear that the ukulele works excellently as part of an ensemble. Playing with other fretted instruments like guitars increases the range of notes and adds a different tone to the proceedings, but the range of instruments the ukulele works with is much wider than that. In the 1930s, for example, it was common for people like Johnny Marvin and Ukulele Ike to play a ukulele with orchestral backing. More recently, bands have combined and contrasted the tinkling ukulele

with the gutsy parping of brass to great effect (take a listen to the indie band Beirut or the jazzy Snake Suspenders for how effective this combination is).

### *Getting kids interested*

Youngsters really relate to the ukulele, and with the frets being close together and the strings easy on the fingers, it's a great instrument for them. They can get a strong musical base that transfers well to whatever instrument they want to pick up next.

Rock guitar gods who played the ukulele as children include Jimi Hendrix, Brian May (Queen), Pete Townshend (The Who) and surf-rocker Dick Dale.

## *Sizing Up the Ukulele*

Unlike most instruments in the guitar family, ukuleles come in a number of different sizes. The three regular sizes of ukulele are *soprano*, *concert*, and *tenor*. All three sizes are tuned exactly the same way, however, and so when you've learned to play one, you can play them all!

In addition to these three types, you can also buy a *baritone* ukulele, which is a very different beast: it's larger and tuned differently, lower than the other types (the same as the top four strings of a guitar). Therefore, you have to use a whole different set of chords and notes, and your skills are not transferable to the other three types.



For these reasons, a baritone is not the best ukulele to start on. If you want to learn baritone ukulele, you need a dedicated baritone book because I don't cover it in this one.

## *Meeting the family: Daddy uke, mummy uke, and baby uke*

A ukulele's size is determined by the scale length, which is the length of the part of the string you play (between the nut and the bridge – check out the following section for descriptions of these parts). Here's a rundown:

- ✔ **Soprano:** The soprano is the smallest ukulele, sometimes referred to as standard size. Originally all ukuleles were sopranos and this size is what most people envision when they think about ukuleles. Soprano is a great size to choose for people who want to do a lot of chord strumming and are looking for the traditional ukulele sound.

- ✓ **Concert:** The concert is the Goldilocks ukulele; not too big, not too small. You get the ukulele sound but with a little extra room on the fretboard.
- ✓ **Tenor:** The tenor is the largest of the standard ukuleles, with a longer neck that allows for more intricate playing (or more wild showing off). The larger body can give you a fuller, more guitar-like sound.

## *Deciding which uke is best for you*

Most people find that the soprano is the best place to start. You don't have to stretch to make the chord shapes, sopranos are cheap and easy to find, and they sound great when you strum simple chords on them.

But whether you start on soprano, concert or tenor, you can easily transfer your skills between them with no problem.

Whatever your first instrument, you may well end up with a collection of ukuleles before long. The term for this fascinating 'addiction' is *ukulele acquisition syndrome* (UAS).

## *Taking a Tour: The Anatomy of the Ukulele*

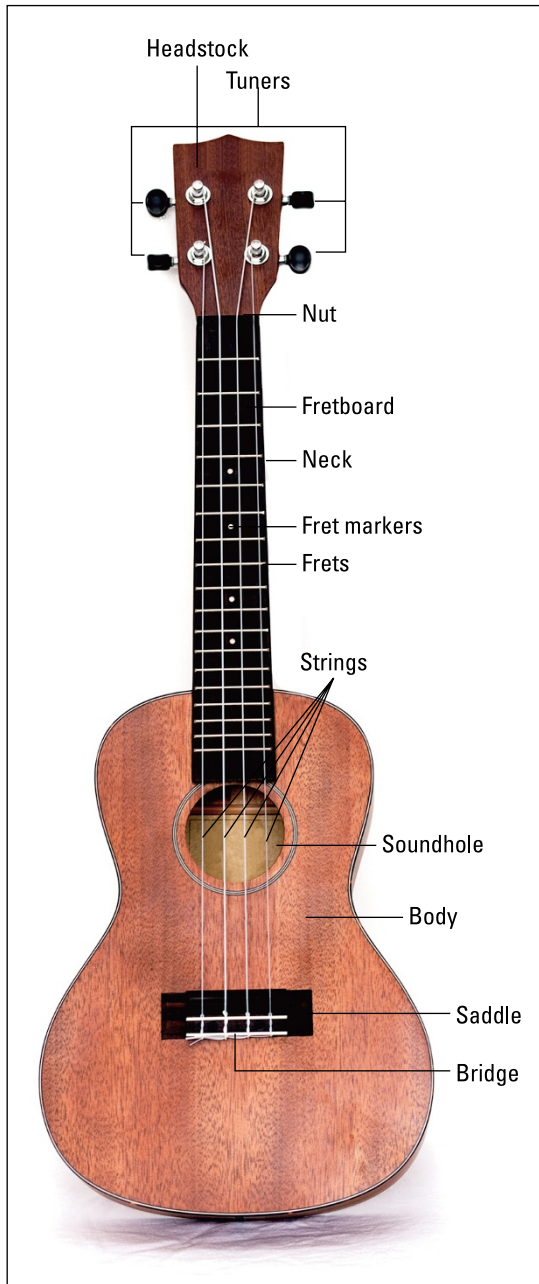
Ukuleles are usually shaped like small guitars, but other shapes are also common (the pineapple shape is popular). The shape of the ukulele doesn't usually make a great deal of difference to the sound, but some shapes, such as the Flying-V, are harder to play.



Avoid buying one of the more whacky ukulele shapes as your first ukulele. Whatever you do, avoid Flying-V shaped ukuleles. I received one of these instruments as a gift, and had a real trial keeping a smile on my face as it poked me in the thigh and forearm.

Other shapes to tread carefully around are triangular ukuleles and cricket bat-shaped electric ukuleles.

Ukuleles share many of their parts with people: for instance, bodies and necks. And I'm lobbying strenuously to get the *mouth* officially renamed the *soundhole*. But until the full alignment of names, Figure 1-1 provides a guide as I take you on a tour of the various parts of the ukulele.



**Figure 1-1:**  
A typical  
ukulele  
with parts  
indicated.