

LEARNING MADE EASY



3rd Edition

# Ukulele

for  
**dummies**<sup>®</sup>  
A Wiley Brand



Get familiar with chords  
and strumming patterns

Select, maintain, and  
tune your ukulele

Explore musical styles like  
jazz, blues, and Hawaiian

**Alistair Wood**

Top ukulele player and teacher,  
owner of [ukulelehunt.com](http://ukulelehunt.com)



# Ukulele

for  
**dummies**<sup>®</sup>  
A Wiley Brand





# Ukulele

3rd Edition

**by Alistair Wood**

for  
**dummies**<sup>®</sup>  
A Wiley Brand

## Ukulele For Dummies®, 3rd Edition

Published by: **John Wiley & Sons, Inc.**, 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030-5774, [www.wiley.com](http://www.wiley.com)

Copyright © 2021 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey

Published simultaneously in Canada

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning or otherwise, except as permitted under Sections 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without the prior written permission of the Publisher. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, (201) 748-6011, fax (201) 748-6008, or online at <http://www.wiley.com/go/permissions>.

Trademarks: Wiley, For Dummies, the Dummies Man logo, Dummies.com, Making Everything Easier, and related trade dress are trademarks or registered trademarks of John Wiley & Sons, Inc., and may not be used without written permission. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

LIMIT OF LIABILITY/DISCLAIMER OF WARRANTY: WHILE THE PUBLISHER AND AUTHOR HAVE USED THEIR BEST EFFORTS IN PREPARING THIS BOOK, THEY MAKE NO REPRESENTATIONS OR WARRANTIES WITH RESPECT TO THE ACCURACY OR COMPLETENESS OF THE CONTENTS OF THIS BOOK AND SPECIFICALLY DISCLAIM ANY IMPLIED WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE. NO WARRANTY MAY BE CREATED OR EXTENDED BY SALES REPRESENTATIVES OR WRITTEN SALES MATERIALS. THE ADVICE AND STRATEGIES CONTAINED HEREIN MAY NOT BE SUITABLE FOR YOUR SITUATION. YOU SHOULD CONSULT WITH A PROFESSIONAL WHERE APPROPRIATE. NEITHER THE PUBLISHER NOR THE AUTHOR SHALL BE LIABLE FOR DAMAGES ARISING HEREFROM.

For general information on our other products and services, please contact our Customer Care Department within the U.S. at 877-762-2974, outside the U.S. at 317-572-3993, or fax 317-572-4002. For technical support, please visit <https://hub.wiley.com/community/support/dummies>.

Wiley publishes in a variety of print and electronic formats and by print-on-demand. Some material included with standard print versions of this book may not be included in e-books or in print-on-demand. If this book refers to media such as a CD or DVD that is not included in the version you purchased, you may download this material at <http://booksupport.wiley.com>. For more information about Wiley products, visit [www.wiley.com](http://www.wiley.com).

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020946174

ISBN 978-1-119-73660-8 (pbk); ISBN 978-1-119-73662-2 (ebk); ISBN 978-1-119-73663-9 (ebk)

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Contents at a Glance

<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Part 1: Getting Started with the Ukulele</b> .....	5
CHAPTER 1: Exploring the Ukulele .....	7
CHAPTER 2: Tuning Up to Sound Great .....	19
CHAPTER 3: Discovering How to Handle Your Ukulele .....	29
<b>Part 2: Starting Out with Chords and Strumming</b> .....	39
CHAPTER 4: Playing Your First Ukulele Chords and Songs .....	41
CHAPTER 5: Drumming Up More Strumming Patterns .....	59
CHAPTER 6: Meeting the Chords and Their Families .....	79
<b>Part 3: Picking and Single-Note Playing</b> .....	99
CHAPTER 7: Coming to Grips with Tabs and Notation .....	101
CHAPTER 8: Discovering Fingerpicking Patterns .....	117
CHAPTER 9: Combining Melodies and Chords When Playing Solo .....	131
CHAPTER 10: Picking Up Some Soloing Techniques .....	141
<b>Part 4: Discovering Genres and Styles</b> .....	157
CHAPTER 11: Rocking Out with Your Uke .....	159
CHAPTER 12: Playing the Blues to Lift Your Spirits .....	167
CHAPTER 13: Saying “Aloha” to the Hawaiian Style .....	185
CHAPTER 14: Jazzing Up Your Uke Playing .....	193
CHAPTER 15: Strumming Up the Jawaiian Style .....	201
CHAPTER 16: Getting Classy: Classical Masterpieces for Ukulele .....	207
CHAPTER 17: Ukuleleing the Holidays .....	217
<b>Part 5: Buying and Looking After Your Ukulele</b> .....	223
CHAPTER 18: Weighing Up Your Options When Buying a Ukulele .....	225
CHAPTER 19: Splashing Out on Essentials and Accessories .....	233
CHAPTER 20: Restringing, Maintaining, and Adjusting Your Uke .....	241
<b>Part 6: The Part of Tens</b> .....	251
CHAPTER 21: Ten Ukulele Players to Know .....	253
CHAPTER 22: Ten Ways to Get Involved in the Ukulele Scene .....	259
CHAPTER 23: Ten (or So) Tips for Improving Your Playing .....	265
CHAPTER 24: Ten Greatest Ukulele Chords .....	271

<b>Part 7: Appendixes</b> .....	279
<b>APPENDIX A:</b> Chord Charts .....	281
<b>APPENDIX B:</b> Reading Standard Musical Notation .....	285
<b>APPENDIX C:</b> Audio Tracks .....	291
<b>Index</b> .....	297



# Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
About This Book .....	1
Foolish Assumptions .....	2
Icons Used in This Book .....	2
Beyond the Book .....	3
Where to Go from Here .....	3
<b>PART 1: GETTING STARTED WITH THE UKULELE</b> .....	5
<b>CHAPTER 1: Exploring the Ukulele</b> .....	7
Understanding the Uke's Advantages .....	7
Loving the sound .....	8
Joining a vibrant community .....	8
Appreciating the uke's practicality .....	8
Sizing Up the Ukulele .....	10
Meeting the family: Daddy uke, mummy uke, and baby uke .....	11
Deciding which uke is best for you .....	11
Taking a Tour: The Anatomy of the Ukulele .....	11
Becoming a Well-Versed Ukulele Player .....	15
Strumming along to hula in Hawaii .....	15
Swinging and picking across the USA .....	16
Rockin' and rollin', and getting down with the blues .....	17
Diversifying into ever more styles .....	17
<b>CHAPTER 2: Tuning Up to Sound Great</b> .....	19
Knowing Some Musical Terms .....	20
Notes as letters .....	20
Half steps and whole steps .....	20
Chords and scales .....	21
Major and minor .....	21
Pitching into Tuning Basics .....	22
Unravelling Tunings for Your Instrument .....	22
Exploring the most common tuning: gCEA .....	23
Using other tunings .....	24
Choosing a Tuning Method .....	24
Going hi-tech: Tuning with an electronic tuner .....	25
Listening and repeating: Tuning to the audio track .....	26
Stringing along: Tuning to a guitar .....	26
Seeing in black and white: Tuning to a piano or keyboard .....	26
Tuning your uke to itself .....	27

<b>CHAPTER 3: Discovering How to Handle Your Ukulele</b> . . . . .	29
Holding On to Your Ukulele . . . . .	29
Positioning yourself to play . . . . .	30
Standing up . . . . .	31
Sitting down . . . . .	31
Holding your uke left-handed . . . . .	32
Developing Your Strumming . . . . .	32
Strumming in the right spot . . . . .	33
Strumming in the right way . . . . .	34
Refusing to use a pick! . . . . .	34
Pressing On to Fretting . . . . .	35
Positioning your fretting hand . . . . .	35
Locating where to fret . . . . .	36
Discovering how strongly to fret . . . . .	36
Adjusting when things don't sound right . . . . .	37
Playing and pain . . . . .	37

**PART 2: STARTING OUT WITH CHORDS AND STRUMMING** . . . . . 39

<b>CHAPTER 4: Playing Your First Ukulele Chords and Songs</b> . . . . .	41
Playing Music without Reading Music . . . . .	42
Reading chord diagrams . . . . .	42
Deciphering chord diagrams for lefties . . . . .	44
Playing a Song Using Two Chords . . . . .	44
Creating a C chord . . . . .	44
Fingering an F chord . . . . .	45
Starting your first song: "Li'l Liza Jane" . . . . .	46
Developing Your First Strumming Patterns . . . . .	47
Using strumming notation . . . . .	48
Filling in with ups and downs . . . . .	48
Finding an easy way to follow rhythms . . . . .	49
Discovering Seventh Chords . . . . .	51
Getting to grips with G7 . . . . .	51
Adding the E7 chord . . . . .	52
Taking off with your second song: "I'll Fly Away" . . . . .	53
Practicing Minor Chords . . . . .	55
Attempting A minor . . . . .	55
Moving on to D minor . . . . .	56
Majoring in E minor . . . . .	56
Playing your first minor-chord song . . . . .	57

<b>CHAPTER 5: Drumming Up More Strumming Patterns</b> .....	59
Pocketing the Ever-Useful Swiss Army Strum .....	59
Adding Pep with Some Strumming Variations .....	64
Changing chords within bars .....	64
Strumming strongly and weakly .....	65
Introducing the time signature .....	66
Checking out chnks .....	71
Strumming for Various Genres .....	72
Getting down with blues strumming: The shuffle .....	72
Becoming upbeat about the reggae off-beat .....	73
Rocking without strumming .....	75
Rolling your strums .....	77
Deciding on an Appropriate Strumming Pattern .....	78
<b>CHAPTER 6: Meeting the Chords and Their Families</b> .....	79
Getting to Know Chord Families .....	79
Practicing the Three-Chord Trick: The I-IV-V Progression .....	80
Fingering Barre Chords .....	82
Going flat-out for B flat .....	82
Deciding to play D7 .....	83
Playing B minor .....	86
Moving Chord Shapes .....	87
Budging up barre chords .....	87
Discovering new moveable chord shapes .....	88
Inviting Round More Chord Families .....	92
Geeing up the G chord family .....	93
Finding out about the F chord family .....	94
Playing according to the A chord family .....	94
Discovering the D chord family .....	95
Easing the Chord Changes .....	95
Changing D and A the easy way .....	96
Refingering E minor .....	96
Shuffling B7 .....	97
Breezing through D7 .....	97
<b>PART 3: PICKING AND SINGLE-NOTE PLAYING</b> .....	99
<b>CHAPTER 7: Coming to Grips with Tabs and Notation</b> .....	101
Tapping into Tabs .....	101
Stringing notes along in tabs .....	102
Fretting notes in tab .....	102
Sequencing notes in tab .....	103
Playing simultaneous notes in tab .....	103
Chording in tab .....	104
Strumming in tab .....	104

Reading Rhythms . . . . .	104
Splitting into quarter notes . . . . .	105
Holding on for half and whole notes . . . . .	106
Dividing further: Eighth and sixteenth notes . . . . .	106
Dotting and tying notes . . . . .	107
Resting and Repeating . . . . .	109
Taking a rest . . . . .	109
Repeating . . . and repeating . . . . .	110
Putting Everything Together . . . . .	112
Starting with a simple tune . . . . .	112
Moving up the neck . . . . .	113
Shifting positions . . . . .	113
<b>CHAPTER 8: Discovering Fingerpicking Patterns . . . . .</b>	<b>117</b>
Introducing the Fingerpicking Technique . . . . .	118
Picking Up Some Picking Patterns . . . . .	120
Getting the lowdown on the up pattern . . . . .	120
Rising and falling: The up and down pattern . . . . .	123
Playing all together: The simultaneous picking pattern . . . . .	123
Thumbing around: The alternate picking pattern . . . . .	125
<b>CHAPTER 9: Combining Melodies and Chords</b>	
<b>When Playing Solo . . . . .</b>	<b>131</b>
Strumming Melody and Chords Together . . . . .	131
Thumb-strumming the melody . . . . .	132
Using up strums . . . . .	134
Strumming between the melody . . . . .	134
Finger-strumming the melody . . . . .	137
Picking Out Melodies and Chords . . . . .	139
Faking a strum . . . . .	139
Fingerpicking to combine melody and chords . . . . .	139
<b>CHAPTER 10: Picking Up Some Soloing Techniques . . . . .</b>	<b>141</b>
Getting Articulated on the Frets . . . . .	141
Hammering-on . . . . .	142
Pulling-off . . . . .	143
Sliding between notes . . . . .	144
Bending notes . . . . .	147
Producing vibrato . . . . .	149
Putting everything together . . . . .	150
Picking Your Way to Great Solos . . . . .	150
Being all fingers and thumbs (in a good way!) . . . . .	151
Picking alternately: The running man . . . . .	151
Using a pick . . . . .	151
Strum blocking . . . . .	152

Inventing Solos the Easy Way . . . . .	153
Soloing using chord shapes . . . . .	153
Playing all the chord shapes . . . . .	153
Soloing with scales . . . . .	154
<b>PART 4: DISCOVERING GENRES AND STYLES . . . . .</b>	<b>157</b>
<b>CHAPTER 11: Rocking Out with Your Uke . . . . .</b>	<b>159</b>
Rocking Out with Chords . . . . .	159
Keeping it simple: Three-chord punk . . . . .	160
Adding a fourth chord . . . . .	160
Powering up with 5 chords . . . . .	160
Building tension: Suspended chords . . . . .	161
Strumming Rock and Punk Rhythms . . . . .	162
Bo Diddling . . . . .	162
Iggy Popping . . . . .	163
Making Your Uke Talk: Soloing Tips . . . . .	163
Phrasing like speaking . . . . .	164
Articulating questions and answers . . . . .	164
Moving up the fretboard for tension and release . . . . .	164
<b>CHAPTER 12: Playing the Blues to Lift Your Spirits . . . . .</b>	<b>167</b>
Playing Blues Chord Progressions . . . . .	168
Performing a simple 12-bar blues . . . . .	168
Varying the 12-bar blues . . . . .	168
Shuffling the blues . . . . .	172
Turning the Blues Around . . . . .	176
Leading the Blues . . . . .	178
Soloing with the Blues Scale . . . . .	179
Discovering the first position blues scale . . . . .	180
Using the second position blues scale . . . . .	180
Scaling the heights with solos . . . . .	181
<b>CHAPTER 13: Saying “Aloha” to the Hawaiian Style . . . . .</b>	<b>185</b>
Strumming in the Hawaiian Way . . . . .	185
Turning Around, Hawaiian-Style . . . . .	188
Progressing to the Hawaiian turnaround . . . . .	188
Soloing the Hawaiian turnaround . . . . .	189
Stretching Out to Play “Alekoki” . . . . .	190
<b>CHAPTER 14: Jazzing Up Your Uke Playing . . . . .</b>	<b>193</b>
Turning Around, Jazz-Style . . . . .	193
Using Hot Jazzy Chords . . . . .	195
Strumming in That Jazzy Way . . . . .	196

	Playing a ragtime tune . . . . .	196
	Hitting the split stroke . . . . .	198
<b>CHAPTER 15:</b>	<b>Strumming Up the Jawaaiian Style . . . . .</b>	<b>201</b>
	Starting Up Some Jawaaiian Strumming . . . . .	202
	Practicing the touch strum. . . . .	202
	Drumming up the thumb ‘n’ strum style . . . . .	203
	“Jamming” with Bob Marley . . . . .	205
<b>CHAPTER 16:</b>	<b>Getting Classy: Classical Masterpieces for Ukulele . . . . .</b>	<b>207</b>
	Strumming Up the Classics . . . . .	207
	Picking the Classics — Classical Guitar Pieces for Ukulele . . . . .	210
	Playing Campanella Style . . . . .	213
<b>CHAPTER 17:</b>	<b>Ukuleleing the Holidays . . . . .</b>	<b>217</b>
	Playing the Twelve Days . . . . .	217
	Ringin’ in the New Year with “Auld Lang Syne” . . . . .	219
	Making a Noise with “Silent Night” . . . . .	220
<b>PART 5: BUYING AND LOOKING AFTER YOUR UKULELE . . . . .</b>		<b>223</b>
<b>CHAPTER 18:</b>	<b>Weighing Up Your Options When Buying a Ukulele . . . . .</b>	<b>225</b>
	Buying Your First Uke . . . . .	225
	Assessing how much to spend . . . . .	226
	Picking a size . . . . .	226
	Avoiding problems . . . . .	227
	Deciding Where to Buy . . . . .	227
	Buying from a shop . . . . .	227
	Purchasing online . . . . .	228
	Obtaining Your Second (and Third, Fourth, Fifth . . .) Ukulele. . . . .	228
	Thinking about solid versus laminated . . . . .	229
	Considering types of wood . . . . .	229
	Plugging In: Electric Ukuleles . . . . .	231
	Lowering the Tone: Bass Ukuleles . . . . .	232
<b>CHAPTER 19:</b>	<b>Splashing Out on Essentials and Accessories. . . . .</b>	<b>233</b>
	Picking the Right Strings . . . . .	233
	Getting Hold of Optional Accessories. . . . .	234
	Clipping on a tuner . . . . .	234
	Bagging a case . . . . .	235
	Recording your performance. . . . .	235

Leaving it standing up or hanging down? . . . . .	236
Strapping on your uke . . . . .	236
Capturing the right capo. . . . .	236
Feeling for a pick . . . . .	237
Going Mobile . . . . .	238
Finding uke chords . . . . .	238
Tuning up . . . . .	238
Keeping time with a metronome . . . . .	239
Recording tunes. . . . .	239
<b>CHAPTER 20: Restringing, Maintaining, and Adjusting Your Uke . . . . .</b>	<b>241</b>
Restringing Your Ukulele . . . . .	241
Deciding when to restring . . . . .	242
Removing the strings . . . . .	242
Tying the strings at the bridge. . . . .	243
Looping the strings round the tuning pegs . . . . .	245
Stretching the strings . . . . .	246
Maintaining Your Ukulele. . . . .	246
Cleaning after playing. . . . .	247
Storing your ukulele . . . . .	247
Tackling humidity. . . . .	247
Diagnosing and Solving Uke Problems. . . . .	248
Adjusting strings that go out of tune . . . . .	248
Deciding that the strings are too high: Lowering the action. . . . .	248
Fixing a buzzing sound: Raising the action . . . . .	249
Fighting against out-of-tune strings high up the fretboard. . . . .	250
<b>PART 6: THE PART OF TENS. . . . .</b>	<b>251</b>
<b>CHAPTER 21: Ten Ukulele Players to Know . . . . .</b>	<b>253</b>
Ernest Ka'ai (1881–1962). . . . .	253
May Singhi Breen (1895–1970) . . . . .	254
Roy Smeck (1900–1994) . . . . .	254
George Formby (1904–1961) . . . . .	255
The Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain (1985–) . . . . .	255
Israel Kamakawiwo'ole (1959–1997). . . . .	256
Jake Shimabukuro (1976–) . . . . .	256
Amanda Palmer (1976–) . . . . .	257
James Hill (1980–) . . . . .	258
Zach Condon (1986–) . . . . .	258

<b>CHAPTER 22: Ten Ways to Get Involved in the Ukulele Scene</b> . . .	259
Joining a Ukulele Club . . . . .	260
Visiting a Ukulele Festival . . . . .	260
Making a Video . . . . .	261
Playing Live . . . . .	261
Going Online . . . . .	262
Spreading the Uke News . . . . .	262
Entering a Contest . . . . .	262
Teaching Someone . . . . .	263
Writing Your Own Songs . . . . .	263
Seeing a Show . . . . .	264
<b>CHAPTER 23: Ten (or So) Tips for Improving Your Playing</b> . . . . .	265
Playing Very Slowly . . . . .	265
Refusing to Rush Things . . . . .	266
Recording Yourself . . . . .	266
Playing with and for Others . . . . .	267
Practicing in Sections . . . . .	267
Knowing When to Stop Practicing . . . . .	267
Stealing from Everyone . . . . .	268
Varying Your Inversions and Varying Your Invarsions . . . . .	268
Opening Your Ears . . . . .	269
Enjoying Yourself . . . . .	269
Busting a Rut . . . . .	270
<b>CHAPTER 24: Ten Greatest Ukulele Chords</b> . . . . .	271
Invigorating C (with a High Note) . . . . .	272
Shimmering A Minor 7 (High Up) . . . . .	272
Melancholy F Major 7 . . . . .	273
Complex G9 . . . . .	273
Chilled Out G6 . . . . .	274
The “Hawaiian” D7 . . . . .	274
Uncomfortable A Augmented 7 . . . . .	275
Jazzy C9 . . . . .	276
Menacing F Minor 9 . . . . .	276
Nostalgic E Diminished 7 . . . . .	277
<b>PART 7: APPENDIXES</b> . . . . .	279
<b>APPENDIX A: Chord Charts</b> . . . . .	281
<b>APPENDIX B: Reading Standard Musical Notation</b> . . . . .	285
<b>APPENDIX C: Audio Tracks</b> . . . . .	291
<b>INDEX</b> . . . . .	297



# Introduction

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 practicing 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*, 3rd 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 4 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/ukulelefd3e](http://www.dummies.com/go/ukulelefd3e).

» **Watch the videos.** Find helpful videos at [www.dummies.com/go/ukulelefd3e](http://www.dummies.com/go/ukulelefd3e) — 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.



REMEMBER

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.



TIP

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



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

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.



WARNING

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.



PLAY THIS

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/art-center/music/ukulele/ukulele-for-dummies-cheat-sheet/](http://www.dummies.com/art-center/music/ukulele/ukulele-for-dummies-cheat-sheet/). Most importantly, you can find the audio and video tracks at [www.dummies.com/go/ukulelefd3e](http://www.dummies.com/go/ukulelefd3e). Find free bonus articles at [www.dummies.com/extras/ukulelefd3e](http://www.dummies.com/extras/ukulelefd3e).

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*, 3rd 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 pry 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 3.



# 1

## **Getting Started with the Ukulele**

## **IN THIS PART . . .**

Kick-start your ukulele playing with all the background information you need.

Chapter ukulele terms and lingo.

Tune up your uke.

Know how to position your hands to be ready to play.

## 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

# Chapter 1

## Exploring the Ukulele

**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.



REMEMBER

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.



TIP

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 favorite instrument among travelers.



REMEMBER

And don't forget the price. Ukuleles are relatively cheap and you can get a decent beginner ukulele for 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.



## 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 favorite 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 anglicized 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 anglicized *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!



REMEMBER

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 practicing.

### 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 Suspenderz 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.



WARNING

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.



WARNING

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.

The two sound-producing parts are as follows:

- » **Body:** The body is the main part and where the sound is produced. The type of wood this section is made of determines how the ukulele sounds. The most popular woods for the body are mahogany and koa (a Hawaiian wood).

The body is divided into three main parts: soundboard or top (the front of the uke), the back, and the sides. The soundboard is the most important part (which is why you often see ukuleles with expensive woods used for the top and less expensive wood, or even plastic, on the back and sides).

One offshoot of the ukulele called the *banjolele* (sometimes called a banjo-uke) has a banjo-like body rather than a wood body, though you play it just like a wood ukulele. The difference is in the sound they produce. They are much louder and have the metallic sound of a banjo.

- » **Strings:** Originally, ukulele strings were made from catgut and nylon. Nowadays, however, they're made from synthetic fibers (with ugly names such as fluro-carbon and nylgut) that combine the best features of both catgut and nylon.

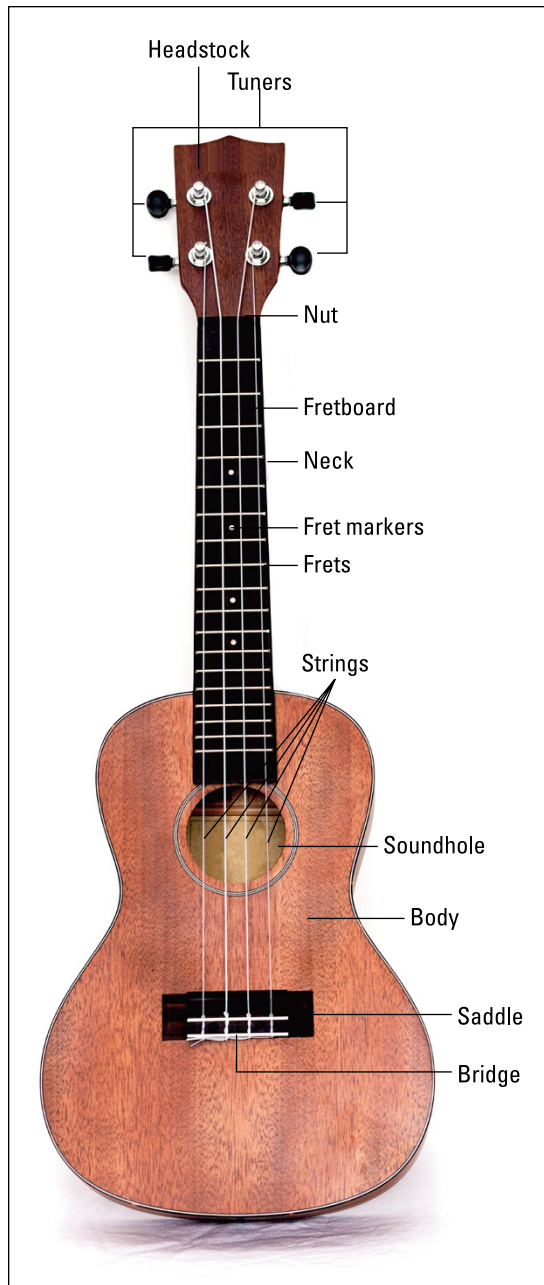
Unlike most string instruments, ukulele strings don't go from fattest nearest your head to thinnest nearest the ground. This arrangement confused me when I first got a ukulele: I thought someone must have screwed up and I changed the order of the strings. I was an idiot.



TIP

Here are the rest of the ukulele's parts:

- » **Bridge:** The bridge is attached to the front of the ukulele and holds the strings at that end. Two main types of bridge exist: one where you tie the strings to the bridge, and one where you knot the end of the string and thread it through a slit.



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

© John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

- » **Saddle:** The saddle is the thin, usually white, piece that sticks up out of the bridge. The strings rest on top of the saddle, and this creates one end of the section of strings that you play.
- » **Soundhole:** This round hole on the front of your ukulele lets the sound out. The soundhole is usually placed under the strings but not always. The placement of the soundhole doesn't particularly impact the sound.
- » **Neck:** The neck is the long bit that sticks out of the body. Ukulele necks are lighter and weaker than similar instruments, such as guitars and mandolins, because they're designed for nylon strings. So don't be tempted to put steel guitar strings on your uke; you'll snap the neck in two.
- » **Fretboard:** The fretboard is the strip of wood that runs along the neck just behind the strings. When you're playing your ukulele, you press the strings down against the fretboard to produce notes. Most fretboards are made of rosewood.
- » **Frets:** The frets are strips of metal that go vertically across the fretboard. They mark out the different pitches of the notes. The higher up the fretboard, the higher the note is musically.
- » **Fret markers:** Fret markers are the dots on the fretboard. They make it easier for you to spot which fret is which farther up the neck. Ukuleles have fret markers on the 5th, 7th, and 10th frets (and also at the 12th and 15th if the fretboard extends that far).



TIP

This arrangement can be a little confusing for guitar players who pick up a ukulele, because guitars have a marker at the 9th fret rather than the 10th.

- » **Nut:** The nut marks the end of the fretboard. The strings sit on it as they go from the fretboard to the headstock. It forms the end of the section of the strings that you play.
- » **Headstock:** The headstock is located at the end of the fretboard and is there to hold the tuners. But its main function is as an advertising spot for the uke maker.
- » **Tuners:** Tuners are attached to the headstock and hold the strings of the ukulele. You change the tuning of your strings by twiddling them. Two types of tuner exist:



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

- *Friction tuners:* Traditionally, ukuleles have friction tuners, which stick out behind the ukulele and hold the strings in tune by friction alone.

If your ukulele has friction tuners, you may need to tighten the screws that hold them to the headstock. If your ukulele goes out of tune as soon as you've tuned it, check the tuners. If you can see them unfurl, tighten the screw.