YOUR FIRST UKULELE LESSON
AND THEN SOME
A Complete Beginner’s Crash Course to Playing Ukulele

BY BRETT MCQUEEN
Your First Ukulele Lesson and Then Some

A Complete Beginner’s Crash Course to Playing Ukulele

by Brett McQueen of the *Ukulele Tricks blog*

This ebook is dedicated to my grandfather who taught and inspired me to play ukulele.

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Welcome

Are you ready to dive into the world of ukulele? Maybe you already have but you’ve not gotten that far. Wherever you’re at, after going through these lessons, you will not only have the skills to play a large handful of chords and be able to hold down a solid strumming pattern, but you’ll be able to play some of your favorite songs.

The ukulele has brought a lot joy to my life, and I think it can to yours, which is why I write this “crash course.” It’s consistently been a centerpiece instrument around family gatherings and celebrations. The cool thing is you don’t really need a musical background to play ukulele. In fact, my Grandpa taught me how to play when I was just six. If you put your mind to it, I’m positive you can learn too!

These lessons are designed for the beginning or relatively new ukulele player to get you started on your path towards ukulele success. However, even if you’ve played for a little while, I encourage you to keep reading because you might just pick up some new tricks.

With that being said, let’s get started!

QUESTIONS/COMMENTS

If at anytime while reading this lesson packet you find yourself completely stumped, do not hesitate to jump over to http://www.ukuleletricks.com and send me an email through the contact page.

You can also follow me and ask your questions on Twitter at: http://twitter.com/ukuleletricks
About the Ukulele

The ukulele is a four stringed plucked instrument that originated in the 19th century from Hawaii. The most popular sizes of ukuleles are: **soprano**, **concert** (alto), **tenor**, and **baritone**.

Soprano ukuleles are the smallest ukes and tend to be the most common as they can be had for a pretty low price (great for beginners). They are known for their bright, jangly sound. As you go to the opposite end of the spectrum, baritone ukes are larger and are tuned like the bottom four strings of a guitar. They sound warmer and deeper in comparison to a soprano. [Click here to read more about ukulele sizes](#).

Sound is created whenever you pluck a string. The string vibrates the **saddle**, which is the white piece of plastic or bone supported by the **bridge** on the top of the ukulele. The energy produced vibrates the top of the ukulele which resonates in the **body** of the instrument and is projected out of the **soundhole**.
The most important thing you need to know for the purposes of this lesson is how to identify the **neck**, **fretboard**, and **frets**. Frets are the vertical pieces of metal that lay across the fretboard. You press your fingers between the frets and pluck a string to produce a sound. The higher you go up the fretboard the higher the pitch. If you want, read more about the parts of the ukulele.

### Different Ukulele Sizes

- **soprano**
- **concert (alto)**
- **tenor**
- **baritone**
How to Tune Your Ukulele

The most common type of tuning is standard tuning. Soprano, concert, and tenor ukuleles are typically tuned this way.

As you can see, the top string or **fourth string** of the ukulele is tuned to a **G**. The **third string** is tuned to a **C**. The **second string** is tuned to an **E**, and the **first string** or bottom string is tuned to an **A**.

You can see how the ukulele is tuned on the music staff:
Tuning Your Ukulele by Ear

You can use the Ukulele Trick’s free online tuner to tune your ukulele by ear. When you tune your ukulele by ear, you play a reference pitch of the note you want to tune to, and then turn your tuning pegs to match the pitches as closely as possible.

This takes some practice to get it right. One trick is to listen closely to the two pitches as they are ringing. If there is a “wobbly” or “warbly” sound between the pitches, this means they are out of tune. Your goal is to turn the tuning pegs till you hear the purest tone possible with no “wobble”. To hear an example, take a listen near the bottom of this page.
Using a Chromatic Tuner to Tune Your Ukulele

The easiest way to tune your ukulele is by using a chromatic tuner. As you pluck each individual string on your ukulele, this little device will detect the pitch and display it back to you. It will indicate if you are sharp or flat (above or below the pitch), so you can get an accurate tuning. Every ukulele player should have a chromatic tuner.

Check out my review of the best chromatic tuners for ukulele.

This is the basics of what you need to know for tuning, but if you want to read a more in-depth explanation and learn more about alternate tunings, click here.

FREE TIP

Always, I mean always, tune up your ukulele before you play it. Strings stretch as you play them and can go out of tune from humidity and temperature. As a ukulele player, you will be more inspired by a ukulele that’s in tune and so will your listeners!
How to Hold Your Ukulele

How you hold your ukulele can vary depending on what size of ukulele you have. Typically though, you want to cradle the body of the ukulele in your right arm, while the part of your forearm, closest to the elbow, applies a little pressure to the top of the ukulele, so it is held snug against your body. Then, you support the neck of the ukulele in the crevice of your left hand where your thumb meets your index finger.

Your strumming hand should be loose and relaxed with the fingers perpendicular to the 12th to 14th fret of the ukulele. Most of the time you’ll want to strum in this area and not directly over the soundhole. The closer you get to the bridge and soundhole the brighter the sound becomes (sometimes this is desirable though).

Some people might also strum with their index finger, so the nail of their finger strums across the strings on their down strum, and the bottom of the finger strums across the strings on their up strum.

However you choose to strum, the most important thing to remember is to keep a loose, relaxed hand and wrist.
Your First Ukulele Chords

It’s time to actually learn how to play something. We’ll be learning three chords to start off: C major, G major, and F major. As a side note, you can reference these chords and hundreds of others for free at the [Ukulele Tricks chord library](#).

**C major**

![C major diagram]

To play a C major chord, place your **ring finger** on the 3rd fret of the bottom string. The remaining strings ring completely open.

**G major**

![G major diagram]

To play a G major chord, place your **middle finger** on the 2nd fret of the bottom string, your **ring finger** on the 3rd fret of the second string, and your **index finger** on the 2nd fret of the third string. The top string rings completely open.
F major

To play an F major chord, place your index finger on the 1st fret of the second string and your middle finger on the 2nd fret of the top string or the fourth string. Let the first and third string ring completely open.

How to Practice These Chords

Practice the fingering for each of these chords and practice changing between chords. At first, it’s difficult and frustrating to get your fingers to go where you want them. Through time and practice, you’ll build muscle memory where changing chords becomes second nature.

You might also notice that the ends of your fingers start to feel sore after awhile. This is very normal. Eventually, your fingers will build callouses on the ends of them, which will prevent the tips of your fingers from hurting. After a week of dedicated practice, you should start to notice this to get better.

Amazingly enough, you can play hundreds of songs with just these three chords. Before we learn a song though, let’s take a look at some strumming patterns.
Your First Strumming Pattern

Strumming can feel very awkward at first and a bit of a juggling act. Not only are you trying to switch chords but you’re also trying to keep the strumming pattern going while you’re doing this. This can be really hard.

I’ve noticed the tendency might be to jump right in and start learning a strumming pattern. Before we do this, we really need to cover some important thinking that goes behind strumming. If we understand this, strumming becomes easier.

The Basis of Strumming

Strumming is a form of rhythm. Rhythm depends completely upon good timing and consistency. Strumming is not about how complicated or how fast you can play. If you’re not keeping good time and consistency, you’ve completely defeated the purpose of strumming.

This is why as we learn our first strumming pattern we need to be very intentional about counting out loud. Eventually, we will build an internal “clock” of sorts where it becomes easier to keep time without thinking much about it.

Strumming Pattern #1: Down, Down, Down, Down

For this first strumming pattern, we’re going to take our C major chord that we learned and strum all down strums.

We’re going to do this to a count of four, which means we will count out loud “1, 2, 3, 4” and repeat this at a very consistent, but not too fast pace. We will strum down on each count. A count of four (4/4) is a very common time signature in most popular music.
Practice counting out loud and strumming all down strums at a consistent and moderate tempo. It might seem boring to count out loud and just do down strums, but it’s important to develop this sense of time.

As you start to feel comfortable with this, try adding a chord change. Here’s where it gets a bit harder. Let’s change from a C major chord to a G major chord while keeping the same tempo.

Practice this until you can switch between the two chords without hesitating between the chord changes. The count should remain consistent and steady through the chord change.

Click to see this part of the lesson explained and demonstrated in a video.
Your First Song

After you’ve practiced keeping a steady tempo and changing chords with all down strums, you’re pretty well equipped to play a lot of songs with just those three chords and that strumming pattern, but let’s first take a look at an easy song—an oldie but a goodie: “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.”

Again, keep going with the down strums. The changes in this song are pretty quick, so start off slow and think about anticipating the next chord.

```
C
Twinkle Twinkle
1 2 3 4
F C
1 2 etc...
F C
How I wonder what you are
C F
Up above the world so high
```
Practice this till you can sing and play it at a steady tempo without having to hesitate between your chord changes.

If you are having trouble, slow it down. Practice counting out loud and just going through the chord changes without singing. As you get more comfortable, start humming under your breath in combination with your counting. And then, as this becomes more comfortable sing it out, and sing it strong!

Again, we’re not trying to be “fancy” here (“fancier” stuff will come in the next part). Right now, we want to focus on being steady and consistent. Once you’re ready, let’s move on and learn some more important chords.
10 More Really Important Chords to Know

By now, you should feel pretty comfortable changing between your C, F, and G chords. Your fingers should feel used to switching and changing chords. It’s time to learn some other really important and common chords. If you know these like the back of your hand, you’ll be half way to learning about every song out there.

Major Chords

Here are some other common major chords you should know.

A major

To play an A major chord, place your index finger on 1st fret of the third string, and place your middle finger on the 2nd fret of the fourth or top string. The bottom two strings ring completely open.

D major

There are a couple ways you can play this chord. The first way is to place your pinky on the 2nd fret of the second string, your ring finger on the 2nd fret of the third string, and your middle finger on
the 2nd fret of the fourth or top string. For people with smaller fingers, this might work well.

However, those of us with large fingers, the other common and recommended way to play this chord is to barre the top three strings on the 2nd fret with your ring finger. This means your ring finger lays across the three strings while bending enough to allow the bottom string to ring open. Sometimes I will even use my index finger to do this. This is hard to do and takes some practice, so experiment with both ways to see which one comes easier.

**E major**

![E major chord diagram]

This chord is a bit of a stretch. Place your middle finger on the 2nd fret of the first or bottom string. Place your pinky on the 4th fret of the third string. Place your index finger on the 1st fret of the fourth or top string.

**Minor Chords**

The next set of chords we’re going to learn are minor chords. Minor chords are like major chords, except you change one note of the chord to make it minor. Minor chords tend to have a “sadder” sound to them. [Click here to read a more in–depth explanation on the differences between major and minor chords.](#)
A minor (Am)

This chord is really easy to play. Simply place your middle finger on the 2nd fret of the fourth or top string and let the bottom three strings ring completely open.

D minor (Dm)

To play a Dm chord, place your index finger on the 1st fret of the second string, your ring finger on the 2nd fret of the third string, and your middle finger on the 2nd fret of the fourth or top string. Let the bottom string ring completely open.

E minor (Em)

To play an Em chord, place your index finger on the 2nd fret of the first or bottom string and your ring finger on the 4th fret of the third string. Let the second and top string ring completely open.
Dominant 7th Chords

Major and minor chords only have three notes that make up the sound of the chord. Seventh chords are essentially major or minor chords with an added note called the “seventh,” which refers to the seventh or last note of a scale. You find seventh chords a lot in blues and jazz styles.

There are different types of seventh chords (major 7th, minor 7th, dominant 7th, diminished 7th), however, we’re just going to learn some dominant seventh chords, which tend to show up a lot.

C7

To play a C7 chord, simply place your index finger on the 1st fret of the first or bottom string. Let the other three strings ring completely open.

G7

To play a G7 chord, place your ring finger on the 2nd fret of the first or bottom string. Place your index finger on the 1st fret of the second string. Place your middle finger on the 2nd fret of the third string. Let the top string ring completely open.
D7

This is another chord you want to barre. To play a D7 chord, lay your **index finger** across all four strings on the 2nd fret. While these strings are barred, place your **middle finger** on the 3rd fret of the first or bottom string.

E7

To play an E7 chord, place your **ring finger** on the 2nd fret of the first or bottom string, your **middle finger** on the 2nd fret of the third string, and your **index finger** on the 1st fret of the fourth or top string. Let the second string ring completely open.

Be sure to check out my video of “**11 Must-Know Chords for Beginners**” to see how many of these chords are played.
More Advanced Strumming Patterns

I’ll admit down strums are a little bit boring, but they are extremely flexible, and if you can do this well with good timing and consistency (that’s key, remember) you can easily add some interesting elements into your strumming pattern. Let’s take a look.

**Strumming Pattern #2: Down, Down, Up, Down, Down, Up**

For this pattern, we’re still going to strum to a count of four. However, this time we’re going to add an up strum between beats 2 and 3 and beats 4 and 1. This gives us a strumming pattern of down, down, up, down, down, up.

We can count this by adding an “and” between these beats. We’re simply splitting these beats in half or subdividing them. So our strumming pattern would look like this:

![Strumming Pattern Diagram](image)

It’s important to note that our count is not getting longer or shorter with these added notes. If this is not making sense, watch this video as I show you this strumming pattern.
As you get more comfortable with this strumming pattern, add a chord change.

![Chord Diagram]

Again, practice this until you can change chords seamlessly. Start out slow first and gradually increase your speed. Remember, it’s all about keeping that solid and consistent rhythm.

**Strumming Pattern #3: Down, Down, Up, Down, Up, Down, Up**

This strumming pattern goes even a step farther and adds another up strum. This is the strumming pattern I used in my cover of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.”

![Chord Diagram]
Another you can try to add a different feel to these strumming patterns is to **accent** certain beats. When we accent a beat, we are just strumming a little bit harder, or we are strumming the unaccented beats a little softer.

For this third strumming pattern, I typically strum the 1st and 2nd beat a little bit harder than the other beats. **However, I encourage you to experiment with these three strumming patterns and see what you come up with.** There is not always a hard and fast right or wrong way to strum a song.

Once you’re feeling comfortable, you can try adding a chord change for this third strumming pattern.

![C and G chords](image)

**FREE TIP**

Want to take your rhythm to another level? One really great way to practice your strumming is to use a metronome. A metronome does not lie so it will force you to practice developing a solid and consistent sense of rhythm.
Learn Another Song: “I’ve Been Working On the Railroad”

This is the very first song I ever learned how to play on ukulele, so I’m excited for you to learn it. My grandpa taught it to me, and ironically, he worked on the railroad.

If you’re not familiar with this song, you can listen to me perform it here.

How to Approach Learning a New Song

Whenever you learn a new song, it’s always good to skim through it and see what chords are used in the song. Without even playing, practice changing from these chords.

When you have a good idea about what chords your changing to and from, you can add some rhythm. Before doing that though, count out loud and start to get that internal sense of timing.

Then, just start with down strums. As you start to feel more comfortable, add some up strums like in our second strumming pattern.

With most songs, there is not necessarily a right or wrong strumming pattern for the song. Sometimes you have to experiment and go with what feels right to you.
“I’ve Been Working On the Railroad” Chords

C   C7   F   C
I've been working on the railroad all the livelong day
C   C7   D7   G7
I've been working on the railroad, just to pass the time away
G7   C   F   E7
Can't you hear the whistle blowing? Rise up so early in the morn
F   C   C   G   C
Can't you hear the captain shouting, "Dinah blow your horn!"

C   F
Dinah won't you blow, Dinah won't you blow,
G   C
Dinah won't you blow your horn, your horn?
C   F
Dinah won't you blow, Dinah won't you blow,
G   C
Dinah won't you blow your horn?

C
Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah,
C   G7
Someone's in the kitchen I know,
C   F
Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah,
C   G   C
Strummin' on the old banjo

C   C   G7
Fee fi fiddle-y-i-o, fee fi fiddle-y-i-o-o-o-o-o,
C   F   C   G7   C   G   C
Fee fi fiddle-y-i-o, strummin' on the old banjo

Work through this song and see how it goes. If you run into any problems, you can post a comment on Ukulele Tricks.
Where Do I Go From Here?

While I’ve given you quite a bit to work on and practice, eventually you’ll become a master of all this. The beginning stages of something can always be the most difficult, but I know for a fact through your hard work and discipline you’ll hit your stride in no time. Here are some ways you can “speed” this process up.

Develop a Practice Plan

In my post, “3 Reasons Why You Aren’t Getting Better at Ukulele,” I emphasized the importance of setting goals and creating time for practice. Developing a practice plan can accomplish both of these things.

When you create a plan for practice, you’re creating a plan to get to the place where you want to be. What songs do you want to be able to play on the ukulele? What techniques do you want to master? Answering these questions can provide you a direction for how you want to structure your practice times and what things you work on.

Setting up a practice plan also forces you to carve out time in your busy schedule. Even if you can only spare 15 minutes a day towards practice, doing this consistently is better than spending a couple hours once every couple weeks.

Right now would be a perfect time to jot down a couple goals and find a regular time in your schedule to practice the ukulele. The goals don’t have to be extensive. It could be something as simple as “I want to be able to play the song titled ‘__________’ by next month.”

Seek Out Inspiration

I’ve noticed in my own life that I’m most motivated to push forward in my growth as a musician if I’m surrounding myself in ways I can
be inspired. Sometimes these are totally unrelated to ukulele, but there are a few things that can help.

First, listen to ukulele players that you really enjoy on a consistent basis. This might be a CD of an artist or someone you subscribe to and watch on YouTube. I know for myself listening and watching to someone play is really helpful. Over time, you’ll notice yourself picking up different parts of their style that you really dig, even unintentionally.

This goes a little bit with the first point, but secondly, go see some live concerts. There is something inspiring about seeing someone play who has a mastery of the ukulele. One guy that really inspires me whenever I watch him is Jake Shimabukuro.

Lastly, surround yourself with other ukulele players and musicians that can support and speak into your passion. One great way to do this is to try to find a ukulele group in your local area that meets. If you can’t find anything like this, start one up.

Another way to plug in is with the online ukulele community. Please feel free at anytime to connect and post your thoughts on the Ukulele Tricks blog. We want to be a community that encourages and pushes other people in their goals like yourself.

**Further Resources**

I’ve mentioned a few of these through the course of this book, but be sure to check these resources out (they are all free!):

**Ukulele Chord Library** – Finger positions for over hundreds of chords in several different variations all across the fretboard.

**Online Ukulele Tuner** – Easy-to-use online ukulele tuner to tune your ukulele by ear in standard tuning and several other tunings.
Ukulele Song Library – My favorite songs with chords and lyrics, often times with videos showing you how to play the song.

Ukulele Tricks’ YouTube Channel – Subscribe and check regularly for ukulele video lessons, tips, songs, and more.

Ukulele Tricks Blog – Weekly lessons, new songs, videos, tips, tricks, and inspiring tidbits to keep you practicing.

Final Thoughts

How are things going for you? Any part of this lesson book got you stumped? Have a suggestion for this course? I would love to hear your questions and comments.

There are a couple ways we can connect. First, you can send me an email or post a comment on the blog at anytime. I read all these and try my best to answer any question.

If you’re a Twitter type of person, you can follow me at twitter.com/ukuleletricks.

I would love to hear how it’s going for you, and if there is a way I can help you out, that’d be great.

I hope you’ve found this lesson book to be a good crash course into the world of playing ukulele. It may feel daunting at first, but I’m telling you, the time and work you invest pays off and it’s so rewarding. Again, let me know if you have any questions. I’m here to help.

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