My First Ukulele Lesson

Basic lessons for ukulele beginners...
Ukulele Basics

The Uke
The ukulele is an acoustic instrument consisting of a **Hollow body** and anywhere between four to eight strings. Plucking or strumming the strings produce vibrations which are amplified by the instrument's hollow body. The strings are suspended between the **Nut** of the instrument and the **Bridge** of the instrument. These vibrations are what create the beautiful music you hear.

Keys
The **Keys** of the ukulele are merely mechanical holding devices, or locking assemblies, which are used to retain specific tensions on a desired string. Consisting of a flat head connected to a bolt, the key is used to both tighten the string, (raising the pitch), or loosen the string, (lowering the pitch). There are many types of keys, (sometimes called *Machine Heads*) on the market today. Most of the time when the tuning continues to go out on the instrument, the cause is a worn out, (or cheap) key. The keys are placed through drilled holes, on the **Headstock** of the instrument.

Frets
To the left you will see a diagram of any size ukulele, the number of frets located along the instrument's **Neck** will vary between uke sizes. Ukes usually count twelve frets from nut to body (Soprano), or about 14 frets from nut to body (Tenor).

Position Dots
Position dots are placed on the fingerboard for a matter of convenience. They allow the player to quickly and accurately maneuver throughout the fret board without having to worry about counting frets.

Nut
The nut is the thin raised ridge (fret zero) placed at a right angle between the **Headstock** and the **Fret board** (fingerboard) of the instrument. It can be made of either plastic, wood, ivory or some other material. The nut has an important job of keeping the strings at an equal distance across the fret board, while at the same time, as close to the fret board as possible.

Bridge
The bridge is a wooden wedge or bar, attached to the face of the instrument, just opposite the sound hole. The bridge plays two roles. It holds the strings in a position above and parallel to the hollow body of the instrument, as well as transfers the vibrations into the hollow body of the instrument.
Sound
Sound is created on the ukulele by first plucking or strumming the string. As the string vibrates, this vibration is relayed back and forth between the nut and the bridge. As it reaches the bridge, the vibration is transmitted through the bridge and into the Face (soundboard) of the instrument. The hollow body allows these vibrations to bounce around inside, or resonate. The hollow chamber responds to these various vibration frequencies and specific sounds are created, which then escape through the instrument’s Sound hole.

Tone
The word Tone may be used in many different ways; here, we will use it to denote the way an instrument sounds. Many things give an instrument its sound: the types of strings you have placed on the instrument, (nylon or wire wrapped), the materials that make up the instrument, (different types of woods, metals or plastics), and the thickness of any of those materials. An instrument’s tone is also changed by what you use to pluck the strings – as well as, of course, amount of force used. An easy way to change the way you sound is to move to a different brand of ukulele strings.

Sidenote on Strings
It may take some time for a player to find "just the right strings" that will give the sound he or she wants. Take the time to try many different types; you won't be happy with your sound until you do. On Tenor ukuleles, some people use a lowered "G" string. Some people do not. Whatever it is, do what you want.

Replacing Strings
Many people replace their strings every six months, just like clockwork. Others don't change their strings for several years at a time. People have said that after time, the strings seem to “die” and the sound is not as good. Some say that the sound gets better the longer you play on strings. When should you change them? Ultimately, it’s up to you – but if you’re looking for an easy answer: when the strings break, change them.
Tuning your Ukulele

Relax. Tuning isn’t so difficult, despite how important it is. When you purchase ukulele strings, or get a new ukulele, make sure your strings connect to the same pegs as shown here - if they are different, you have something fishy going on.

The strings may wrap around the peg either way, so you will have to get used to which direction to turn the keys (here, Marked C G E A) to move the string higher (tighter) or lower (looser) on your own particular uke.

We’ll start with your G string. The G string is also known as your “Fourth string”. When looking at your ukulele, the A string is your “First string”, the E string is your “Second string”, the C string is your “Third string” and the G string is your “Fourth string”. This is handy to know when chatting with other musicians who may also be helping you to learn how to play and tune your ukulele. If you have a ukulele pitch pipe (pictured on the right), play the G note first. Now gently pluck at your G string as you twist the tuning peg, to determine which direction you will tune the string higher or lower.

No rush - get comfortable with it. Once you’ve found exactly the right note, tune up a little, then down below the note and back, just to get the hang of it.

When tuning a stringed instrument, it is always advisable to tune "UP" into the note you want. Why? As you loosen the string, it takes a few tugs for the tension above the neck (between the ‘nut’ and the ‘peg’) to equal the tension on the neck, so it will slide down. Try to get used to this: when you’re tuning a string "DOWN", tune it a little too far down, and then back "UP" to where it is perfect. Tuning any stringed instrument works out best that way.

Got your G string all sorted out? Do the same thing to other three. No big rush, get used to how to make the string higher, how to make it lower, and how to ease it gently UP into exactly the pitch you’re aiming for. Tune your C, your E, and finally your A.

Then go back and check - if you tuned the strings very much, they may have pulled on the neck a bit - and then the strings you tuned before will be too loose! You may have to go through all the strings a few times, to get them to stabilize. On brand new ukuleles, or when using new strings, you may have to repeat the procedure over and over for a few days until the strings "settle in".

Try not to get frustrated, especially at the start. When a piano, tuning fork or tuner is not available, tune your ukulele using the following method. Tighten the First string, "A", up a bit so it is not loose and is making a reasonable note. Here, we will simply be tuning the ukulele to itself, so it doesn’t
really matter if it’s playing a true “A”. After the first string is taut, move to the Fourth string ("G") and finger the second fret. Play both strings and tighten the "G" string until it sounds like the "A" string. Once these two strings sound the same, move to the Second string "E" and finger the fifth fret. Tighten the "E" string until it sounds like the "A" string. Once they sound the same move to the Third string "C". Finger the fourth fret and tighten the "C" string until it sounds like the "E" string. This tunes the ukulele so your songs will sound nice when you play them. You'll need to retune when playing with others.

Next, we’re going to learn how to hold a ukulele and strum a chord, and then you’ll be able to check and see if it really is in tune!

How to Hold a Ukulele

Here we have a lovely picture of Tiny Tim, one of the greatest ukulele-powered entertainers of all time, showing quite clearly how to properly hold a ukulele. Please note that Tim is holding left-handed in this picture - so you can line it up as though you’re looking at yourself in a mirror.

Note that the uke is cradled by your right arm - it is also squished between your wrist/forearm and body. The index finger of the right hand is extended, and is used to strum the strings, right at the place where the neck of the ukulele meets the body. Guitar players want to strum near the hole - don’t. Part of the nature of the ukulele’s sound come from the strings being strummed way up there - right in the middle of the part that will be vibrating.

The fingernail of the index finger faces the ground, so that the back of the nail strums the strings on the way down, then the tip of the finger and nail strum on the way back up.

The ukulele is held high on your body - anyone who held a guitar up so high would look foolish. This position allows you to partly hold the uke up in the crook of your elbow. It also helps you to hear the ukulele while you are singing, when it is closer to your head. Your right forearm should point right up the uke’s neck.

If you are holding the uke properly, you should be able to take either hand away and have the uke stay where it is. That’s easy enough for the left hand - just grab the neck between the heel of your hand and your fingers, as though you’re making a chord. It’s a little trickier for the right hand - you have to keep the whole hand free for strumming, so you have to get used to sort of cradling/squishing it in there.

Give it a try. It’s worth getting used to hanging on with just the right arm (not the hand!), otherwise when you are playing songs, the uke will keep catching you off guard by slipping, and breaking your concentration.
Making Chords

A chord can be described in a number of ways, but for your beginner’s lessons, we can think of a chord as 4 notes, one note for each string, all played at the same time.

A chord diagram (shown on right) is a simple drawing of the instrument, with markers for the finger positions required to make the chord.

To play the “A” (also known as “A major”) chord as shown in this chord diagram, you simply press the end of your index finger down on the “C” string between the “nut” (at the top of the ukulele fret board) and first “fret” (those metal bars that go across the neck) and press the end of your middle finger down on the “G” string between the first and second “fret”. You should place your fingers close to the frets below them, but far enough away that the string can vibrate freely. You have to press down hard enough that the string stays down on the fret. Songbooks may not always have numbers to indicate which fingers to use on which strings. In general, your index finger will usually play notes just above the first fret (or just above the highest fret you are playing), your middle finger the next fret, your ring finger the next fret, etc. For bar chords and trickier chords, your ukulele instructor (or fellow player) can help you determine what the proper fingering should be.

Sometimes you will need to make a barre (bar) chord. Bar chords require you to press down on more than one string with a single finger. In the picture to the left, we see that the index finger is being used to hold down all four strings at the second fret. Notice that the artist is using the middle finger to give additional support by pressing down on top of the index finger. This technique is common and recommended for beginners who need the added pressure to keep the chord from “buzzing”. A buzzing sound is made when strings are not fully depressed and vibrate against a fret on the fret board of the ukulele.

Now, drag the fingernail on your right index finger down across all four strings and use the pad of your finger on the way back up - you’ve played your first chord! Some people also like to use the pad of their thumb on the way down, and the pad of their index finger on the way back up. Another technique is to press the pads of your thumb and your index finger together (as if you’re holding a pick) and to drag the fingernails across the strings as they stroke up and down. In the end, whatever feels most comfortable to you will be the best way to play. As you progress and learn to play better, you may want to try different techniques; but for now, go with what feels most natural.
Top 10 Tips for Ukulele Beginners (as adapted from Ukulelehunt.com)

1. Record yourself playing and listen back to it. It's difficult to play and listen to yourself at the same time. Quite often, just noticing what you're doing wrong is enough to fix the problem. It also gets you used to playing in front of the mic, making it less of a big deal if and when you want to record yourself properly.

2. Much to the RIAA's disgust, you can't sue someone for stealing a chord progression. Although Metallica tried to sue the band Unfaith for changing from F to E. If you hear something you like, work it out and steal it.

3. Practice so slowly you can't possibly make a mistake. If you make the same mistake over and over again, it's incredibly hard to get rid of it. It's much easier to start slow, get the tune under your fingers and gradually speed up (those of us who took typing class learned this early on). If you're more conscientious, you'll use a metronome while you're doing this sort of thing.

4. Learn how to read ukulele tab. There are plenty of people around who can play the ukulele without learning to read tab. But there's so much ukulele tab around on the net now that it's really going to increase the speed that you can pick up new tunes. We're not teaching you tabs at this point in your ukulele lessons, but feel free to browse around on the internet and get used to reading uke tabs on your own.

5. Once you've decided you enjoy the ukulele, get a nice one. Almost everyone starts off playing on a very cheap ukulele. These ukes are fine for deciding if playing the ukulele is for you. But once you're into it, get yourself a decent quality ukulele. It'll be easier to play, sound better (so you'll be more pleased with the way you sound), and will give you more motivation to practice.

6. The type of strings you use can make a big different to the sound of your ukulele. The strings you get with your ukulele are likely to be cheap and of poor construct. It's worth replacing them with higher quality strings such as Worth, Martin, or Aquila.

7. Don't hold your ukulele too tightly! The ukulele is small and it's very easy to smother the sound out of it. Don't hold it too tightly with your left or right hand, or you'll lose a lot of volume/tone and your playing may sound muted and strained. Watch how masters like Jake Shimabukuro play and hold the uke.

8. Listen to lots of ukulele players. The more you listen, the more you'll get a feel for the ukulele and the way it sounds. It will influence how you play subconsciously.

9. Take the time to tune up properly. The ukulele isn't the easiest instrument to get in tune and keep in tune, but must be done often. If your ukulele is out of tune, you WILL sound terrible.

10. Enjoy yourself. The big appeal of the ukulele is that it is the most fun instrument around. People try to denigrate the ukulele as a toy. To some, calling the uke a toy can make the experience of playing one more enjoyable and less intimidating. After all, toys are fun to play with!
Ready? Set? Learn!

Are you ready to learn your first few chords? We have already played an “A” chord. Let’s try a few more. Below are diagrams of some basic “Major” chords. Try them each, and then we will try putting them together into a song. As you learn more about chords, you will note that there are several different ways to play each chord (as shown below with the D7 chord). Learn your chords well and try to memorize the fingering position for each one. Sometimes when you are playing a song, only the names of the chords (without diagrams) will be given to you. Likewise, if chord diagrams are shown, they do not often include the relevant finger numbers for playing each chord. If you memorize each chord you learn, you will eventually be able to walk up to sheet music which references chords for other instruments (piano, guitar, etc) and play along freely and easily.
He's Got The Whole World In His Hands – Soprano Ukulele

He's got the whole world in His hands

He's got the whole world in His hands

He's got the whole world in His hands

He's got the whole world in His hands

He's got the little tiny baby, in His hands,
He's got the little tiny baby, in His hands,
He's got the little tiny baby, in His hands,
He's got the little tiny baby, in His hands,
He's got the whole world in His hands . . .

He's got you and me brother, in His hands,
He's got you and me sister, in His hands,
He's got you and me brother, in His hands,
He's got you and me sister, in His hands,
He's got the whole world in His hands . . .

He's got everybody here, in His hands,
He's got everybody here, in His hands,
He's got everybody here, in His hands,
He's got everybody here, in His hands,
He's got the whole world in His hands . . .
Singin' in the Rain – Soprano Ukulele

I'm singin' in the rain, just singin' in the rain

What a wonderful feelin', I'm happy again

I'm laughin' at clouds so dark up above

The sun's in my heart and I'm ready for love

Let the stormy clouds chase everyone from the place

Come on with the rain, there's a smile on my face

And I walk down the lane with a happy refrain

Oh I'm singin', just singin' in the rain
Clementine (In a Cavern) – Soprano Ukulele

G
\[1\] \[2\] \[3\]

In a cavern, in a canyon,
D7
\[1\] \[3\]

Excavating for a mine,
C G
\[5\] \[2\] \[3\]

Dwelt a miner, forty-niner,
D7 G
\[1\] \[3\] \[2\] \[3\]

And his daughter Clementine.

Chorus:
G
\[1\] \[3\]

Oh my darling, oh my darling,
D7
\[1\] \[3\]

Oh my darling Clementine
C G
\[3\] \[1\] \[2\] \[3\]

You are lost and gone forever,
D7 G
\[1\] \[3\] \[1\] \[5\]

Dreadful sorry, Clementine.

Light she was, and like a fairy,
And her shoes were number nine,
Herring boxes without topses,
Sandals were for Clementine.

(Repeat chorus)

Walking lightly as a fairy,
Though her shoes were number nine,
Sometimes tripping, lightly skipping,
Lovely girl, my Clementine

(Repeat chorus)

Drove she ducklings to the water
Ev’ry morning just at nine,
Hit her foot against a splinter,
Fell into the foaming brine.

(Repeat chorus)

Ruby lips above the water,
Blowing bubbles soft and fine,
But alas, I was no swimmer,
Neither was my Clementine.

(Repeat chorus)

In a churchyard near the canyon,
Where the myrtle doth entwine,
There grow rosies and some posies,
Fertilized by Clementine.

(Repeat chorus)

Then, the miner, forty-niner,
Soon began to fret and pine,
Thought he oughter join his daughter,
So he’s now with Clementine.

(Repeat chorus)

I’m so lonely, lost without her,
Wish I’d had a fishing line,
Which I might have cast about her,
Might have saved my Clementine.

(Repeat chorus)

In my dreams she still doth haunt me,
Robed in garments soaked with brine,
Then she rises from the waters,
And I kiss my Clementine.

(Repeat chorus)
Home on the Range – Soprano Ukulele

Oh give me a home where the buffalo roam

Where the deer and the antelope play

Where seldom is heard a discouraging word

And the skies are not cloudy all day

Chorus:

Home, home on the range

Where the deer and the antelope play

Where seldom is heard a discouraging word

And the skies are not cloudy all day

The Red Man was pressed from this part of the west
It's not likely he'll ever return
to the banks of Red River, where seldom, if ever
his flickering campfires still burn

(Repeat chorus)

How often at night when the heavens are bright
with the light from the glittering stars
Have I stood there amazed and asked, as I gazed
if their glory exceeds that of ours

(Repeat chorus)

Oh, give me a land where the bright diamond sand
flows leisurely down the stream
Where the graceful white swan goes gliding along
like a maid in a heavenly dream

(Repeat chorus)