



Using Songs to learn Ukulele

There are two approaches when learning a musical instrument like the ukulele or guitar. One approach that is very popular with the ukulele goes right along with its “easy” to play reputation. This approach uses songs to learn the ukulele.

A second approach is to learn what would be consider the “basics” before working with songs. This would be akin to the apprenticeship system developed in the Middle Ages. An apprentice would develop his or her skills at the foot of a master for several years before going on their own. My personal opinion when learning a musical instrument is to seek out a master teacher or two and study with them one-on-one.

Both approaches involve exploring and mastering the technical and musical aspect of your chosen instrument.

A Song

A song is like a recipe. It provides a list of ingredients that are needed to successfully create the recipe. If you are baking a cake, you need flour and eggs. If you don’t have all the ingredients needed, you have to run out and get what is needed.

The ingredients for a song are the chords, lyrics, melody, and the style of the song. Is it a rock song, a bluegrass song, a country song, a jazz standard, a latin tune, etc... Each style has a recognizable rhythmic style associated with it.

Playing a song also requires you start and end it. That might require an introduction, intor for short, and ending. Compose your own or use the song’s is already written. If you are playing by yourself, you can just start it and end is without an intro or ending.

Picking the Song

It’s a good idea to start with simpler songs that don’t require a lot of “ingredients”, essentially a lot of chords. The fewer chords in a song, chances are it’ll be easier to learn.

The Chords

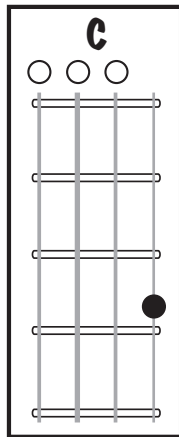
First, memorize the chord shape and an efficient fingering. Multiple fingerings might be needed depending on the chords before and after any given chord. Initially, you only need one chord shape and fingering for each chord.





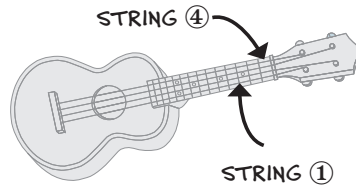
In order to learn chords, start with basic open position chords. These are the “easy” chords around frets 1, 2, 3, and 4. They typically include one or more open strings.

The C or C Major chord is typically one of the first chords most players learn. It requires only one finger. And with most ukulele chords, you strum or stroke all four strings.



The C chord can be fingered using finger one string 1*, fret (3) and sounding all four strings.

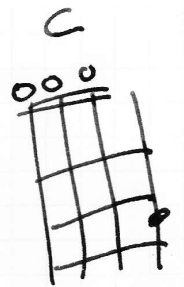
* String one is the closest string to the floor when holding the ukulele.



There are a few other “one finger” ukulele chords like Am, C7, Cmaj7, A7. But if they’re not one of the chords in the song, there’s no need to learn them at this time.

Switching Chords

The learning process involves using the *mind*, *ear* and *hands* when learning the ukulele. As with any physical endeavor, it requires developing the motor skills to achieve success. The ukulele requires both the fretting hand and the strumming hand to execute what the mind and ear tells them to do.



Personal Chord Diary

After learning your first chord. Start your own chord diary or dictionary. Put all the chords you know in one place for easy reference. Over the long haul you won't need this chord diary except for reference.

Developing these motor skills is where the work is. It takes a many repetitions to train the fingers to go where you want them to go. Initially they don't cooperate. Switching chords is the first difficult aspect of playing the ukulele. It's relatively easy to memorize a few chords. It's not as easy to switch between them – in tempo.

To speed this switching process up and develop the skills necessary for switching, play each chord in the order that they appear in the song. Stroke each chord one time.



For the song *Stand By Me* in the key of G, the chords are G, Em, C, and D7. That's the chord order to practice switching. Start slowly, in tempo and gradually increase the tempo until you can switch faster than you'll ever need to play the song.

Basic Strums

Just as there's a basic set of chords you need, there's a few basic strums that will get you through most songs.

The Basic Strum

Most songs are in common or 4/4 time. This means that one measure or bar of music contains four beats.

Counting 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and, strike the chord on the numbers and the "ands". The numbers are the down beats and the "ands" are the up beat.

Strum the strings with your extended index finger. Strike the strings with the nail of the index finger on the down beats. Then brush the strings with the pad of your index finger on the up beats. This strum pattern, in standard music notation, is shown below.



Do this while switching chords in tempo and you have a basic strum that works in most settings.

See the book *A Guide to Ukulele Strums* for a wide range of basic strums and styles.



My book *Ukulele Chords* and *A Guide to Advanced Chords for Ukulele* takes a fundamental approach to learning basic, movable and 4-part contemporary chords - a.k.a. “jazz” chords.

Exploring Jazz Chords on Ukulele takes the song based approach to learning “jazz” using chord progressions from songs in the jazz standard repertoire and a few of the chords from *Ukulele Chords* and *A Guide the Advanced Chords for Ukulele* books.