Getting Beyond Shapes

Over the years, people have come up with various fingering systems, patterns, and even gadgets to make learning the ukulele easier. Most systems are shape and pattern-based and geared to the beginning student and do not require any knowledge of the ukulele fingerboard beyond what a fret is and the location of strings ① ② ③ and ④.

Common Fingering Systems

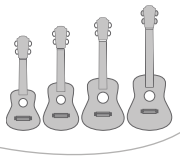
One thing most fingering systems have in common is that they are shape and pattern-based. A connect the dots approach and does not require any knowledge of the actual names of the notes you are playing. These approaches don't provide any method or way to connect the various shapes. These approaches are fingerings, starting on the same finger each time. And most importantly, by being set fingerings, they produce one sound.

The initial set of basic chords are typically dictated to the beginner or learned from a book as chord shapes using chord grids. They show the fingerboard shape, the fingers to use, and what strings to play. This approach carries over to learning scales. But what are the notes? The notes could have come from Mars as far as most are concerned. This shape-based put finger x here approach also carries over to TAB, showing what string and fret to play.

Beyond a basic set of scales and chords, there are too many shapes to memorize. Knowledge of the fingerboard is needed to progress beyond basic ukulele shapes. The sooner the shapes are linked to their actual notes and the sound they produce, the better. A shape should come after the notes and sound. It is the notes that create the shape, not the other way around.

The ukulele has a unique capability to play the same note on different strings using any one of your fingers, giving tremendous flexibility and headaches at the same time. The duplicate note ability of the ukulele at the extreme provides you multiple choices for a note.

Example: String one open is A, it's also on string two fret five, string three fret nine. If using a high "G" tuning, A is also available on string four fret two. A lot of fingering and tonal choices. The piano has one location for a note, and set fingerings are an advantage.



Basic Requirements for a Fingering System

There are four sources of material used for improvisation: *scales*, *intervals*, *arpeggios*, and *sequences*. Any fingering system needs to support the efficient playing of each. Allow for playing any note with any finger, support multiple ways of playing any musical passage taking advantage of the ukulele's ability to play the same note on different strings. As ukulele players, we might as well use this feature.

All fingering systems provide a set number of scale fingerings and shapes. It's like painting by numbers. They are limited in scope and do not address any fingering problems inherent with the ukulele's tuning. These include playing single notes on the same fret either on adjacent or non-adjacent strings, starting on different fingers, connecting positions..., etc.

Being locked into a fingering system is the most common reason for one to feel that their improvisations are limited and always sound the same. They do!!! Set fingerings produce set sounds.

The Solution to Set Fingering Systems

One major problem with set fingering systems is that they start on a particular interval, finger, and string. They are shape-based, with no knowledge of notes required.

It is challenging to develop a fingering system that works starting on any scale degree and any string, works equally well for scales, intervals, arpeggios and sequences and addresses inherent fingerings problems that encounter.

For exploring scale fingerings, we'll use one-octave scales. To create longer two and three-octave fingerings, all we will need to do is connect various one-octave fingerings, and it won't matter what finger we start or end with. Our goal is not to paint ourselves into a proverbial fingering corner. "Oops, I never played in this area of the neck or from this finger."

One thing that will break one out of a set fingering system is knowing the neck's notes. Knowing the names of the notes of the fingerboard is not the same as reading. It is as simple as putting your finger on any string, at any fret, and name the note. It does not require you to memorize a bunch of new fingerings.

So, What is this System?

It's not a system but a series of principles used to play the notes on the ukulele and explore multiple possibilities. If you think about it, there are never more than two notes to worry about. The note that you're on and the next note. It's that next note that gives ukulele players problems. Using the principles from The *Six Secrets of Ukulele Fingering*, there are up to six ways of playing that next note.

Using the six motion principles from the book The Six Secrets of Ukulele Fingering and knowing the neck's notes, a ukulele player CAN play ANY scale, ANY intervallic sequence, ANY arpeggio or sequence starting on ANY finger, and you don't have to memorize countless shapes or patterns. There is no musical situation that can't be solved using one or a combination of these principles. It's great for reading as well as improvising.

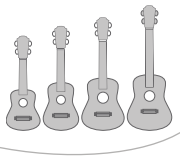
This system gives a ukulele player multiple fingering pathways through any musical passage and up great musical choices and possibilities. It's more work than the set fingerings of other systems. However, it offers a broader palette of musical options than any set fingering system.

From the principles from *The Six Secrets of Ukulele Fingering*, any fingering system can be analyzed using one or more of the six principles. This system is not shape-based and thus needs a knowledge of the names of the notes of the ukulele neck. It applies equally well to scales as it does to intervals, arpeggios, and sequences.

To learn the notes of the ukulele neck, I recommended my book Learning *the Ukulele Fingerboard*. This book provides easy steps to finally mastering the ukulele neck.

Beyond the basic chords and scales, a ukulele player should quickly realize that there are far too many shapes on the ukulele to memorize. Just take a look at any chord dictionary to see that. Throw in scales, arpeggios, intervals, and it can be pretty overwhelming. It all comes down to the notes.

The bottom line is that this "non" system can explain any other method or system.



The Six Secrets of Ukulele Fingering

In his book *The Six Secrets of Guitar Fingering*, Chuck Anderson has developed a system based on six motion principles for navigating the fingerboard. We can apply these principles to the ukulele, and I have adapted and applied these to the ukulele in my book, *The Six Secrets of Ukulele Fingering*.

The **Six Secrets of Ukulele Fingering** are *Basic*, *Slide*, *Pass*, *Leap*, *Stretch* and *Contraction*. Here is an excerpt from Chuck Anderson's book.

Basic - is used when the passage falls within a four fret span, and you need the maximum motion efficiency. This fingering solution minimizes the number of notes per string. Consequently, it maximizes the number of string changes resulting in the highest possible mixture of tone colors. The Basic four fret span can be set and reset anywhere on the neck.

Slide - is used when the passage can not be played within a single four fret span or when more notes per string are needed to produce a particular effect. I used situations where a gradually ascending or descending diagonal motion best solves the passage's physical and musical demands.

Pass - maximizes the number of notes per string, making the timbre consistent. It allows you to cover a larger span of the fingerboard by moving up or down the neck. The pass provides an effective way to move straight up the first string. It's particularly useful in developing two or more octave fingerings and playing melodies with an adjacent drone string.

Contraction - is used to subtly shift the position up or down as you move from string to string. Though contraction is a much-neglected principle, it often eliminates the need to stretch.

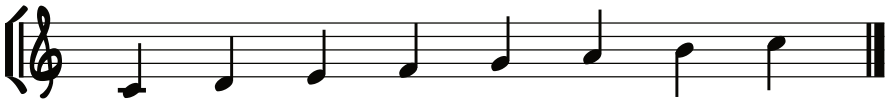
Stretch - is used when the majority of notes in a passage fall within a four fret span except for a note or two. Generally, the stretch is avoided. However, if the avoidance of stretch causes excessive position shifting and this shifting can't be justified for any musical reason, use the stretch principle. Stretch can also be used to prepare for a new position.

Leap - is used to solve a passage whose range is unusually broad or when you need to alter the notes' timbre drastically.

Using the Fingering Principles

The dominant principle of fingering is **Basic** and not marked in the examples. The other principles are when notes are beyond a four fret span or when a particular musical effect is needed. Each of the examples illustrates a fingering principle or a combination of principles.

Example C Major Scale

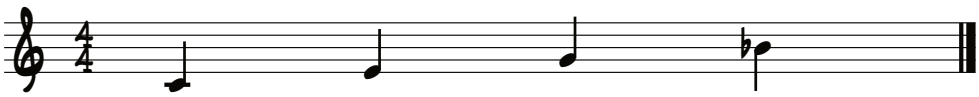


Example A: C Major Scale, One Octave C to C, C D E F G A B C`

Example **A** shows a few of the possibilities starting on string four. All produce a particular sound. Do not memorize these examples but simply explore the possibilities. To improvise, vary the rhythm, add embellishments, staccato, legato, hammer-ons, pull off, etc.

There are countless other ways to play this scale. Using the one-octave C Major scale above and starting on string four alone, there is a minimum of twenty different pathways through a one-octave major scale using each of the fingering principles once or twice only. If you combine principles or apply the principles on different note combinations, the possibilities are almost endless. Compared to the one finger, one pattern approach of most systems, the musical possibilities are staggering.

Example C7 Arpeggio

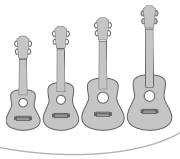


Example B: C7 Arpeggio, C E G Bb

Example **B** shows several examples for playing the notes of a C7 arpeggio. Again, Do Not memorize these examples but simply explore them. To improvise, as with the scale, vary the rhythm, add embellishments, staccato, legato, hammer-ons, pull-offs, etc.

I can't say this enough, **DO NOT MEMORIZE** any of these as the shapes these fingerings happen to make, memorize the notes and the principles used. The goal is to be able to play any note with any finger making wise, efficient fingering decisions and pathways.

Getting Beyond Shapes



Some problems that a ukulele player will encounter are the actual motor skills necessary for the six fingering principles. There are a whole series of fingering exercises to gain motor skills. Visit **www.LearningUkulele.com** for a series of lessons for developing the motor skills using the fingering principles from *The Six Secrets of Ukulele Fingering*.

Now go back and explore these on every string using every possible starting finger. Apply it to all your scales, intervals, arpeggios and sequences. Lots of work but the reward is greater than the effort.

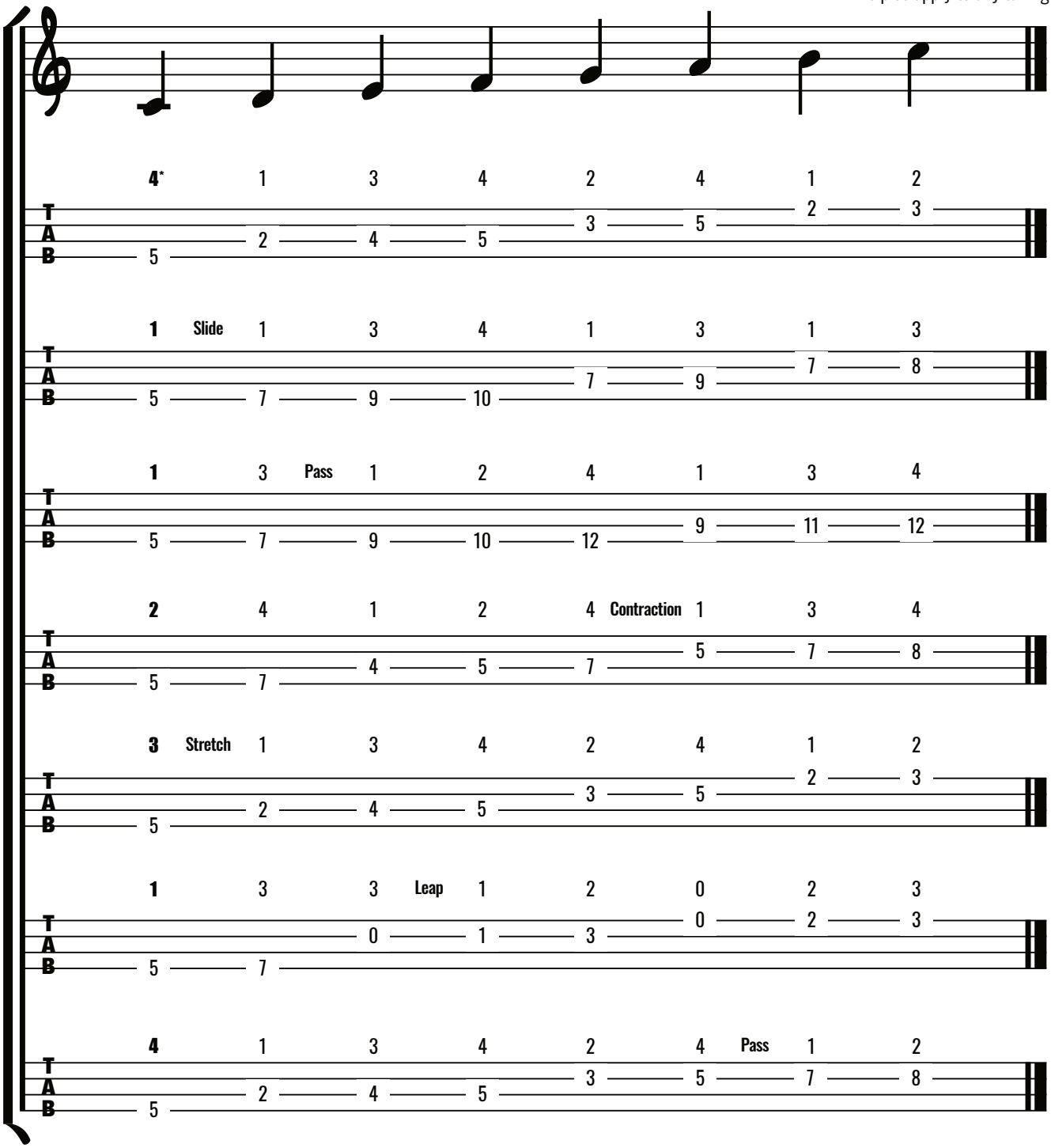
Examples are shown using a Low G, C Tuning. The Principles used to apply to any tuning.

C Major Scale

A

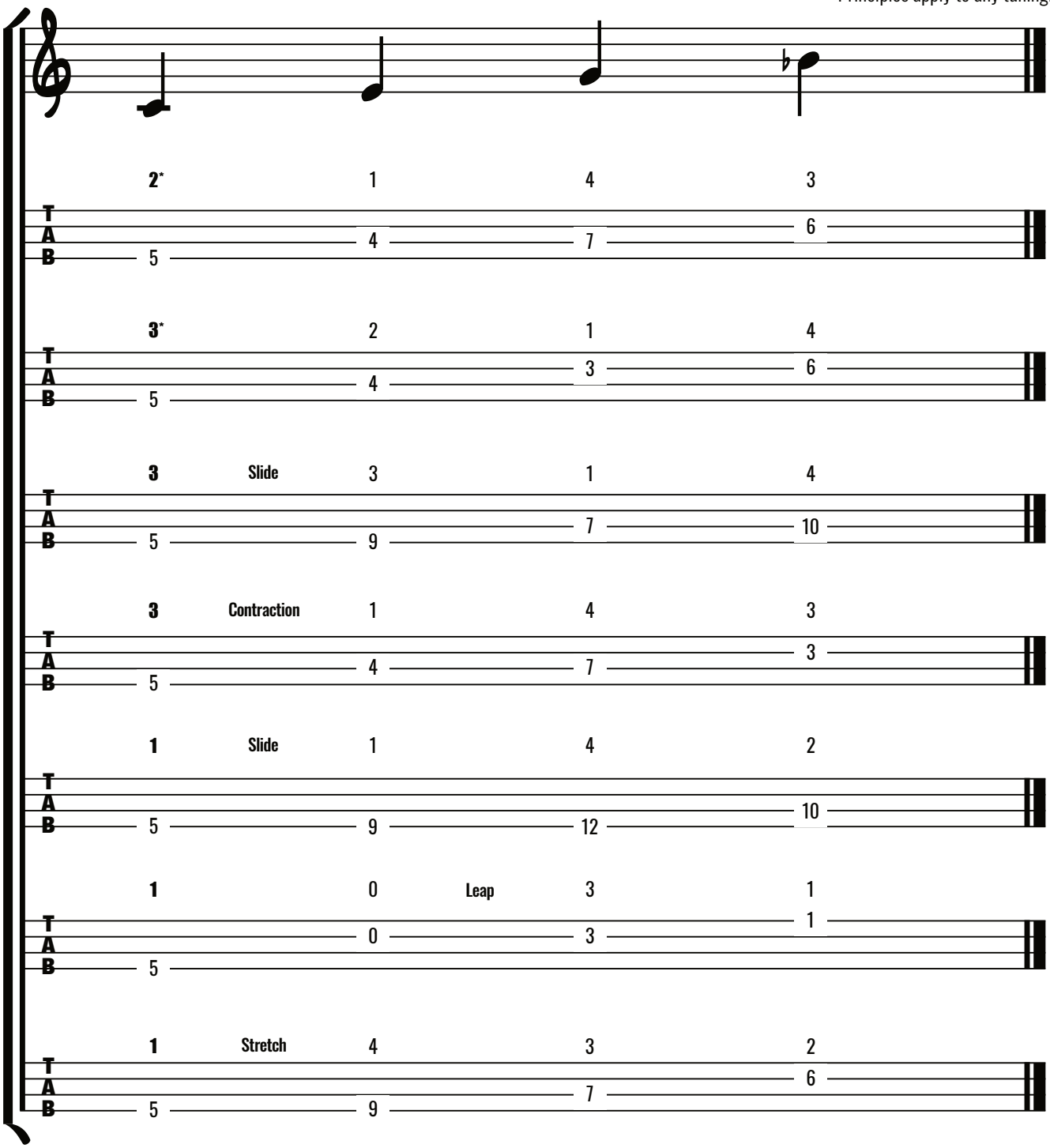
*Basic - 4-frets Span Fingering

Examples Shown Using Low G, C Tuning.
Principles apply to any tuning.



C7 Arpeggio

B

***Basic - 4-fret Span Fingering**

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