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Introducing the ukulele

This chapter is an introduction to the ukulele and its history, with some suggestions to help you get kitted out so that you are ready to start playing.

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A potted history of the ukulele

Say hello to your little friend – a quick introduction to the ukulele

The ukulele was developed in the 1880s from a small guitar – the “Machete de Braga” – that originally came from the island of Madeira, near Portugal. The Machete was a popular souvenir amongst wealthy British tourists who visited Madeira in the 19th century, and there is a picture of Lorina Liddell, sister of Alice, the inspiration for *Alice in Wonderland*, playing one in the 1860s.

Portuguese sailors visiting Hawaii took the instrument with them, and these were the forebears of the modern ukulele. The name “ukulele” translates from Hawaiian as “dancing flea”, and there are a number of theories about the origin of the name. A popular one is that when they watched the sailors playing, the Hawaiians thought that their fingers looked like fleas dancing on the fingerboard. The king of Hawaii, David Kalākaua (1836-1891), should be mentioned here as well, because his love of the ukulele was one of the most important factors in cementing its popularity.



Ukulele or Ukelele?

There are a number of different spellings that seem to be widely accepted. I've opted for “ukulele” in this book, although I have been reliably informed that there must always be an apostrophe in front of the first letter in order to spell it correctly in Hawaiian.

Throughout its history the ukulele has had three main peaks in popularity, with the modern one being perhaps the largest. Interestingly, each of these is linked to developments in technology. In the 1920s, the ukulele became popular through the radio and recorded sound. The second peak of popularity in the 1950s coincided with the rise of television, and the ukulele's current popularity has coincided with the rise of the internet and social media. In part, this is probably because it is very easy to make videos of performances using hand-held devices and upload them to sites such as YouTube.

A few notable players

This list is very much a personal choice, but here are a few suggestions of some players to check out:

Roy Smeck (1900-1994)

Known as “the wizard of the strings”, Smeck was born in 1900 in Pennsylvania and died in 1994 in New York. As well as the guitar and banjo, he was also noted as a ukulele player. His musical style was developed from a mixture of jazz, country, and Hawaiian music. His performance of the jazz tune *Tiger Rag* is well worth a listen. You can listen to it and watch the performance on YouTube, here:

<https://youtu.be/-8fQePz4FcE>

George Formby (1904-1961)

The son of a music hall entertainer, who also used the same stage name, originally Formby’s act was based on his father’s, but he began to include the ukulele in his act after he bought one from a fellow performer. At the age of 28 he recorded a number of novelty songs, and this was the beginning of a rise to international stardom, including in Soviet Russia where, apparently, his films were hugely popular. There is a story of a schoolboy who walked up and down the street outside his house in Blackpool in the 1950s but never plucked up the courage to knock on the door to ask for his autograph. It’s a shame that George Formby didn’t live a few years longer as maybe once the Beatles were popular, John Lennon could have finally got his autograph!

One of George Formby’s best-known songs is *When I’m Cleaning Windows*. With lyrics that were considered rather suggestive at the time, it provided light relief and became a very popular song in the tense times leading up to World War Two. You can listen to it and watch his performance on YouTube, here:

<https://youtu.be/sfmAeijj5cM>

May Singhi Breen (1895-1970)

As a performer, composer and arranger, Breen was an important figure in the history of the ukulele. She successfully campaigned for the American Federation of Musicians to accept the ukulele as a musical instrument in its own right rather than just a novelty, and recorded the piece *Inspiration* for ukulele and big band. You can watch her performance of *Waitin’ Around* on YouTube, here:

<https://youtu.be/ZNIVgf32rxg>



The internet makes it easy to enjoy performances by many of the great players of the ukulele in a way that wasn’t possible when I started playing. Listening regularly to other players and being inspired by what is possible can be an important addition to your practice time.

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James Hill (born 1980)

A graduate of the music education programme started by J. Chalmers Doane in Canada in the 1970s, which used the ukulele to teach musical literacy, Hill is widely recognised as one of today's leading players, and his performance of *Billie Jean* is a great example of his mastery of the ukulele. You can see the performance on YouTube, here:

https://youtu.be/2gyxeXW_2T8

Jake Shimabukuro (born 1976)

Born in Hawaii, Shimabukuro has done much to further the popularity of the ukulele, including premiering the *Ukulele Concerto* that was composed for him by Byron Yasui in 2015. He became famous after his version of *While My Guitar Gently Weeps* by George Harrison (a keen ukulele player himself) became an internet hit. You can see it on YouTube, here:

<https://youtu.be/puSkP3uym5k>

Israel Kamakawi'ole (1959-1997)

Kamakawi'ole, also known affectionately as "Bruddah Iz", died at a tragically young age but managed to do much to popularise the ukulele, with performances including his version of *Somewhere Over The Rainbow*, which you can view on YouTube, here:

<https://youtu.be/V1bFr2SWP1I>

He also moved the ukulele away from its image as a novelty instrument by using it to perform a number of heartfelt songs that highlighted the problems of the indigenous population in Hawaii.

Taimane Gardner (born 1989)

From Oahu in Hawaii, Gardner is one of the new generation of ukulele players. Using her fingernails like a classical guitarist, she has a virtuoso technique that includes strumming and tremolo playing. Her performances of *Bodysurfing* and Bach's *Toccat*a are good examples of this. You can view these performances on YouTube, here:

<https://youtu.be/CookkyMzTNE>

<https://youtu.be/6JX13LwnZss>

...cont'd

Brittini Paiva (born 1988)

Born in 1988, Paiva is a self-taught player from Hilo in Hawaii. She played a number of instruments before focusing on the ukulele at the age of 11. As a jazz musician she has won a number of awards and performed with musicians such as Tommy Emmanuel and Carlos Santana. An interesting aspect of her technique is the use of a thumb pick, which allows her to swap between plectrum and fingerstyle technique. Her live performance of *Take Five* is worth checking out on YouTube, here:

<https://youtu.be/4tNdNFACU00>

Ben Rouse (born 1977)

Ben Rouse took up guitar at the age of 11, and by the age of 14 was regularly playing lead guitar in a number of bands in his home town. He was inspired to take up the ukulele after seeing a performance by the Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain, and now regularly performs with them. Keen to explore different aspects of the ukulele, he was the soloist for the premiere of the author's Ukulele Concerto in May 2017.

The Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain

Started in 1985, the Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain (www.ukuleleorchestra.com) has been a large part of the rise in popularity of the ukulele. Its repertoire includes unique versions of popular songs by artists such as Kate Bush and Nirvana; *The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy* by Tchaikovsky; and film music by Ennio Morricone. You can view its performance of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* on YouTube, here:

<https://youtu.be/pLgJ7pk0X-s>



Whatever stage you are with the ukulele, so was everyone else once.

Buying and looking after a ukulele

Buying a ukulele

Part of the appeal of the ukulele is the fact that it is possible to buy an instrument and get playing at very little cost, because compared to other instruments such as the flute, beginner ukuleles don't cost too much. I think that's all the more reason to buy the best ukulele that you can afford as your first instrument. If possible, try a few instruments in your local music shop and take someone who plays ukulele or guitar with you when you do.



If you know someone who already plays the ukulele, ask them to come along if you are buying yours from a shop. They will probably have some good suggestions, and it will help you decide on a ukulele if you can listen whilst someone else plays it.

Buying online is another option worth looking into. I prefer to take my time and try out a ukulele before I buy it, so I haven't personally bought a ukulele online before, but I have purchased a few guitars and haven't had any problems.

When looking at ukuleles, check that the action (the distance the strings are set above the fingerboard) is low enough to press the strings down easily, but high enough so that when you press down firmly the string doesn't buzz on the metal bars (frets) on the fingerboard.

A case or a "gig bag" will help to protect your ukulele from damage when you are out and about with it or not using it for a day or two. It is also worth kitting yourself out with an electronic tuner, a music stand, and a metronome.



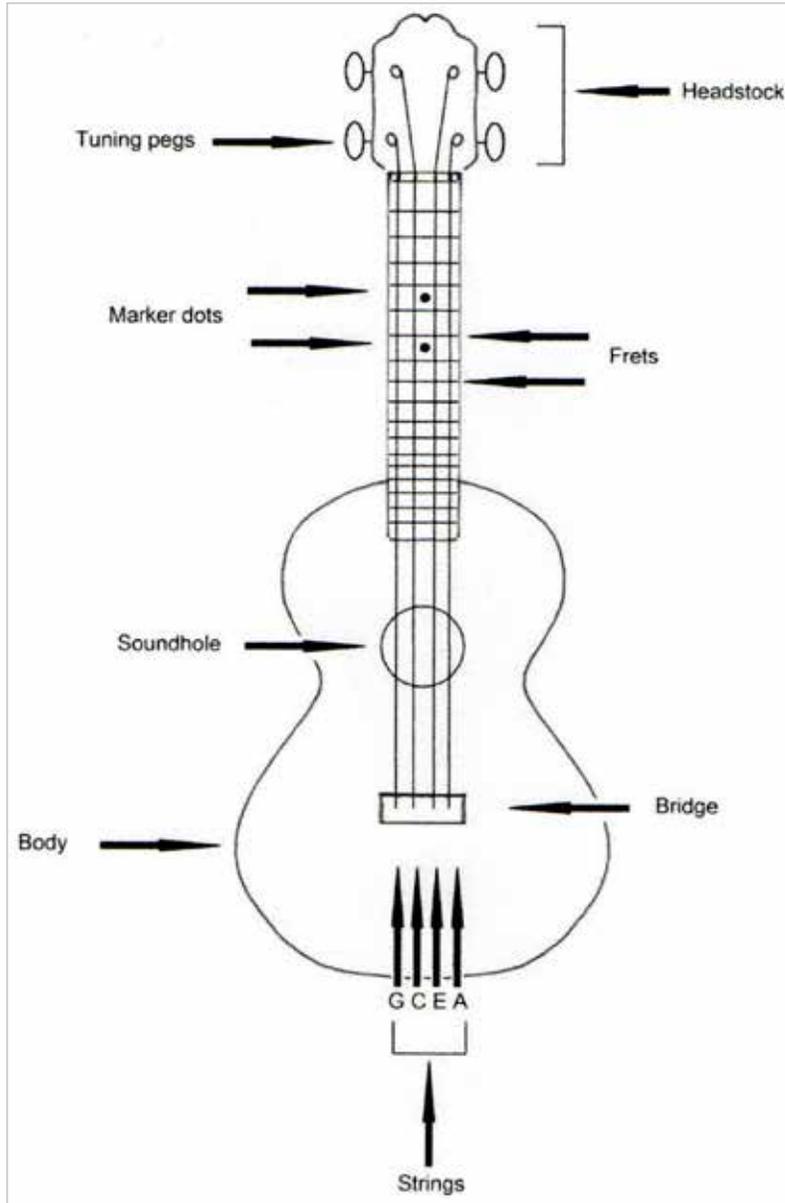
Looking after your ukulele

As with any musical instrument, extremes of temperature and humidity are not good for your ukulele, so make sure that you avoid keeping it near a heater or a radiator. Using a ukulele stand is also a good investment. I once had an instrument that I had leant against a wall knocked over and damaged, and the repair bill was definitely higher than the cost of buying a stand.



Don't leave your ukulele near a heater or radiator. The heat can dry the wood out, causing it to split. Avoid leaving it in direct sunlight as well.

The main parts of a ukulele



Ukuleles can be made of "laminated". However, solid wood will give you a better sound. Koa wood is traditionally used, but mahogany and spruce are very often used instead.



Old strings lose their tone, so it's a good idea to put new ones on regularly, especially if you are playing a lot. See pages 91-92 for instructions on changing ukulele strings.



Your finances will, of course, dictate how much you can spend on your first ukulele, but don't be tempted to buy the cheapest instrument that you can find. Buy the best instrument that you can afford. I have found that even £10 or £20 more can make a big difference in how easy an instrument is to play. A more playable ukulele will help you enjoy your playing, which in turn will keep you motivated.

Playing position

When playing the ukulele, the most important thing is to find a posture where you can keep the ukulele steady whilst moving your hands freely.



When standing, the traditional way of holding the ukulele is by pressing it against your chest using your forearm. Unfortunately, this muffles the sound of the instrument, so modern players very often use a strap to avoid this.

It is possible to buy a strap designed to hold a classical guitar when standing. I usually use one of these, as it has a small hook that attaches to the edge of the sound hole, so the ukulele doesn't need any modification.

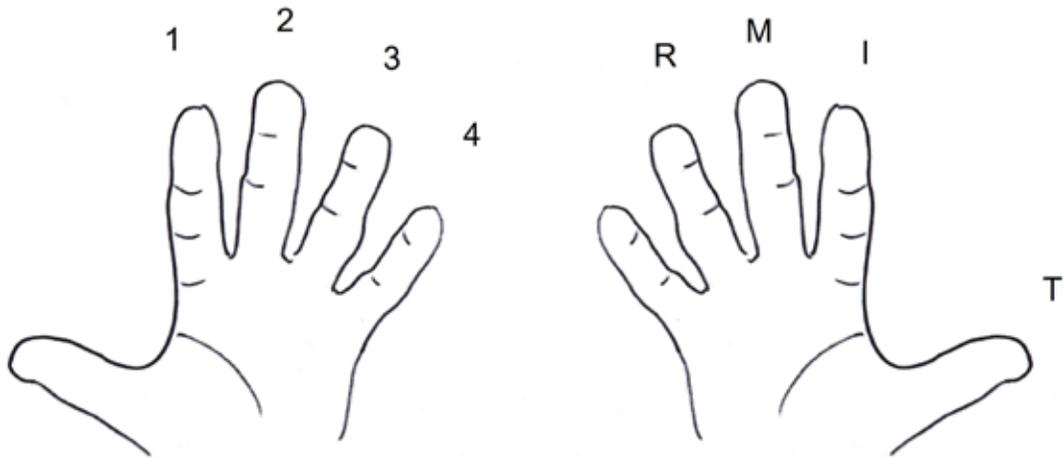
You could also ask an instrument repairer to fit a "strap button" on the end of the instrument so that you can use a strap designed for an acoustic guitar.

When sitting down, support your ukulele by resting it on your leg and using your forearm on top of the instrument to keep it steady.



Using your hands

In ukulele playing we use numbers to indicate the different fingers of the fretting hand, and letters for each finger of the strumming hand.



Keep the nails short on the fingers of your fretting hand so that you can use the tips of your fingers to press the strings down firmly.

Using a plectrum (pick)

Using a plectrum is often seen as being incorrect technique for the ukulele. However, during its history there are a number of examples of using a plectrum. The player Jennie Durkee published a tutor book *The American Way of Playing Ukulele Solos* as long ago as 1917, which was based around playing with a plectrum, and I was recently talking to a well-known professional who will occasionally use a plectrum to get more volume.

As a beginner, I would suggest using just your fingers to start with, and including use of a plectrum once you have been playing for a while.



If you are playing left-handed, the letters will refer to the fingers on your left hand, and the numbers the fingers on your right hand.

Summary

Now that you have had an introduction to the ukulele and the playing position, you are ready to get started.

Here are a few suggestions to help as you work through the book:

- 1 If you aren't sure of anything in the book or struggle with it at first, leave it for a day or two and come back to it. Whilst the ukulele has many advantages for players wanting to get going quickly, there are still a lot of skills to learn to play it proficiently, and taking a break can give you a chance to absorb the new information.
- 2 Following on from this, be patient with yourself. You will go through stages when your fingers are sore, and your hands won't do what you want them to, but don't forget the Chinese proverb: "A thousand-mile journey begins with the first step."
- 3 If you know any other ukulele players, don't be afraid to ask for help. People are very often pleased to share what they have learnt. Also, you never stop learning, and even now I still learn new things or just see a different way of approaching something.
- 4 Enjoy your playing. Perhaps this seems an odd thing to write, but there will be days when you may not feel you are progressing, or find learning a particular song challenging. If that happens, play some pieces that you are confident with for the sheer pleasure of playing, or listen to one of your favourite players to re-connect with the spark that made you want to pick up a ukulele.