

- » Appreciating the advantages of the ukulele
- » Looking at different sizes
- » Getting to know the ukulele
- » Discovering what you can play on the uke

Chapter 1

Exploring the Ukulele

Ukulele virtuoso Jake Shimabukuro says something that makes a lot of sense to many ukulele players: “One of the things I love about being a ukulele player is that no matter where I go in the world to play, the audience has such low expectations.” And it’s very true. Many people think of the ukulele as a toy and are unaware of the great music that can be made with it. People are often stunned that you can make real music on a ukulele at all. But the uke is very much a real instrument with a rich musical history, and it’s quite capable of producing everything from light melodies to riotous strumming.

This chapter fills you in on why the uke’s such a fantastic instrument, describes some of the global musical styles you can expect to play on it, and, I hope, inspires you to make some great music with your new best friend!

Understanding the Uke’s Advantages

Why would you want to play ukulele when you could play another exotic instrument such as a saz, shenai, or sackbut? Well, as this section reveals, you can get certain things from a uke that other instruments simply can’t supply.

Loving the sound

The best reason for picking up the ukulele is its captivating, unique sound. Whether it's a lilting Hawaiian song or some riotous jazzy strumming, no other instrument sounds quite like the uke.



REMEMBER

The unusual arrangement of the strings gives you close harmony chords and harp-like tones that simply aren't available on most fretted instruments.

Joining a vibrant community

A special community surrounds ukulele players, one that you rarely get with other instruments. You'd struggle to find a group of bass guitar players getting together to form a bass guitar orchestra, but all over the globe groups of uke players regularly get together to uke-out on a few tunes.

Don't worry about being too old or too young for joining the ukulele community. Most ukulele groups have members ranging in age from teenagers up to pensioners as well as a good gender balance. Most groups welcome beginners and some larger ones have a specific group for people just starting on the uke. No matter who you are, you'll get a warm welcome.



TIP

If you're looking to get involved in the ukulele social scene, check out Chapter 22.

Appreciating the uke's practicality

I live in a small flat. There's not enough room to swing a cat (I tested, but Tiddles is just about fine now). So the fact that I play the ukulele rather than the church organ is fortunate. The uke's diminutiveness makes it a favorite instrument among travelers.



REMEMBER

And don't forget the price. Ukuleles are relatively cheap and you can get a decent beginner ukulele for around \$45. Read Chapter 18 for a full guide to buying a uke, Chapter 19 for stocking up on accessories, and Chapter 20 for maintaining your prized possession.

Getting started quickly

Have you ever heard someone just starting out on the violin? It's not very pleasant (sounds a bit like the noise Tiddles made as he helped me test the size of my flat!). You have to put in a great deal of practice before you can make a musical sound on the violin.

ORIGINS OF THE WORD *UKULELE*

Ukulele is a Hawaiian word, and as such it presents some spelling and pronunciation issues for English speakers.

Exactly how the ukulele got its name is lost in the mists of time, but that doesn't mean that people haven't made some interesting guesses. In Hawaiian, *'uku* means flea and *lele* means jumping, and so the most common explanation is that it was called the "jumping flea" because of the movement of the player's fingers.

Another convincing explanation is that the name developed from a traditional Hawaiian instrument called the *'ukeke*. But my favorite is the suggestion offered by Queen Lili'oukalani, who translated ukulele as "gift that comes from afar."

I'd be willing to wager that ukulele is probably the most misspelled musical instrument in existence. Even the English poet Rupert Brooke — in his poem "Waikiki" — couldn't manage it and came up with "eukaleli."

The widely accepted spelling, and the one used in this book, is ukulele, which is also the spelling in most dictionaries. But the true Hawaiian spelling is *'ukulele* with an *'okina* (the apostrophe) at the beginning. Using the anglicized version without the *'okina* is perfectly acceptable, but many people like to use it to pay respect to the ukulele's Hawaiian roots.

Similar problems exist with the pronunciation. Most people go with the anglicized *you-ka-LAY-lee*, although the Hawaiian pronunciation is *oo-koo-lay-lay*. Outside of ukulele-playing circles, you're probably best to stick with *you-ka-LAY-lee* so that people know what you're talking about!



REMEMBER

Not so with the ukulele. With a bit of knowledge and a smidge of practice, you can start making a reasonable sound on the uke within a few minutes. Before long – in fact after learning just two chords (C and F, as described in Chapter 4) – you can be playing your first song. This fast-start aspect is very encouraging and a big motivator to keep you practicing.

Enjoying a long-term challenge

If you spend more than five minutes on the internet, you're sure to see a gaudy ad saying, "You can GET RICH/LOSE WEIGHT in only five days with no effort. Just send us \$99." Similarly, you may meet people who tell you that mastering the uke is easy so they can sell you something. Don't believe them.

Although getting started is easy and satisfying, I love the ukulele because it's such a challenge to play really well. The uke simply has so much less to it than most instruments – fewer strings, fewer frets, less volume – that these restrictions

force you to be creative with rhythms and harmonies. As a result, you can come up with ideas you'd never have on another instrument.

Blending in with other instruments

If playing with other people is what you enjoy, you'll be pleased to hear that the ukulele works excellently as part of an ensemble. Playing with other fretted instruments like guitars increases the range of notes and adds a different tone to the proceedings, but the range of instruments the ukulele works with is much wider than that. In the 1930s, for example, it was common for people like Johnny Marvin and Ukulele Ike to play a ukulele with orchestral backing. More recently, bands have combined and contrasted the tinkling ukulele with the gutsy parping of brass to great effect (take a listen to the indie band Beirut or the jazzy Snake Suspenderz for how effective this combination is).

Getting kids interested

Youngsters really relate to the ukulele, and with the frets being close together and the strings easy on the fingers, it's a great instrument for them. They can get a strong musical base that transfers well to whatever instrument they want to pick up next.

Rock guitar gods who played the ukulele as children include Jimi Hendrix, Brian May (Queen), Pete Townshend (The Who), and surf-rocker Dick Dale.

Sizing Up the Ukulele

Unlike most instruments in the guitar family, ukuleles come in a number of different sizes. The three regular sizes of ukulele are *soprano*, *concert*, and *tenor*. All three sizes are tuned exactly the same way, however, and so when you've learned to play one, you can play them all!

In addition to these three types, you can also buy a *baritone* ukulele, which is a very different beast: It's larger and tuned differently, lower than the other types (the same as the top four strings of a guitar). Therefore, you have to use a whole different set of chords and notes, and your skills are not transferable to the other three types.



WARNING

For these reasons, a baritone is not the best ukulele to start on. If you want to learn baritone ukulele, you need a dedicated baritone book because I don't cover it in this one.

Meeting the family: Daddy uke, mummy uke, and baby uke

A ukulele's size is determined by the scale length, which is the length of the part of the string you play (between the nut and the bridge – check out the following section for descriptions of these parts). Here's a rundown:

- » **Soprano:** The soprano is the smallest ukulele, sometimes referred to as standard size. Originally all ukuleles were sopranos and this size is what most people envision when they think about ukuleles. Soprano is a great size to choose for people who want to do a lot of chord strumming and are looking for the traditional ukulele sound.
- » **Concert:** The concert is the Goldilocks ukulele; not too big, not too small. You get the ukulele sound but with a little extra room on the fretboard.
- » **Tenor:** The tenor is the largest of the standard ukuleles, with a longer neck that allows for more intricate playing (or more wild showing off). The larger body can give you a fuller, more guitar-like sound.

Deciding which uke is best for you

Most people find that the soprano is the best place to start. You don't have to stretch to make the chord shapes, sopranos are cheap and easy to find, and they sound great when you strum simple chords on them.

But whether you start on soprano, concert or tenor, you can easily transfer your skills between them with no problem.

Whatever your first instrument, you may well end up with a collection of ukuleles before long. The term for this fascinating “addiction” is *ukulele acquisition syndrome* (UAS).

Taking a Tour: The Anatomy of the Ukulele

Ukuleles are usually shaped like small guitars, but other shapes are also common (the pineapple shape is popular). The shape of the ukulele doesn't usually make a great deal of difference to the sound, but some shapes, such as the Flying-V, are harder to play.



WARNING

Avoid buying one of the more whacky ukulele shapes as your first ukulele. Whatever you do, avoid Flying-V shaped ukuleles. I received one of these instruments as a gift, and had a real trial keeping a smile on my face as it poked me in the thigh and forearm.

Other shapes to tread carefully around are triangular ukuleles and cricket bat-shaped electric ukuleles.

Ukuleles share many of their parts with people: for instance, bodies and necks. And I'm lobbying strenuously to get the *mouth* officially renamed the *soundhole*. But until the full alignment of names, Figure 1-1 provides a guide as I take you on a tour of the various parts of the ukulele.

The two sound-producing parts are as follows:

- » **Body:** The body is the main part and where the sound is produced. The type of wood this section is made of determines how the ukulele sounds. The most popular woods for the body are mahogany and koa (a Hawaiian wood).

The body is divided into three main parts: soundboard or top (the front of the uke), the back, and the sides. The soundboard is the most important part (which is why you often see ukuleles with expensive woods used for the top and less expensive wood, or even plastic, on the back and sides).

One offshoot of the ukulele called the *banjolele* (sometimes called a banjo-uke) has a banjo-like body rather than a wood body, though you play it just like a wood ukulele. The difference is in the sound they produce. They are much louder and have the metallic sound of a banjo.

- » **Strings:** Originally, ukulele strings were made from catgut and nylon. Nowadays, however, they're made from synthetic fibers (with ugly names such as fluro-carbon and nylgut) that combine the best features of both catgut and nylon.

Unlike most string instruments, ukulele strings don't go from fattest nearest your head to thinnest nearest the ground. This arrangement confused me when I first got a ukulele: I thought someone must have screwed up and I changed the order of the strings. I was an idiot.



TIP

Here are the rest of the ukulele's parts:

- » **Bridge:** The bridge is attached to the front of the ukulele and holds the strings at that end. Two main types of bridge exist: one where you tie the strings to the bridge, and one where you knot the end of the string and thread it through a slit.

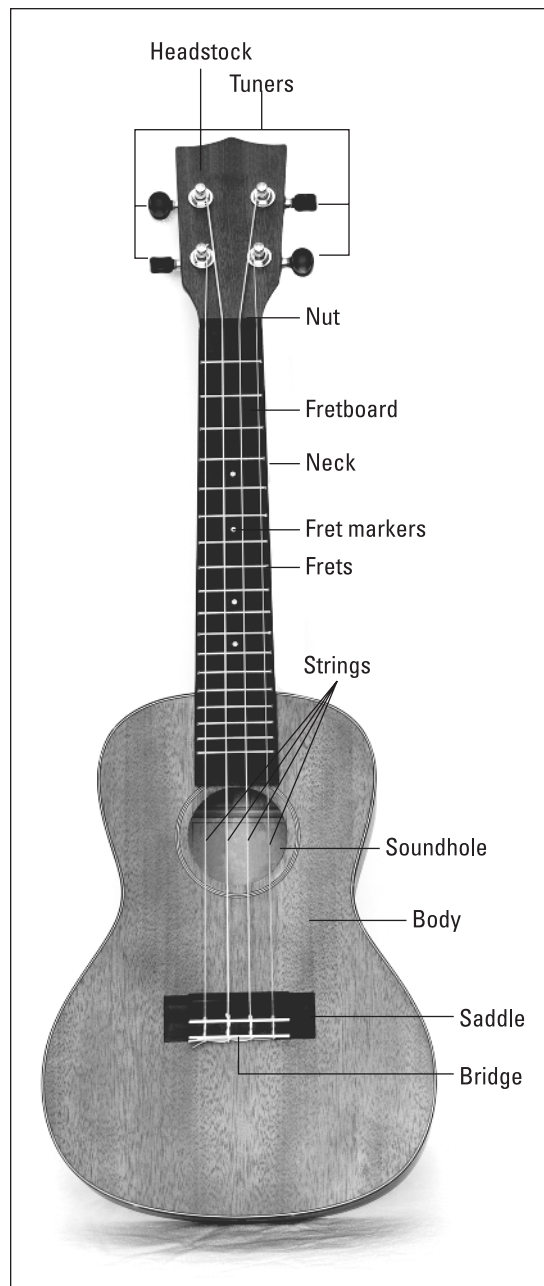


FIGURE 1-1:
A typical ukulele
with parts
indicated.

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- » **Saddle:** The saddle is the thin, usually white, piece that sticks up out of the bridge. The strings rest on top of the saddle, and this creates one end of the section of strings that you play.
- » **Soundhole:** This round hole on the front of your ukulele lets the sound out. The soundhole is usually placed under the strings but not always. The placement of the soundhole doesn't particularly impact the sound.
- » **Neck:** The neck is the long bit that sticks out of the body. Ukulele necks are lighter and weaker than similar instruments, such as guitars and mandolins, because they're designed for nylon strings. So don't be tempted to put steel guitar strings on your uke; you'll snap the neck in two.
- » **Fretboard:** The fretboard is the strip of wood that runs along the neck just behind the strings. When you're playing your ukulele, you press the strings down against the fretboard to produce notes. Most fretboards are made of rosewood.
- » **Frets:** The frets are strips of metal that go vertically across the fretboard. They mark out the different pitches of the notes. The higher up the fretboard, the higher the note is musically.
- » **Fret markers:** Fret markers are the dots on the fretboard. They make it easier for you to spot which fret is which farther up the neck. Ukuleles have fret markers on the 5th, 7th, and 10th frets (and also at the 12th and 15th if the fretboard extends that far).



TIP

This arrangement can be a little confusing for guitar players who pick up a ukulele, because guitars have a marker at the 9th fret rather than the 10th.

- » **Nut:** The nut marks the end of the fretboard. The strings sit on it as they go from the fretboard to the headstock. It forms the end of the section of the strings that you play.
- » **Headstock:** The headstock is located at the end of the fretboard and is there to hold the tuners. But its main function is as an advertising spot for the uke maker.
- » **Tuners:** Tuners are attached to the headstock and hold the strings of the ukulele. You change the tuning of your strings by twiddling them. Two types of tuner exist:

- *Friction tuners:* Traditionally, ukuleles have friction tuners, which stick out behind the ukulele and hold the strings in tune by friction alone.

If your ukulele has friction tuners, you may need to tighten the screws that hold them to the headstock. If your ukulele goes out of tune as soon as you've tuned it, check the tuners. If you can see them unfurl, tighten the screw.



TECHNICAL
STUFF



- **Geared tuners:** Some ukuleles have geared tuners (as shown in Figure 1-2), which stick out from the side of the headstock like ears (the type of tuners you get on guitars).

Geared tuners make fine-tuning easier and help your uke to hold the tuning better. So unless a ukulele comes with high-quality friction tuners, your best bet is to buy one with geared tuners.



FIGURE 1-2:
Geared tuners.

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Becoming a Well-Versed Ukulele Player

The ukulele has gone from niche, local instrument to worldwide phenomenon. This journey, and the ways in which various countries and cultures picked up the ukulele, reveals the instrument's development and signposts you towards the different skills you should strive to master as you make your way through *Ukulele For Dummies*, 3rd Edition.

Strumming along to hula in Hawaii

The first technique that you discover when starting out with your uke is strumming (see Chapters 4 to 6). The ukulele was originally strummed to provide accompaniment to traditional Hawaiian hula dancing. *Hula* is a very gentle, peaceful dance form. As you might expect, then, the ukulele is played in a lilting fashion when accompanying hula, which suits the uke's sound perfectly. This style conjures up the feeling of laidback life on a Hawaiian island, and you can hear its influence in the sound of modern songs that try to recapture that feeling.

INVENTING THE UKULELE

Rather than being a purely Hawaiian instrument, the ukulele has truly international roots.

When the ukulele was invented — towards the end of the 19th century — Hawaii was a mix of many nationalities: British, European, American, Chinese, and Japanese people were all well represented on the islands. Power was still in the hands of the native Hawaiian monarchy but King David Kalakaua was fighting against strengthening foreign interests.

Madeira, a small Atlantic island belonging to Portugal, was one place supplying immigrant workers to Hawaii. In 1879, a ship called the *Ravenscrag* sailed from Madeira to Hawaii with three furniture makers on board who would go on to build the first ukuleles: Manuel Nunes, Augusto Dias, and Jose Espirito Santo. These men brought with them two instruments that would influence the development of the ukulele: the *machete* (pronounced ma-shet) and *rajão* (pronounced ra-zyow). The machete was a small, four-stringed instrument and the rajão featured a tuning similar to that of the ukulele. As they developed their new instrument, the makers made a very important decision to build it out of koa wood, which is native to Hawaii. This wood is a very important royal symbol to the Hawaiians and an integral part of Hawaiian identity.

As part of his efforts to strengthen this Hawaiian identity and culture and protect the monarchy, King David Kalakaua leapt on the ukulele with enthusiasm. With his royal patronage, the instrument became embedded in Hawaiian culture very quickly. So much so that thinking of Hawaiian music without the ukulele is almost impossible.



TIP

If you want to play in the Hawaiian style, check out Chapter 13.

Swinging and picking across the USA

When you come to grips with strumming you can progress to picking single notes and playing solo (you can find out about these skills in Chapters 7 to 10) just as the early uke players did. In this way, those players took the uke into new genres of music and new countries, particularly the US. There, the uke proved popular with college students and became associated with the hip, young flappers who used it to pick early jazz tunes.

With just four strings to play with, the ukulele is begging to be used for playing the interesting chords and rhythms of jazz. The ukulele responds fantastically to rapid playing and complex rhythms, making it a great accompaniment to jazz.

You can try out some of these tunes yourself in Chapter 14.

Rockin' and rollin', and getting down with the blues

In your own search for music to play, rock, blues, and punk might not be the first styles that spring to mind but they are fertile ground for uke players.

In 1950s America, Arthur Godfrey, a TV star of the day, endorsed a new development: the plastic ukulele. This made the ukulele cheaper and, with Godfrey giving lessons on the TV, easier to learn. This increasing popularity helped the ukulele spread to other genres. For example, a blues musician called Rabbit Muse started using the ukulele to produce styles of music never before heard on the uke. People then began to use the ukulele for playing blues chord progressions from the famous 12-bar blues to up-tempo country blues and as a solo instrument for playing lead lines in blues songs.

Chapter 12 covers blues on the ukulele if you want to follow in Rabbit Muse's footsteps.

The 1950s saw blues give birth to rock and roll, which in turn led to rock and punk. Although the ukulele declined in popularity around this time — the one famous ukulele player of the 1960s was Tiny Tim, who used the instrument as part of his jokey act and resurrected old jazz tunes such as “Tiptoe Through the Tulips” — some very famous musicians remained uke fans. Paul McCartney, John Lennon, and George Harrison all played ukulele. Harrison, Brian May (of Queen), and Pete Townshend (The Who) all played ukulele on songs released during the 1970s.

With a history of rock gods like that all playing your new favorite instrument, you just have to repay the favor and try out some rock tunes on your ukulele. No matter how loud, distorted, and unukulele-like a song seems, if it's a good song it will always respond well to being transported to the ukulele. As soon as you've learned a few rock tricks, you'll be able to adapt rock songs to ukulele and see how they work for yourself.



TIP

You can emulate these rock gods by picking up rock uke tips in Chapter 11.

Diversifying into ever more styles

If jazz, rock, and blues aren't your thing, think about casting your net further afield for inspiration. Ever heard of Hawaiian music? No? Well, read on.

The ukulele experienced a resurgence in popularity in the 1990s just as Hawaiian music became rejuvenated and influenced by the reggae music of Jamaica — the resulting genre is called *Jawaiian*. The Jawaiian style took the traditional Hawaiian style and infused it with reggae strumming patterns and chord progressions.

Playing reggae on ukulele immediately gives you this mix of Jamaican and Hawaiian sounds, making it the perfect instrument for this style. Israel Kamakaʻwiwole’s Jawaiian-style cover of “Over the Rainbow” became a huge hit and was used in an endless run of films, TV shows, and adverts.



TIP

You can pick up some reggae ukulele moves in Chapter 15.

As you’ve wisely picked up this copy of *Ukulele For Dummies*, 3rd Edition, you’re part of the current revival, which stretches into the 21st century and is perhaps the most extensive revival of all. Thinking of a musical genre that the uke has left untouched is difficult nowadays – even the traditional Proms series of classical music concerts in the UK has seen a sell-out performance by the Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain (Chapter 16 covers playing classical pieces on the uke).

If classical music appeals to you, you might be surprised to discover that you can adapt many classical pieces to work on the ukulele. A particularly fertile area in which to find classical pieces for ukulele is in the classical guitar repertoire. Because the two instruments are similar, you can often effectively transfer pieces from one to the other. Even grand orchestral works can be played on ukulele, though. The old master composers wrote great melodies that are still effective when played unadorned on a ukulele.

Today, the uke can truly be called a globally played and appreciated instrument. You can play any imaginable genre and style of music on the ukulele. You can even hear the ukulele in the pop charts, from hip-hop act Janelle Monae to indie bands such as Twenty One Pilots and pop star Billie Eilish.

So, read on and don’t be left out!