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Jake Shimabukuro

TEACHES 'UKULELE



MASTERCLASS



Meet Jake

JAKE SHIMABUKURO REMEMBERS the exact moment he first held an 'ukulele. He was four years old, growing up in the Kaimuki neighborhood of Honolulu, Hawai'i. His mother, Carol, had been waiting for him to be big enough to wrap his fingers around the fretboard, and that time had finally come. "She had this Kamaka 'ukulele," Jake says. "I remember her taking it off the shelf and placing it in my lap and [she] showed me how to hold it. I still remember that—that feeling, and just the amount of respect and the amount of care that I took when I handled the instrument. It was such a precious moment."

It was also a fateful moment, though nobody could have known it at the time. Jake would go on to become the most widely acclaimed 'ukulele player in history: a trailblazing technical guru, a format-breaking artist, and a globetrotting ambassador for the instrument. As Béla Fleck is to the

banjo or Yo-Yo Ma is to the cello, Jake is to the 'ukulele—and for what it's worth, those are only two of the many music legends with whom he has collaborated over the years, along with the likes of Jimmy Buffett and Bette Midler

The prospect of a world-renowned 'ukulele virtuoso would have seemed perfectly unlikely before Jake came to define and embody the role. For generations, the 'ukulele was regarded outside of Hawai'i as a novelty instrument, even a kind of toy. But this perception has never been a stumbling



block for Jake. "I love that people don't take the instrument seriously," he told NPR in 2011. "In fact, one of the best things about being a touring 'ukulele player is that audiences all over the world have such low expectations of the music. The 'ukulele is one of the easiest instruments to play, and you don't have to be a musician to play it."

Having said that, Jake has done more than anyone else this century to prove that the 'ukulele is as richly musical an instrument as they come. With dozens of albums to his name (including

some available only in Japan), he has consistently shown that there can be power, precision, finesse, intimacy, and dynamic range on the 'ukulele. His musical breadth comes naturally to him, but it was also a conscious decision, made long before he came to prominence.

Like countless kids growing up in Hawai'i, Jake played the 'ukulele both in lessons with private instructors and in a more self-directed way. Gradually Jake locked into a legacy of advanced musicianship, drawing inspiration from trailblazing Hawaiian musicians like Eddie Kamae.



"He was the first virtuoso on the instrument," Jake attested in Kamae's *New York Times* obituary in 2017. "He came up with techniques to apply to the 'ukulele that no one ever dreamed of...."

Inspiration also came from less obvious sources: rock guitar gods like Carlos Santana; era-defining athletes like Michael Jordan; cultural icons like Bruce Lee. Reaching beyond the traditional frame of reference is an important part of Jake's process and one reason for his breakout success as an artist.

Jake wasn't always an obvious candidate for a solo career. In fact, he didn't pursue it initially. His first brush with playing professionally came as a member of Pure Heart, a Hawaiian folk-pop trio he formed with guitarist and singer Jon Yamasato and percussionist Lopaka Colon. The group's self-titled debut album, released in 1997, was a hit in the islands and earned widespread airplay; on top of that, it swept four categories at the Nā Hōkū Hanohano Awards (Hawaii's equivalent of the Grammys).

In 2002, through the efforts of his new manager, Kazusa Flanagan, Jake signed a record deal with a division of Sony Music Japan International. He began a custom of touring extensively in Japan, where he built a passionate following and further honed his dynamic stage presence. Jake's first solo album, *Sunday Morning*, was released in 2002, receiving a Nā Hōkū for Instrumental Album of the Year. He followed it with a few other albums, notably the 2005 release *Dragon*, which reached No. 5 on Billboard's Top World Music Albums chart.

The following year, Jake's international profile changed virtually overnight when his version of The Beatles' "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" (see page 21) became one of the first-ever viral videos on YouTube. In no time, Jake was booked to play talk shows like *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* and brought on tour with Buffett and others.

Quick Tune-Up

String Theory

A few fun facts about your 'uke



- The 'ukulele is a relatively young member of the stringed instrument family, adapted from its Portuguese predecessors in the early 1880s.

- Between 2010 and 2012, 'ukulele sales in the United States leapt from 581,000 to more than one million, according to the National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM).

- In 2019, approximately 1.6 million 'ukuleles were sold in the U.S.

- The earliest 'ukuleles were made out of koa, from a type of acacia tree native to the islands (and still highly prized). These days the instrument is commonly made out of

a wide variety of other woods, including walnut, cherry and spruce.

- Most entry-level 'ukuleles are made of laminated wood, rather than solid wood; this makes the instrument more affordable and more durable.

- Know the parts of your 'ukulele, top to bottom: the **headstock** is where your tuning pegs are, separated from the **neck** by a bar called the nut. The fretboard runs along the neck, where the strings stretch over the frets. The **body** includes a sound hole as well as a saddle, which raises the strings as they attach to the bridge.

When Jake released his next album, *Gently Weeps*, it hit No. 2 on Billboard's Top World Music Albums chart. He'd top that chart with *Peace Love Ukulele*, released in 2011. The following year, he was the subject of the acclaimed documentary *Jake Shimabukuro: Life on Four Strings*.

Through it all, Jake has managed to pull off something akin to a magic trick—performing dazzling feats on an instrument whose chief characteristic is its approachability. He sees no contradiction in this. "The thing that I love most about the 'ukulele is that it's not intimidating," he says. In his MasterClass, he'll demystify the instrument, share helpful strategies for players of any skill level, and provide a window into his creative process.

Welcome to Jake Shimabukuro's MasterClass.

'UKULELE BASICS

'UKULELE IS PRONOUNCED "OO-koo-LEY-ley," not "you-koo-LAY-lee," as it's often said.

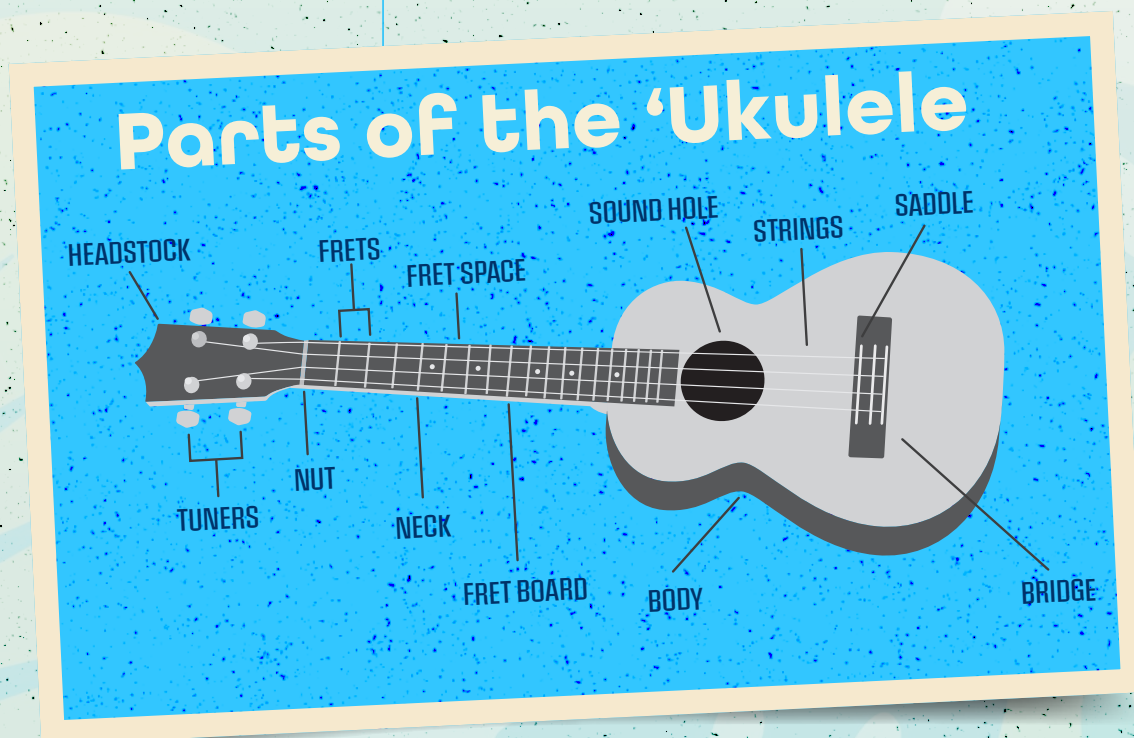
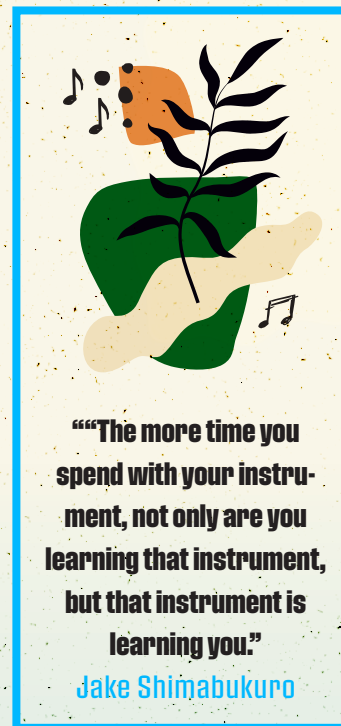
The word is a conjunction of two Hawaiian words: *'uku*, which means "flea" (or "lice"), and *lele*, which means "to jump or leap." As Jake points out, "It got its name, 'the jumping flea,' because your fingers look like little jumping fleas on the fretboard."

Of course, Jake's fingertips fit the description of jumping fleas more aptly than most of ours. But even a child playing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," the first song most 'ukulele beginners learn (and one that Jake teaches you on screen in Chapter 4: Navigating the Fretboard), can quickly develop the facility to evoke a jumping flea.

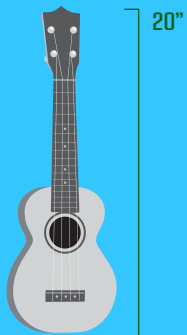
According to *'Ukulele magazine*, the word actually predates the instrument: "An 1865 dictionary defined the word as 'a cat flea,' a pest that had found its way to the islands decades earlier."

When the 'ukulele was born in Hawai'i

in the 1880s, initially as a variation on a Madeiran machete, the name was playfully applied, and it stuck.

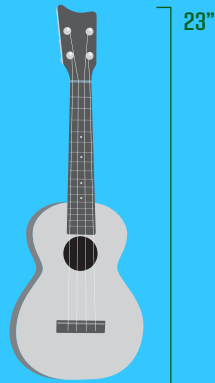


What Size 'Ukulele Should You Get?



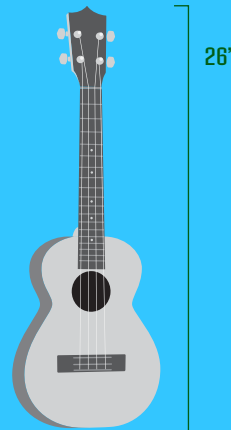
SOPRANO

The most common 'ukulele is a soprano, measuring 20 inches (51 centimeters) from end to end. Sopranos are recommended for all beginners, though it shouldn't be dismissed as a "beginner's instrument" because its bright, cheery sound sets the standard.



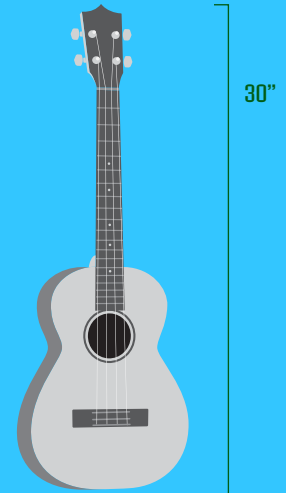
ALTO (OR CONCERT)

A typical alto 'ukulele measures 23 inches (58 centimeters) long with a wider neck and more space between frets. Its tone is fuller, with more midrange. The alto 'ukulele is also a good option for a first instrument, especially for those with bigger hands.



TENOR

Jake's preferred 'ukulele is a tenor. The instrument has a deeper tone and a broader dynamic spectrum that can evoke the sonority of a classical guitar. Tenor 'ukuleles are often 26 inches (66 centimeters) long; Jake's signature Kamaka model runs a little more than 27 inches.



BARITONE

The baritone 'ukulele is about 30 inches (76 centimeters) long and has the deepest tone of the four (imagine an even more nylon-string classical guitar sound). Jake can be heard playing a baritone—overdubbed to provide bass lines—throughout his 2016 album *Nashville Sessions*.

What Kind of 'Ukulele Should You Buy?

IF YOU'RE A FIRST-TIME BUYER, remember that a cheap, toylike plastic 'ukulele should be avoided because its sound will be subpar and its strings will quickly go out of tune.

Jake has a lifelong connection to **Kamaka**, which he aptly describes as the Stradivarius of Hawaiian 'ukuleles. But while a Kamaka 'ukulele made from Hawaiian koa wood represents the gold standard, it's far from the only respectable option today.

The leading 'ukulele brands in Hawai'i, known as "The 4 Ks," are **Kamaka**, **Ko'olau**, **Kanile'a**, and **KoAloha**. All have factories on the island of Oahu, and all do a brisk business both in the islands and internationally. Their offerings span from entry-level models, generally

in the \$200 range, to deluxe custom jobs that sell for tens of thousands of dollars.

Among the other popular brands in Hawai'i are **Pono**, **Kala**, **Mahalo**, **Lanikai**, and **Luna**. (You can also purchase quality 'ukuleles from **Martin** and other prominent mainland companies.) Mail-order and internet purchasing is always an option, but Jake encourages you to walk into a music shop and try before you buy because of the intangible qualities that make an 'ukulele feel "right." "You want to find an instrument that you respect and that you feel connected with, regardless of the price," Jake says, "because you're investing in something that's going to bring you so much joy."

For more on [tuning your 'ukulele](#), head to [masterclass.com](#)

Follow the 'Uke

The small instrument from the Big Island has a long and storied history

1879

The first *machête*—a Madeiran instrument also known as a *cavaquinho* or *braguinha*—arrives in Honolulu Harbor on the SS *Ravenscrag*. On reaching land, a musician named João Fernandes gives an impromptu, celebratory performance with the instrument, noted by the *Honolulu Gazette*. Also aboard the *Ravenscrag* are three woodworkers from Funchal: Manuel Nunes, Augusto Dias, and José do Espírito Santo. All three would become luthiers in Honolulu, with Nunes later claiming to have invented the 'ukulele.

1893

The World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago features a popular Cyclorama of the Volcano Kilauea along with an exhibit called "The South Sea Islanders." The star performer is Kini Kapahu Wilson, a hula dancer trained in the royal court; she also plays 'ukulele.

1901

The Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, features a wildly popular "Hawaiian Village" on the midway, with hula demonstrations and 'ukulele-strumming troubadours.

1906

Virtuoso musician Ernest Ka'ai publishes *The Ukulele, a Hawaiian Guitar and How to Play It*, the first method book for the young instrument. The book introduces a system of notation and tablature that's still widely in use today.

1909

Manuel Nunes establishes M. Nunes & Sons, the most successful of the luthier shops in Honolulu's Chinatown district. A listing in the Honolulu directory touts the company as "Manufacturers of the only genuine 'ukulele, Hawaii's sweetest toned instrument."

1912

The Bird of Paradise opens on Broadway, featuring a Hawaiian setting and music by Sylvester Kalama and Kapule Kanoa. Its modest 13-week run is followed by extensive touring across the United States, and the show gradually becomes a phenomenon.



Kini Wilson and companion perform the hula at Midway Plaisance at the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893.

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN S. DYKES



1915

Jonah Kumalae sparks the first 'ukulele craze by exhibiting instruments in the Hawaiian pavilion at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. The showcase-inspired 'uke-centric tunes like "I Can Hear the Ukuleles Calling Me."

1916

Samuel Kaialilili Kamaka, an apprentice to Manuel Nunes, establishes his own shop, Kamaka Ukulele and Guitar Works, out of his basement. Five years later he opens a business in Kaimuki.

1917

C.F. Martin & Co. publishes its first 'ukulele pamphlet, marking the company's entry into the market. By the close of 1926, Martin had produced nearly twice as many 'ukuleles in 11 years as it had made guitars in the company's 93-year history.

1924

May Singhi Breen, a New Yorker known as "The Ukulele Lady," is contracted to create 'ukulele arrangements for all of the sheet music published by Irving Berlin. She does the same for

many other Tin Pan Alley tunesmiths, facilitating the instrument's ubiquity in pop culture.

1926

Richard Koner, known as "Ukulele Dick," takes a Martin soprano 'uke on Admiral Richard Byrd's expedition to the North Pole and has all 45 crew members sign it. Later he also has the instrument signed by President Calvin Coolidge, Amelia Earhart, Thomas Edison, and others. (A replica retails at C.F. Martin & Co. for \$2,499.)

1929

Cliff Edwards, a vaudeville performer known as "Ukulele Ike," has a No. 1 hit with "Singing in the Rain." The track features his trademark 'uke accompaniment.

1946

CBS begins broadcasting *Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts*, a radio and television talent show. A few years later, the network adds *Arthur Godfrey and His Friends*, a weekly variety show; at their height, the shows boast a total audience of 40 million. Both programs are a massive boon for the 'ukulele, Godfrey's trademark instrument, and ignite a commercial craze.



1958

Lyle Ritz, one of the most in-demand session musicians in Los Angeles, releases *How About Uke?*—a jazz album on Verve Records featuring songbook standards. While it's not a bestseller, it becomes a touchstone for 'ukulele players in the islands and beyond.

1959

Marilyn Monroe portrays a sultry, 'ukulele-toting singer named Sugar Kane in the Billy Wilder romantic comedy *Some Like It Hot*.



1961

Elvis Presley stars in *Blue Hawaii*, a musical romantic comedy set in paradise. The King, who is seen cradling a 'ukulele in the film's poster, strums an 'uke in a number of scenes; the soundtrack album goes on to spend 79 weeks on the Billboard 200, including 20 weeks at No. 1.

1964

Herb Ohta, an 'ukulele master known in Hawai'i as "Ohta-San," has a hit song with "Sushi," a lively bossa nova with tropical overtones. Its success leads to a record deal with Decca.

1968

Tiny Tim brings the 'ukulele into the counterculture with a novelty cover of the Tin Pan Alley song "Tiptoe Through the Tulips," which he debuts on *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*.

1971

The Sons of Hawai'i, a group led by peerless 'ukulele virtuoso Eddie Kamae, releases *The Folk Music of Hawaii*, known locally as "the four faces album" for its cover illustration. The album, which features Kamae in the foreground alongside slack-key wizard Gabby Pahinui, becomes a cornerstone of the second Hawaiian Renaissance.

1971

Roy Sakuma, a groundskeeper for Kapiolani Park in Honolulu, organizes the first annual Ukulele Festival, which would go on to become the largest international fest of its kind in the world. It continues to this day, operating under a nonprofit foundation.

1974

Following the initial success of the Ukulele Festival, Sakuma, who has already been teaching lessons, opens Roy Sakuma Ukulele Studios. The studio



would go on to become an important resource for thousands of island *kēiki* (children)—and produce some notable alumni (including Jake, who studied there for seven years).

1985

The Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain is founded in London by George Hinchliffe and Kitty Lux. This ensemble, featuring 'ukuleles of every register and size, performs popular songs from a range of genres. The troupe would go on to tour the world and release more than a dozen albums.

1999

Israel Kamakawiwo'ole's solo voice-and-'ukulele recording of "Over the Rainbow/What a Wonderful World,"



2011

In a wildly popular YouTube clip, Zoëy Deschanel strums an 'ukulele in a duet with her *500 Days of Summer* costar Joseph Gordon-Levitt. The two sing a duet called "What Are You Doing New Year's Eve?"

2011

Taylor Swift reserves a prime space in her global arena tour for the 'ukulele, performing a solo acoustic version of her song "Fearless" (as a mashup with the aforementioned "Hey, Soul Sister" and "I'm Yours").



from his album *Facing Future*, post-humously catches fire after being featured in a commercial for eToys. The song is quickly licensed for a number of movies and network television shows, becoming synonymous with the islands (and with the instrument).

2004

Raiatea Helm earns a Grammy nomination for her album *Sweet & Lovely*, which features her traditional 'ukulele stylings as well as her winning Hawaiian falsetto.

2005

The Jason Mraz single "I'm Yours," with its trademark 'ukulele strum, spends a staggering 76 weeks on the Billboard Hot 100.

2006

A clip of Jake playing "While My Guitar Gently Weeps," filmed in New York's Central Park, becomes one of the first viral videos on YouTube.

2009

Train releases an upbeat single called "Hey, Soul Sister," the sound of which is largely defined by the strumming of an 'ukulele in E major. It hits No. 3 on the Billboard Hot 100, eventually becoming the top-selling song on iTunes in 2010.

2011

Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder releases *Ukulele Songs*, his second solo album, consisting of original songs performed on an 'ukulele. It receives a Grammy nom for Best Folk Album.

2014

Pixar releases *Lava*, a digital short that appears in theaters before the feature film *Inside Out*. The short is scored with a song by the same name, which openly emulates Israel Kamakawiwo'ole's 'ukulele and singing style. It features vocals by Kuana Torres-Kahele and Nāpua Greig.

2017

Kalani Pe'a wins Best Regional Roots Album at the Grammy Awards for his debut album, *E Walea*. The album naturally features 'ukulele—as does Pe'a's subsequent album, *No 'Ane'i*, which wins in the same category in 2019.

'Ukelele Basics

Fretboard Navigation

JAKE COMPARES THE grid of a 'ukulele fretboard to the floors and rooms of a high-rise hotel—a handy analogy that probably came naturally to him as a Honolulu native.

Assignments

1. Practice basic familiarity with the fretboard, making sure that your fingers press on the center of each fret. Following Jake's example, start with your index (pointer) finger on 1(0), and move to 1(1), 1(2) and so on. Proceed all the way to 1(12), and then move back, floor

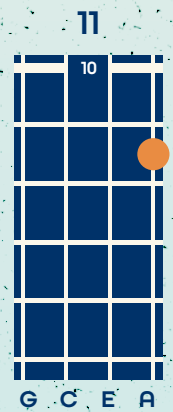
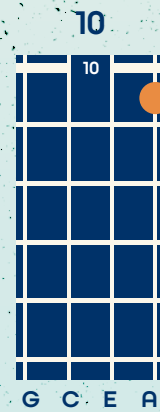
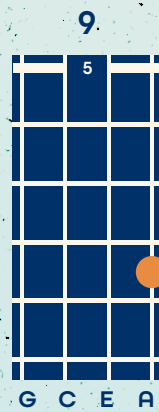
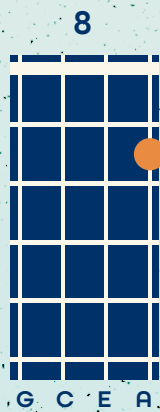
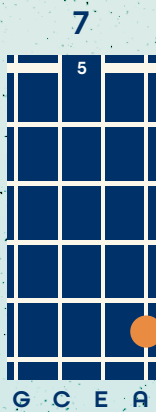
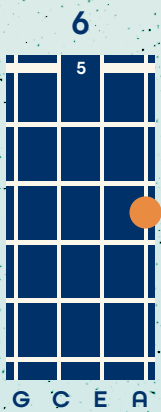
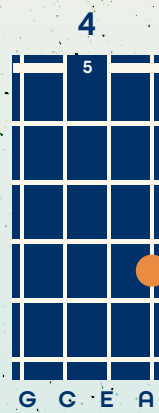
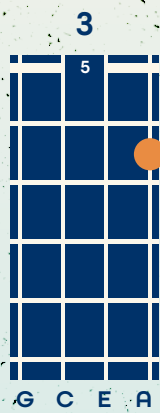
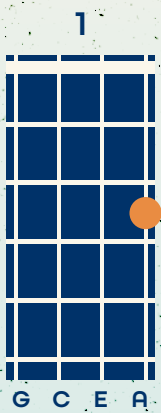
by floor, to 1(0). Try this on all four strings, and with different finger combinations. As Jake puts it: "Play every note as if it's the most important note of the song."

2. Practice playing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," as Jake demonstrates. Move from 1(0) to 1(7) to 1(9), then back to 1(7)— that's the first phrase of the song. The notes in the second phrase are: 1(5), 1(4), 1(2), 1(0). Try sounding out the remaining notes in the song. Then, as Jake suggests, try modulating into different keys by shifting the numbers— starting, for instance, at 1(1) and moving to 1(8) and 1(10).





Practice Sesh: Chords

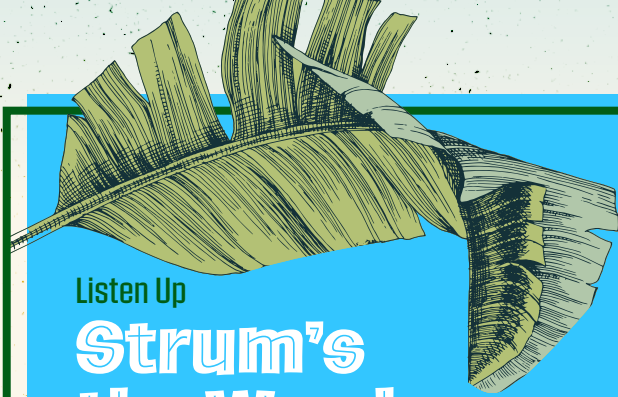


Strumming

IT MAY SOUND OBVIOUS, but strumming is one of the most essential skills in an 'ukulele player's tool kit. With solid strumming technique and a rudimentary set of chords, for instance, you could back a hula dancer on an array of Hawaiian standards. Of course, strumming is also crucial for anyone covering a pop tune or filling out the chords of an original song. But first you need to get comfortable with the basic positioning and set of movements:

Assignments

1. Practice strumming a C major chord, 1(3), with the flesh of your thumb in a down-stroke motion. (Remember Jake's analogy describing the feeling of a foot sliding off the edge of a curb.) Once that begins to feel natural, practice strumming the same chord with your index (pointer) finger in an upstroke motion. Then alternate those two strumming motions—thumb downstroke, index upstroke—in a steady rhythm. Finally, switch motions, with an index downstroke/thumb upstroke, so that your fingernails strike the strings for a harder sound. Remember to strum with your wrist and not with a rigid arm.
2. Experiment with different angles of attack in your index finger downstroke to see what feels most natural. As Jake suggests, rotating your finger forward may produce a smoother strum. Another reason to explore different angles is to test out small variations in timbre (the quality of a sound as compared to other string instruments) and tone (the quality of a sound as compared to itself).



Listen Up

Strum's the Word

If you're interested in traditional Hawaiian strumming patterns, listen to these three examples selected by Steven Espaniola for *Ukulele* magazine

“Ka Pua U’i”

ISRAEL KAMAKAWIWO’OLE

A textbook example of the **classic** style, a swingy strum that begins on the upbeat. You'll hear this all over Hawaiian music, but it's readily adaptable to pop and other styles.

“Ka Uluwehi O Ke Kai”

KAWIKA ALFICH

A heavily rhythmic strum known as **‘olapa**, which means “dancer.” Ubiquitous in music for hula, because its accents evoke the cadence of an *ipu heke*, or double gourd drum.

“E Mau Ke Aloha”

WAIPUNA

The **modern** style features more syncopation, and with a rhythmic energy that suggests acoustic guitar.



Demystifying Chords

BASIC HARMONY ON the 'ukulele is easily achieved, and as we've already seen, you can play a lot of songs with just a few chords under your belt. Greater harmonic complexity is simply a matter of broadening your vocabulary and getting acquainted with a range of fingerings.

Assignments

1. Practice the one-finger chords that Jake shows you, beginning again with C major, or 1(3). Then try C7, which is 1(1). Move to the next "room," for F sus2, followed by A7.
2. Following Jake's lead, toggle between C7 1(1) and F sus2 2(1). Try strumming those two chords as you sing "The Itsy Bitsy Spider," like Jake does. See if you can also make it fit the title phrase of "You Can't Always Get What You Want" by The Rolling Stones.
3. Play along with Jake as he moves his two-finger chord around the fretboard, starting with 1(2) and 3(2). "Instead of jumping around to other positions, you keep that same position," he says, "and it's just a matter of moving it around the neck to create different chords." Practice the sequence of chords that Jake outlines until it feels familiar.
4. Get comfortable with the feeling of triangle chords, moving your fingers up the fretboard as Jake shows you. "There's no proper way or standard way of holding a chord," he says. "It just depends on what chord you're going to be playing after that."
5. Explore stairs chords, beginning with the one that Jake shows you, with 1(2), 2(3), 3(4) and 4(0). Then move the formation up to the third fret, 1(3), 2(4), 3(5), 4(0). Then, as Jake demos, move everything up a floor: 1(0), 2(2), 3(3), 4(4). When you're comfortable with this positioning and movement, try playing along with Jake on "Pipeline" by The Ventures.



For more on reentrant tuning,
head to [masterclass.com](https://www.masterclass.com).

Advanced Chord Groupings

Get a Grip

Jake talks about making a change to his thumb positioning and grip in order to avoid repetitive-stress pain. If you're a casual player, this may not be an issue for you—pressing your thumb on the back of the neck, roughly behind the third fret, will come easier—but it's worth trying his approach to see how it feels.

Taking

Jake also discusses posture, which is important not only in regard to comfort but also for the sound you can get out of an 'ukulele. If you're seated, you can rest the lower part of the instrument on the thigh of your picking hand and lightly press your forearm against it to hold it in place. This will come easily if you're seated cross-legged on the ground. (You could also try perching on a balance ball, as Jake suggests, which will move with the rocking of your body.)

If you're standing up, you can apply the same forearm pressure to hold the instrument to your torso, but you can also choose to use a strap. Straps keep the instrument in position and allow both hands to move more freely. A strap like the one Jake uses will clip onto the sound hole, so that there's no need to drill a peg; you can buy one online or at a music shop, and there are easy DIY instructions online if you're feeling crafty.

Raising the Barre

"Barre chords are tough at the beginning," Jake says. But don't be intimidated. As with every other aspect of learning the instrument, mastering barre chords is just a matter of practice.

For more info on **half steps and whole steps**, head to [masterclass.com](https://www.masterclass.com).



Assignments

1. Start at the fifth fret with your index finger across all four strings and practice strumming a barre chord. Try to get a clear sound out of all the strings. Then experiment with the "crossed finger" approach that Jake demonstrates, pressing your middle finger on top of your index finger for added pressure.

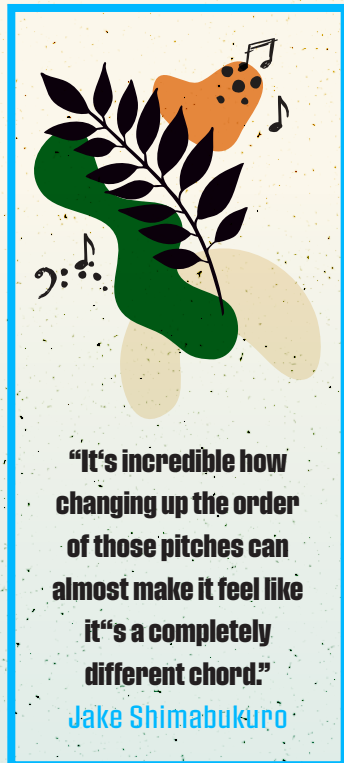
Jake also introduces the useful concept of the barre as a modulation tool, inviting you to imagine that the bridge at the top of the fretboard is an "invisible finger" and showing how you can move up by half-steps. "If you think of that concept of the invisible finger, you can move that finger anywhere on the neck," he says. "And then you can play the same chord position." (Guitarists will recognize that in this sense, the barre functions the same way as a capo.)

2. Follow Jake's example and try using barre chords to facilitate chromatic modulation. Start by alternating between a C major and F sus2, and then slide up the fretboard, with your index finger as a barre. You can use the same approach with a range of other chords, and even with scales, as Jake shows us. Play around and see what you can come up with.

For more info on **chord roots**, head to [masterclass.com](https://www.masterclass.com).

Giving Voice to Chords

JAKE GIVES US an especially helpful case study in flexible voicings by sharing his approach to E major, which can be a notoriously tricky chord to play.



Assignments

1. Follow along with Jake as he shows you how to play an alternate fingering for E major—4, 4, 0, 2—which utilizes the open E string. Also try the E major 9, as he demonstrates.

“In Herbie Hancock’s MasterClass,” Jake says, “I think he interpreted Miles Davis, saying, ‘Stay away from the butter-notes.’ And that’s basically what we’re doing. We’re staying away from the thirds, and from the very obvious notes. So then it becomes more open, more ambiguous. And that’s a very special sound.”

For more info on **chord voicings**, head to [masterclass.com](https://www.masterclass.com).



'Uke Techniques

Practice Makes Perfect

JAKE FRAMES PRACTICING in terms of three tiers, moving from concrete to abstract:

1. Physical

"You're working on your coordination, you're building up the finger strength, you're refining your movements so that you're using your energy in a very efficient way," Jake says.

2. Mental

"You have reasons behind the choices that you make musically," Jake notes. "You have reasons behind why you do certain things the way that you do."

3. Emotional/Spiritual

"Every once in a while, when tier one and tier two come together in a very special and magical way, you experience that third level," Jake adds.

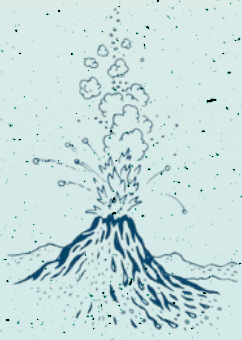
To illustrate this elusive third level, Jake paints a picture of a Tai Chi session in a park. "It's almost like you're watching someone dance in slow motion," he says, describing a fluid and graceful set of movements. "And sometimes I feel like when you're in those moments of deep practice, that's the state of mind that you want to achieve."

Assignments

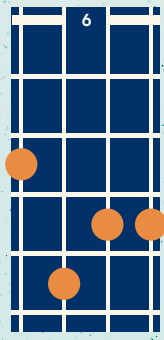
1. Follow along with Jake's instructions in the section of this lesson marked "Practice Routine." He tosses out a handful of suggestions for things to work on; pick one and work on it, and then pick another.
2. Establish a routine with your practice regimen, finding the right level of ambition for where you are with the instrument. Set small goals and strive toward them. But as you do, be receptive to the flow state that Jake describes; it's not just for the pros.

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN S. DYKES

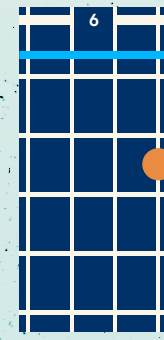
Practice Sesh: "Fly Me to the Moon"




1



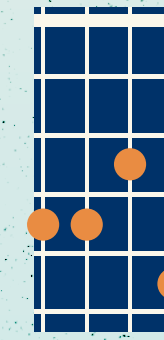
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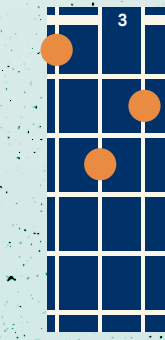
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5



6



G C E A G C E A G C E A G C E A G C E A G C E A

Melodic And Rhythmic Dimension

Assignments

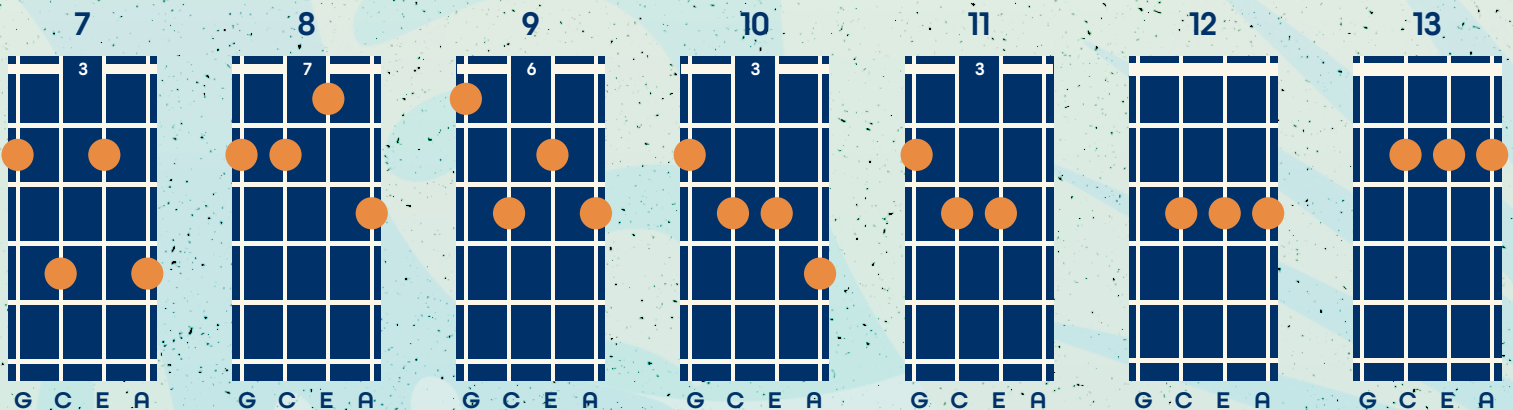
1. Study Jake's example of the first few phrases of "Fly Me to the Moon" (see the bottom of pages 15 and 16) moving from E minor to A minor while playing the melody.
2. Set a strumming pattern like the one that Jake demonstrates. Try maintaining it to the steady beat of a metronome (or a metronome app on your smartphone)—first with dampened strings, for a purely percussive effect, and then with chords.
3. Practice moving from one dynamic extreme to another—strumming a single chord with as much volume and rhythm energy as you can and then easing up until it approaches the level of a whisper. Then try following that arc in reverse.



"I started thinking about a lot of classical music. I started thinking about some of my favorite jazz recordings. And what I loved about those recordings...was how the music would draw me in...and then sometimes it would push me back."

Jake Shimabukuro

For more info on **dynamics**, head to [masterclass.com](https://www.masterclass.com).



Vibrato

THERE HAS PROBABLY never been an 'ukulele player more expressive with vibrato than Jake Shimabukuro. It's another of his trademarks and another technique that will only develop over time, with a lot of practice. But note how Jake talks about vibrato—not in terms of diligent work or strategic usage but rather as an articulation of personality. He uses words like *spice* and *kick*, as well as *sweeten*, implying that vibrato is a flavor amplifier.

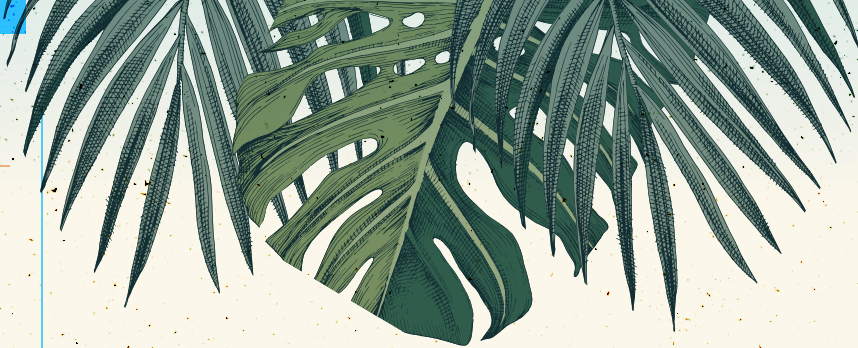
Classical string players create vibrato either by wobbling a finger in place or by moving back and forth slightly along the string to subtly vary the pitch. The latter of these techniques is easily applied to a nylon-stringed 'ukulele despite the presence of frets.

Another way of producing vibrato on a stringed instrument, more common among guitarists, is to bend the note from side to side—or as Jake explains it, pulling up and pushing back on the string. Jake employs this vibrato method extensively, which is one reason he's often compared to a guitarist. (The analogy is especially apt when he uses pedal distortion.)

Assignments

1. Practice the two methods of vibrato—classical and guitar-style—on a note. Then expand it to a scale. Then test it out on a song, even something as simple as "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." Consider not only how vibrato feels under your fingertips, but also what it does to the expression of a melody. Try applying it to different notes to see where it fits best.

For more info on **DI boxes**, head to [masterclass.com](https://www.masterclass.com).



The Magic of Tremolo

ONE OF JAKE'S TRADEMARKS on 'ukulele is his ability to counteract the limitations of the instrument. And his primary tool in this regard is tremolo, which is the rapid reiteration of a tone to produce a tremulous effect. This technique is common in classical guitar literature, but no one in the 'ukulele realm has embraced it more wholeheartedly (or effectively) than Jake.

"When you pluck a note, you play it, and it immediately decays, right? So sometimes you hear the attack of the note," he says. "But if you're playing in a larger group, you don't hear the sustain of the note. So sometimes...utilizing a tremolo technique can give you that illusion of the note, [of] sustaining over a chord or for a duration of time."

Assignments

1. Practice different methods of tremolo by playing "Ave Maria" (see right): using your thumbnail as a pick, using the fleshy part of your finger, using your open palm. Explore the sounds you can get with light, rapid repetition.
2. Practice a three-finger roll, with your middle finger on the first string, your index finger on the second string, and your thumb on the third string. Play them in a steady 1-2-3 rhythm at a variety of tempos.

For more info on **stringing your 'ukulele**, head to [masterclass.com](https://www.masterclass.com).

Practice Sesh: "Ave Maria"

To play this song, use your index, middle, and ring fingers to play the tremelo on the A string while using your thumb to alternate between the G, C, and E strings

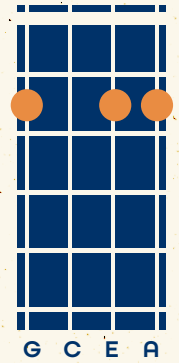
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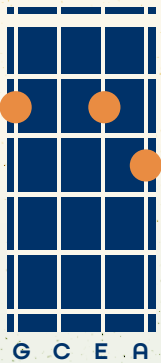
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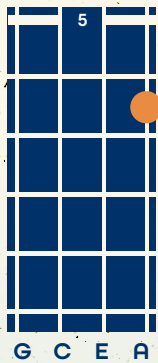
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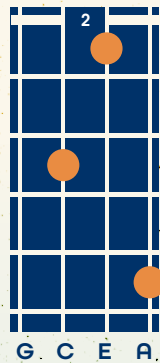
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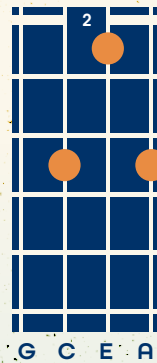
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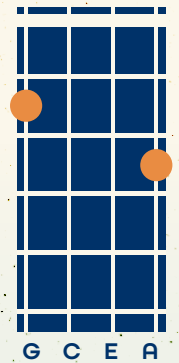
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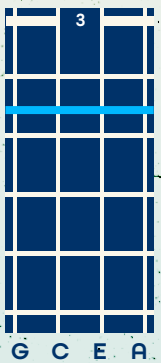
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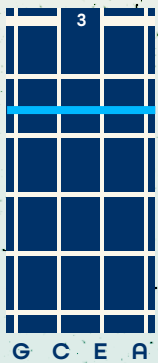
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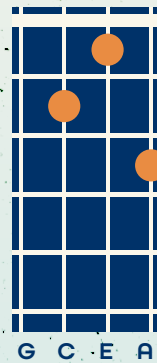
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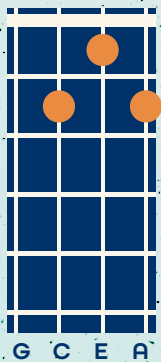
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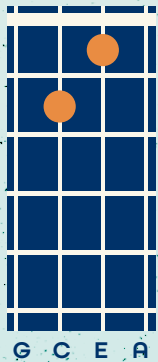
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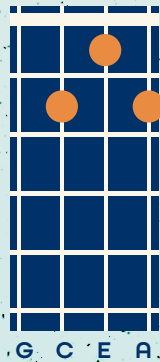
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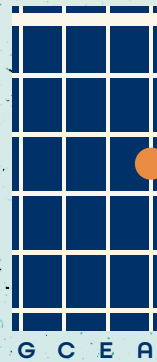
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17



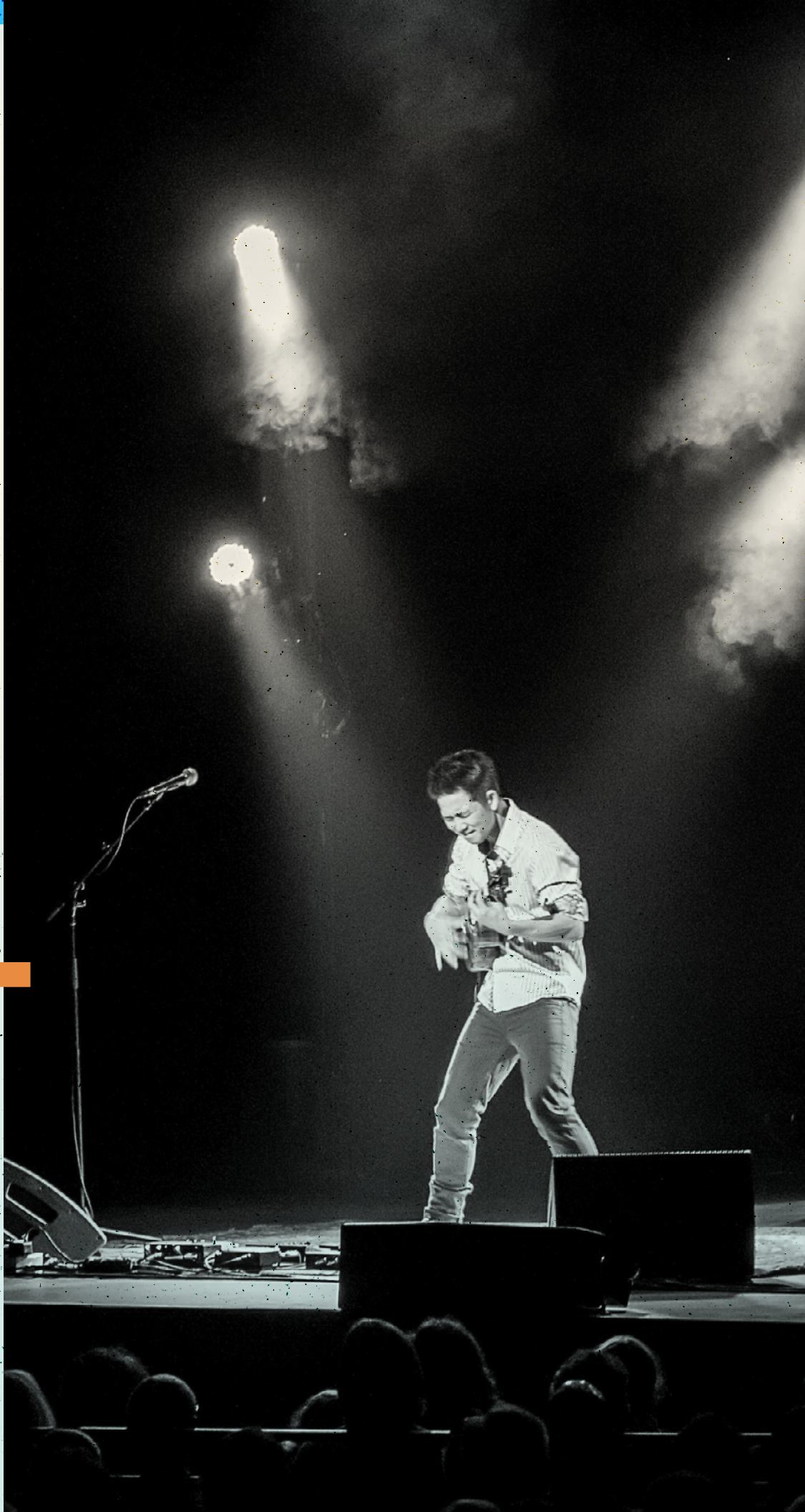
"If you use it in the right place at the right time with just the right amount and at the right speed, you can make that one note so magical."

Jake Shimabukuro



“One of the things that I love most about [tremolo] is [that] it allows the ‘ukulele to really float on top of an ensemble, the same way a vocalist would.”

Jake Shimabukuro





The Beauty of Harmonics

STRING HARMONICS, also known as partials or overtones, are the chiming, high tones produced by the vibrations of a string divided into equal parts. This is all a matter of physics, but what we need to know is much simpler. As Jake points out, the most common harmonic is on the 12th fret: By lightly touching (but not pressing) it, you can produce a tone that's one octave above the pitch of the open string.

Two other common harmonics are on the seventh fret—which will produce a tone at an interval of a fifth above the open string—and the fifth fret, which gives you a two-octave span.

Assignments

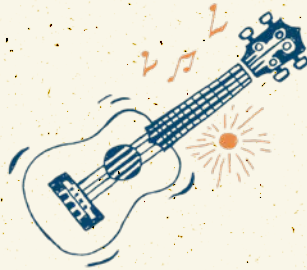
1. Follow along as Jake demonstrates harmonics. Don't miss his suggestion to use a light barre technique on the 12th fret. Then play harmonics on the bottom three strings (for an A minor) followed by just the top three (for a C major).

For more info on **harmonics**,
head to [masterclass.com](https://www.masterclass.com).

JAKE SHIMABUKURO: SUZI PRATT/FILMMAGIC;
ILLUSTRATION: JOHN S. DYKES



Song Spotlights



“While My Guitar Gently Weeps”

IN 2006, JAKE TRAVELED to New York City for the first time. Though he was widely known in Hawai‘i and had toured extensively in Japan, only true ‘ukulele enthusiasts knew him in the mainland United States. When one of these enthusiasts asked Jake to tape a segment for a local cable access television show called *Midnight Ukulele Disco*, he readily obliged.

Months after the show aired, someone uploaded Jake’s cover of “While My Guitar Gently Weeps”—George Harrison’s song from The Beatles’ “White Album”—to a new video platform called YouTube. The grainy four-and-a-half-minute clip shows Jake in a white button-down shirt sitting beside a rock formation. His arrangement features a deft combination of picking and strumming, with a bravura crescendo that evokes the rugged flair of flamenco.

Almost immediately, and to Jake’s complete surprise, the clip started racking up views. “It was one of the first viral videos on YouTube,” attests one of the company’s executives in the documentary *Jake Shimabukuro: Life on Four Strings*. (As of June 2020, the original video had nearly 17 million views.)

As a result of the video’s success, Jake was booked on network talk shows and asked to join marquee musicians on tour. (He formed an especially productive relationship with Jimmy Buffett.) The next album that Jake released, late in 2006, was naturally titled *Gently Weeps*; it reached No. 2 on Billboard’s Top World Music Albums chart and won him a Nā Hōkū Hanohano Award for Instrumental Album of the Year.

Beyond that, as *Fretboard Journal* once put it, Jake’s solo ‘ukulele performance of “While My Guitar Gently Weeps” has “probably inspired thousands to take up the Hawaiian instrument. It also turned him into one of the most in-demand live performers of the instrument.” For a long while afterward, Jake spent nine months out of every year on the road.

“While My Guitar Gently Weeps” has remained in Jake’s active repertory, but he has modified the arrangement of the song since his breakout performance. The version he plays here is softer and more sensitive than the one he played in 2006, with considerably more space and breath. He offers it as a tremolo lesson, but it could also be a study in maturity and lyricism.

“Hallelujah”

LEONARD COHEN, the venerated Canadian poet and singer-songwriter, wrote his secular hymn “Hallelujah” in the mid-1980s, at a low ebb in his career. His storied output of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s—brooding, folk-rockish songs like “Suzanne” and “So Long, Marianne”—had been commercially successful enough to spawn a greatest hits album. But it had been the better part of a decade since those highs. When Cohen included “Hallelujah” on an intended album titled *Various Positions*, his record label initially declined to release it in the United States.

But that original recording—featuring background vocals by Anjani Thomas, a Hawaiian-born singer-songwriter and pianist—slowly found admirers among a circle of Cohen’s fellow artists. Bob Dylan covered “Hallelujah” in concert in 1988. A few years later, John Cale, a founding member of The Velvet Underground, recorded it for a tribute album. Rock troubadour Jeff Buckley followed suit with a rapturous, nearly operatic treatment on his 1994 album *Grace*.

But the song really took on a life of its own in the 21st century. Cale’s version was used to score an emotional scene in the blockbuster 2001 animated film *Shrek*, whose soundtrack featured yet another version, by Rufus Wainwright. Buckley, who died a few years after *Grace* was issued, had a posthumous hit when his version was released as a single in 2007.

The following year that single topped Billboard’s Hot Digital Songs chart after an *American Idol* contestant named Jason Castro performed “Hallelujah” on the show. And so on, and so on; whether it’s Tori Kelly as an elephant in the movie *Sing* or Kate McKinnon as Hillary Clinton on *Saturday Night Live*, you can surely recall some

achingly earnest performance of the song.

What often gets lost in translation is the muted understatement that gives the original such a mysterious air. “‘Hallelujah’ as it exists on *Various Positions* is both opaque and direct,” observes Alan Light in *The Holy or the Broken: Leonard Cohen, Jeff Buckley, and the Unlikely Ascent of “Hallelujah,”* published in 2012. “Each verse ends with the word that gives the song its title, which is then repeated four times, giving the song its signature prayer-like incantation.”

The version of the song that Jake included on his 2018 album, *The Greatest Day*, captures some of that delicate balance and avoids the cloying pitfalls. It’s an instrumental with full-band orchestration, and Jake’s reading of the melody is graceful and plainspoken, with a backdrop of backmasked effects that subtly call The Byrds and The Beatles to mind.

Here, Jake gives us a window into his voicings and other choices as he arranges the song—showing how he structures his interpretation for fluidity of movement, clarity of intention, and direct emotional payoff. To watch him break down that process before viewing his full performance of the song is a rare treat.



“Dragon”

JAKE’S SONG “DRAGON”—the title track of his fourth solo album, released in 2005—is a nod to martial arts master Bruce Lee and his landmark film *Enter the Dragon*, which opened one month after Lee’s tragic death at 32.

If that seems like a slightly out-of-the-box touchstone for an ‘ukulele player, let Jake explain.

“Bruce Lee’s whole concept was to move efficiently and not waste energy,” he once said in an [interview with SFGate](#). “So, when I’m strumming, instead of bending at the elbow, I started finding ways of using the muscles in my hand. I do a lot more twisting motion with my wrist.” (Recall his on-screen demonstration of this motion at the beginning of Chapter 7: Playing Advanced Chords.)

In the same interview, Jake adds: “There’s another way I was influenced by Bruce Lee. It’s more of a philosophical approach to the way he approached martial arts. There are so many different styles of martial arts, and it’s the same with music. There are so many different genres. Bruce was more interested in fusing and combining different ideas and forms. So I learned you don’t have to throw yourself into one style of music.”

By now, you’ve heard enough from Jake to understand how that broadmindedness plays out in his music. You can hear it clearly in “Dragon”—not only in his performances of the tune but in its construction, informed by

East-Asian and Western classical music as well as the style of guitarist and fellow MasterClass instructor Carlos Santana, among others. (In an [album review of *Dragon*](#), *Vintage Guitar* noted that the composition “is as impressive as Jake’s playing—which is saying a lot.”)

The solo performance of “Dragon” spotlighted here is framed as a demonstration of harmonics, which feature prominently in the final moments of the tune. But before we get there, Jake deftly covers a whole lot of other ground, technically speaking: pedal loops and other effects, bluesy pitch-bending, trick strumming with both hands. Note how he moves with the music as he plays, a full-body fluctuation that brings the Bruce Lee evocation into direct focus.

“He saw all forms of martial arts as just a form of human expression,” Jake told [Honolulu magazine](#) in 2014. “As a kid, I applied his philosophy to music. For me, playing the ‘ukulele is not so much about playing an instrument. The ultimate goal is using it as a vehicle to express who you are.”



For more on [pedal loops](#),
head to [masterclass.com](#).

“Bohemian Rhapsody”

THE FANTABULOUS ROCK aria “Bohemian Rhapsody” is another song that has had several lives in pop culture. Composed by Freddie Mercury for Queen’s 1975 album *A Night at the Opera*, it was a Top 20 hit on first release, and hit the chart again when Mercury died in 1991.

Jake first got acquainted with the song via an instantly iconic scene in the 1992 movie *Wayne’s World*, which came out when he was in high school. (The movie sent the song skyrocketing to No. 2 on the Billboard Hot 100.) More recently, of course, there was the massive boost provided by the Queen biopic of the same name, which provided a seductive new mythology around the creation of the song.

The ‘ukulele arrangement of “Bohemian Rhapsody” that Jake unpacks here is a version of the one he recorded for his 2011 album *Peace Love Ukulele* and has performed around the world. Jake describes orchestration for a song like this as a jigsaw puzzle and goes on to show what he means. Note the decisions behind some of the details in his canny arrangement—like his use of a chiming harmonic for the arpeggiated two-note flourish that Freddie Mercury would play on the piano with his left hand (crossing over his right).

Pay attention to the way that Jake differentiates the mood in the operatic section, leading up to the lyric “thunderbolts and lightning,” which he evokes with a hard, decisive strum. And note the

almost comically wide span of his fingers on the fretboard as he reaches the “Galileo” refrain, and its answering cry of “Figaro.”

And, as Jake notes, sometimes trial and error will lead you to the “right” key for an arrangement—the one that provides the most possibility for chord voicings and the best path forward.



The Write Stuff

Creating An Original Song

SONGWRITING IS A highly personal process. "It's really just taking a bunch of things that you like, or that speak to you, and just throwing them together," he says. "Then the hard part is just figuring out how to make them work together." Here are a few tips for creating your own original song.

Let the Creative Process Guide You

Jake's process often involves hearing a melody or a chord progression first (as opposed to, say, lyrics). Your process might be opposite: Perhaps a lyric or a series of lyrics will come to you, and you'll work to set it to a melody. No matter how you approach songwriting, take comfort in the fact that Jake says there's no "right" way to go about it. Just let your creativity flow freely and go from there.

Save the Good Bits

If you happen to stumble upon a chord or interval that sounds especially interesting to you, Jake recommends saving it for a special section in the song (an emotional bridge, the chorus, etc.).

Seek Out Moments of Symmetry

Jake voices a G chord and then moves his index finger down a half step. Then he moves his fingers to the third fret and resolves the section by moving his index finger down another half step. The symmetry of repeating the same thing twice in different keys not only sounds beautiful, but it makes it a little easier to remember what you've played or created.

Pay Attention to the Mood of the Song

As you're building chords, be sure to select notes that fit the character of the melody you're working with rather than ones that might sound dissonant or atonal.

Practice Sesh: Jake's Original Song

To play this song, play section A

Section A:

- 1: G C E A (Fingerings: 3, 3, 1, 1)
- 2: G C E A (Fingerings: 3, 3, 1, 1)
- 3: G C E A (Fingerings: 1, 1, 1, 1)
- 4: G C E A (Fingerings: 1, 1, 1, 1)

Section B:

- 5: G C E A
- 6: G C E A

Find a Melodic Phrase That You'd Love to Hear Over and Over

Jake discovers a five-note melody that sounds lovely to his ear and then syncopates the notes to create a musical phrase. Moments like these can be repeated throughout a song.

Assignments

1. Build your own song, using whichever part of Jake's process makes sense to you (or learn the one Jake plays on screen using the chord charts below). Start with one chord, and set that as your key center. Play around with different progressions, and see what sounds or feels right.
2. Write another song, but this time use the melody as your guide. Pick out a single-note melodic line, until you're satisfied with its shape. Then set about fleshing out the harmony, working to make it suit the melody.

For 10 tips on **writing an original song**, head to [masterclass.com](https://www.masterclass.com).



Auditory Yum

BUILD YOUR GEAR BOX

Jake has been a pioneer in the realm of 'ukulele effects. Here's what he typically uses to create his signature sound

- [Jam Pedals TubeDremer overdrive point-to-point](#) (live and in the studio)
- [Fulltone Secret Freq distortion/overdrive](#) (in the studio)
- [Jam Pedals Delay Llama analog delay](#)
- [Orion Effekte KAFKA Reverb](#)
- [Alien Bass Station](#)
- [Boss RC-1 Loop Station](#) (live)
- [Boomerang Phrase sampler](#) (studio)
- [D.W. Fearn Passive Direct Box](#)
- [Manley Mono Tube DI](#) (live and in the studio)
- [D'Addario EJ65T Pro-Arté Custom Extruded 'Ukulele strings](#)

twice; section B three times; section C; and then section D

Section C:

- 7:** Fret 3, strings 1, 2, 3, 4. Fingering: 3, 3, 3, 3.
- 8:** Fret 3, strings 2, 3, 4. Fingering: 3, 3, 3.

Section D:

- 9:** Fret 2, strings 1, 2, 3, 4. Fingering: 2, 2, 2, 2.
- 10:** Fret 2, strings 2, 3, 4. Fingering: 2, 2, 2.
- 11:** Fret 3, strings 1, 2, 3, 4. Fingering: 3, 3, 3, 3.
- 12:** Fret 9, strings 1, 2, 3, 4. Fingering: 9, 9, 9, 9.





Parting Words From Jake

"THE THING THAT I LOVE MOST about the 'ukulele is that it's not intimidating. I promise you: If you have a couple fingers to spare and you know how to count, you will learn how to play this instrument.

There's an old saying in Japan: *okage sama de*, which means "I am what I am because of you." I'm just representing all the people who took the time to sit with me and share with me their ideas. As we say in Hawai'i, mahalo. Keep strumming and have fun."

JAKE SHIMABUKURO; DEBRA L ROTHENBERG/GETTY IMAGES; ILLUSTRATION: JOHN S. DYKES



CLASS: Queen at Live Aid footage
Courtesy Band Aid Trust

Live concert footage
Courtesy The Philharmonic Society of Orange
County and The Segerstrom Center for the Arts