

Ukulele Frequently Asked Questions

Frequently Asked Questions

- 1 Where can I buy an ukulele in the Phoenix area?
- 2 Where can I buy an ukulele in Hawai'i?
- 3 Where can I buy an ukulele in Southern California?
- 4 How much do new ukuleles cost?
- 5 What do I look for when buying a used ukulele?
- 6 How much should I spend on a case for my ukulele?
- 7 Why are there many different sizes of ukulele?
- 8 What do the dots on the fretboard mean?
- 9 When do I change my strings and install new ones?
- 10 What is so special about the twelfth fret?
- 11 What is unique about the baritone ukulele?
- 12 How do I protect or improve the finish of the wood?
- 13 Where do I press on the string?
- 14 How hard should I press the strings?
- 15 What is the best way to strum?
- 16 Why does my ukulele sound like a rubber band on a cigar box?
- 17 If I don't like to play a song in its original key, how can I play it in a different key?
- 18 I'm stranded on a desert island without a transposing chart, so how do change the key of a song?
- 19 What are the names of the tones in the twelve-tone musical scale?

Buying an ukulele

- 1 Where can I buy an ukulele in the Phoenix area?
A: For a good selection of nice instruments, try Central Music, on Central north of Camelback, next to Dairy Queen. A few other musical instrument stores around the Valley carry ukuleles; let your fingers do the walking in the Yellow Pages.
- 2 Where can I buy an ukulele in Hawai'i?
A: Everywhere, even the convenience store. The phone book is a good place to start. For good quality and selection, try these places: O'ahu - Harry's Music in Kaimuki, Island Guitars at Ward Warehouse, Windward - ?. Kaaui - Larry's Music in Kapa'a, Tropic Isle Music in Lihu'e. Big Island - Mele Kai Music in Kailua-Kona, ? in Hilo. Maui - Bounty Music in Kahului.
- 3 Where can I buy an ukulele in Southern California?
Try Giacoletti Music in Carlsbad, north of San Diego (760-729-1335). They carry all-wood ukuleles from a local maker (Louis Belfiore) that sound great, have a wider fingerboard, and are priced below the Kamakas. The tenor and the concert were under \$200. Also try The Double Eagle, in San Diego (619-521-2327).
- 4 How much do new ukuleles cost?
A: An inexpensive instrument that will stay in tune will cost \$20 to \$30 for a soprano, \$50 for a baritone. However, these can be difficult to play if the strings are too high, and may not sound right. If you want one that sounds good, but is of medium quality material, \$100-\$200 for Applause or Fluke (both of which use some plastic or composite in the construction). For best quality all-wood construction, \$300 is the lowest cost, generally for a soprano by Kamaka. See also the question, "Where can I buy an ukulele in Southern California?"

Ukulele Frequently Asked Questions

5 What do I look for when buying a used ukulele?

A: Play the instrument to check the sound. Play a couple of whole songs the way you are accustomed. Then play each note on each string, starting with an open string, then playing each fret on each string. Listen for buzzing sounds that might indicate cracks in the body or a warped neck. Study the body for cracks, the bridge to see if it is lifting off the body, the neck to see if it is separating from the body. Reject the instrument if it has any of these problems. Look very closely at the fretboard under the first few frets to see how deeply worn they are. Don't take it if there is a lot of wear. Choose tuning mechanisms of one of two types: right-angle gear drive, or adjustable friction (with a screw or something to prevent the peg from slipping). Smell the hole in the body to see if it is moldy; if it is excessive due to wetness, the internal construction glue might come apart..

6 How much should I spend on a case for my ukulele?

A: Don't spend more for the case than for the instrument. However, if you spend more than \$300 for an instrument, spend \$80 for a hard case.

Understanding the ukulele

7 Why are there many different sizes of ukulele?

A: Different sizes lead to different tones: small ones have a higher tone than large ones. Further, people come in varying sizes, and personal comfort depends on the size of the ukulele. The best size for you is one that is comfortable and gives the tone you enjoy. Comfort comes from how easy it is to cram your fingers onto the fretboard for a chord like G7, and from how long the instrument is, so you can tuck the body under your arm while you play. The sizes are called, from smallest to largest: soprano or standard, concert, tenor, baritone.

8 What do the dots on the fretboard mean?

A: The dots are a visual aid to help you find the higher frets. The makers of your ukulele decide where to put the dots. However, the convention is to put two dots on the twelfth fret, and one dot on the fifth and one on the seventh. Some makers put a dot on the ninth fret, some put one on the tenth. Some put dots on the edge so you can see them from the side.

9 When do I change my strings and install new ones?

A: When the old strings are broken. You can also change if they look cracked, or too dirty, or if the metal-wound strings are corroded. Beware: new strings take a long time (perhaps a couple months) to stretch out to their final length, so you will need to re-tune new strings often.

10 What is so special about the twelfth fret?

A: It divides the length of the string in half. This makes the note at the twelfth fret be one octave higher than the note when the string is played open (without pressing on any fret). Similarly, the seventh fret is one-third the length of the string, and the fifth fret is one quarter the length.

11 What is unique about the baritone ukulele?

A: On the baritone, the largest sized ukulele, the strings are often tuned to different pitches than are the strings on the other sizes. Generally, to play the same note on a baritone as on the other sizes, you must press five frets higher (so, for instance, the note on the first fret of a soprano is on the sixth fret of a baritone). The fingering of a chord on a baritone is different from that on the other sizes. The baritone strings are tuned the same as the four highest-pitched strings on a guitar.

12 How do I protect or improve the finish of the wood?

A: Most music stores have guitar polish that you can use on the body. Don't use any polish or wax on the fretboard. Use the same care as you would for fine wood household items, avoiding things that will make it feel sticky or slippery, or that will encourage build-up. Consult an instrument repair shop (Milano Music in Mesa) if you are considering something like refinishing.

Ukulele Frequently Asked Questions

Playing the ukulele

13 Where do I press on the string?

A: Press between the frets, not on the fret. The fret is the raised ridge.

14 How hard should I press the strings?

A: Press barely hard enough to get the sound to be clear. Find the right amount of pressure by trying this: barely put your finger on the string, then pluck the string with the other hand. It will sound like a chicken, "cluck, cluck". Keep plucking and press a little harder; eventually it will buzz. Press a little harder and it will ring clear. Stop. This is as hard as you need to press.

15 What is the best way to strum?

A: As a beginner, you strum in a way that causes all four strings to sound clearly all at once. Usually, this means using the tip of your index finger (your fingernail or the soft pad, you choose). With each beat of the music, lightly drag the finger down from the fourth string to the first string. Keeping the beat, snap your wrist a little more quickly until it sounds like a single fluid motion. Most of the action is in your wrist, very little in your elbow, and none in your shoulder. After you master the simple downward strum, you will learn to strum down and up, then double strumming, and so on. Ultimately, how you strum will determine your style. When you get famous, people will remember your strumming (or picking) technique. By that time, you will be using your thumb and more fingers, and you'll be strumming in complex and interesting patterns.

16 Why does my ukulele sound like a rubber band on a cigar box?

A: The sound of an ukulele comes from the material of which the body is made, and from how the body is constructed. Assuming you are pressing and strumming correctly, the instrument is sounding as good as it ever will. Low cost instruments are made of materials and methods that have a limited ability to sound good. The reason you pay more for a good ukulele is to get the better sound produced by better materials and better construction methods.

Playing music

17 If I don't like to play a song in its original key, how can I play it in a different key?

A: First make sure that your singers will cooperate and sing in the different key. If they can't, then you need to get accustomed to playing the way you don't like. Assuming they can, here is the method to change the key of any song. You will transpose it from the original key to a new key. You will need a transposing chart, like "Common Ukulele Chords". Find the column for the original key. Find the column for the new key. For each chord in the song, find it in the column for the original key. Move left or right to the column of the new key. The chord you find there is the new chord. Replace the original chord with the new chord and continue for the entire song.

18 I'm stranded on a desert island without a transposing chart, so how do change the key of a song?

A: First, memorize the names of tones of the twelve-tone musical scale. Second, find out how far you are transposing by counting how many semitones are between the original key and the new key. Add that number of semitones to all the original chords to get the new chords. Example - Transpose from F to A: There are four semitones from F to A. The chords in F are: F, F7, Bb, C7, G7. Add four semitones to each to find the new chords. F plus four is A, F7 plus four is A7, Bb plus four is D, C7 plus four is E7, G7 plus four is B7.

19 What are the names of the semitones in the twelve-tone musical scale?

A: A, A#, B, C, C#, D, D#, E, F, F#, G, G#. Start over again with A. Think of a clock; 1 comes after 12. There are some aliases: A# = Bb, C# = Db, D# = Eb, F# = Gb, G# = Ab.