

# Strumming

THE BEST STRUM LESSON EVER!




Pomaikai'i Keawe Lyman, granddaughter of legendary Hawaiian singer & entertainer Aunty Genoa Keawe, at the 2009 Aloha Falsetto Festival in Redondo Beach. Photo by Marsha Aguon

## Unlock the secret to decoding any strumming pattern by ear...in seconds!

### Frustrated? Stuck in a rut?

Confused by the many so-called "experts" online and hard-to-grasp instructional books? Stop wasting hours of your valuable time trolling discussion forums and spend just a few minutes mastering these simple techniques that will refresh your approach to strumming the ukulele and will allow you to decode any given strum within SECONDS...BY EAR!

Practice the following concepts diligently and you will see your skill

level skyrocket in a very short time with just a few minutes a day. You'd be surprised - when you look forward to practicing and you put yourself in that mental state of discovery mode, ten minutes easily turns into 30 minutes, 2 hours...all day!

But in the end, there is no substitute for LISTENING. Eric Clapton, Miles Davis, Jimi Hendrix, Frank Sinatra - you can be sure they all spent a LOT of time sitting by their record player lifting that needle and replaying their favorite parts as

they learned how to emulate what they heard.

So dust off those old favorites, revisit them with an open ear and HAVE FUN!

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### Noteworthy Ukulele Players

(surprised at some of these names?)

George Harrison  
 Tiny Tim  
 Bill Tapia  
 Jake Shimabukuro  
 Benny Chong

Ohta San  
 Lyle Ritz  
 James Hill  
 Troy Fernandez  
 Abe Lagrimas

Byron Yasui  
 Bryan Tolentino  
 William H Macy  
 Greg Hawkes  
 Johnny Winter



## Other beat patterns

4/4 may be most recognizable to us but 3, 5 and even 7 beats in a measure are not uncommon. Here are some well-known examples:

### Three Beats

Happy Birthday  
 Star Spangled Banner  
 Amazing Grace  
 Edelweiss  
 Rainbow Connection  
 Sweet Baby James (James Taylor)

### Five Beats

Mission Impossible  
 Take Five (Dave Brubeck)  
 Everything's Alright (From Jesus Christ Superstar)

### Seven Beats

Solsbury Hill (Peter Gabriel)  
 Money (Pink Floyd)

## Counting Beats

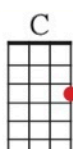
If you can't count "them", how can you keep "it"? Whether you're playing solo, or in a group, a strong sense of timing and rhythm is of the utmost importance.

The most common time signature is 4/4 time which means that in a given song or piece of music there is an underlying pulse of four strong beats. In fact, 4/4 is so common, it's also known as "Common Time" and is often represented on a sheet of music with the letter "C".

Don't worry - just because you didn't know the terminology doesn't mean you weren't feeling it all along. Notice how you tend to tap your foot on beats 1, 2, 3, and 4 naturally when listening to a catchy song on the radio?

Ever been to a concert or event where they want to fire up the crowd by getting them to clap their hands together? You'll know what I'm talking about if you've ever attended a Jewish wedding or seen the scene from the movie "The Deer Hunter".

Let's apply counting beats in common time as it relates to playing the ukulele.



Start with the C chord. Stick out your index finger like a record player stylus, strum across the strings down toward the ground

and count "ONE". Now move your hand across the strings toward the ceiling and say "AND".



On the next downward strum count "TWO", followed by an "AND" on the way back up. Repeat with "THREE AND FOUR AND" for one full measure (phrase) of 4/4 time. Be sure to give equal volume to both up and downstrokes. Yes, upstrokes feel a little weird at first but you'll get used to it quickly. Consistent practice is key.

You'll see quicker results when you practice strumming very robotically at first, with a certain emotional detachment. In a way, when we practice, we should "behave and feel like scientists, observing, dispassionately, the results of our experiments."\*

\*On Practising by Ricardo Iznaola



Count out loud while you are practicing strumming. If you've been having a hard time coordinating singing and strumming, this will help you immensely

*"It takes a lot of devotion and work, or maybe I should say play, 'cause if you love it, that's what it amounts to. I haven't found any shortcuts, and I've been looking for a long time."* - Chet Atkins



## Swing vs Straight-style Strumming

Here are some well-known examples of songs in both styles

### Swing

Little Grass Shack  
Tiny Bubbles  
In The Mood  
All Of Me  
Pearly Shells  
Love Me Do  
Eight Days A Week  
Can't Buy Me Love  
Five Foot Two  
New York, New York  
Bye Bye Love

### Straight/"Rock"

Twist & Shout  
La Bamba  
Brown-eyed Girl  
Under The Boardwalk  
I Wanna Hold Your Hand  
Rock You Like A Hurricane  
(Just checking to see if you're paying attention)



As you listen to the songs listed above, it will help you get a feel for the strums if you cover the ukulele strings with your left hand (muting the sound) and strum along lightly with your right.



Kunia Galdeira, grandson of Hawaiian music pioneer Gabby Pahinui, in his appearance at the 2010 Southern California Slack Key Festival in Los Angeles.  
Photo by Oceanfront Photography

## Swing strumming

Probably the most natural thing to do when one picks up the ukulele for the first time. This style of strumming swings - ala Tiny Tim, Count Basie big band - with the up a little softer than the down - ka-CHUNK ka-CHUNK ka-CHUNK. Think tropical breezes, sipping a drink, relaxing on a hammock under a palm tree...ahhhhh.....

See the sidebar on the left for some very familiar examples of this style.

## Straight/"Rock and Roll" Strumming

I call this the rock strum because so many of the songs people love to play on the ukulele are simply adaptations of popular rock and pop songs originally written for guitar, such as "Bye Bye Love", "Under The Boardwalk", etc. Notice how these songs do not fit the image of a big band performing them alongside tunes like "Unforgettable" or "Fly Me To The Moon?"

In this style of strumming we give equal volume and conviction to every beat - both up and down strums - with the consistency of a metronome. Of course, rarely will we play a song the whole way through like this and that's where the magic of *Ghost Strokes* - the topic on the next page - comes in!

## Strumming Variations

Using straight-style strumming, practice ghost strokes to get the familiar sounds of these well-known tunes

(x = ghost stroke)

Blowin' In The Wind  
(Bob Dylan)

1 x 2 x 3 & 4 &

Leather and Lace  
(Stevie Nicks)

1 x 2 x x & 4 &

Best Of My Love  
(Eagles)

1 & 2 & x & x x

Angel Mine  
(Cowboy Junkies)

1 x 2 & x & 4 &

Sister Golden Hair  
(America)

1 x 2 x 3 & 4 &  
x & 2 x x & 4 &

*"The music has generated all the techniques I use. When I sit down to learn to play something...it is not because I want to master a technique. It is because I want to hear what an idea sounds like."*

- Pat Martino



## "Ghost Strokes"

Here is where it gets fun! This is probably the single most important lesson you'll ever learn on the subject of strumming and it will work equally well for both swing and straight "rock" styles and can be easily adapted to guitar and mandolin as well.

*Ghost Strokes* is a term originally used by drummers but I find it to be a perfect way to describe what one needs to do to emulate any strum while maintaining a strong sense of rhythm and pulse regardless of whether the tempo is slow or fast.

A ghost stroke can fall on either a downbeat or an upbeat and a variation/combination of both will produce familiar sounding grooves (see sidebar on the left).

Start with a repeating pattern of strumming all beats: 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &. Now replace all the "&"s with a silent upstroke, completely missing the strings but moving your hand as if you were strumming them. If you had a volume control and it were turned off, people watching your strumming hand would not know that you were not producing a sound on those upstrokes. If you then turned the volume up, listeners would hear

just 1, 2, 3, 4, like the beginning of "Benny and the Jets" (G chord) or "Sandman" by America (Em chord).

Try one of the patterns in the left sidebar. (Note: the "Rock/Folk" pattern is one of the most prolific strum patterns out there) Once you've played one a couple times,

stop counting and focus on the sound itself as you assign the movement to muscle memory. Muscle memory is important - at some point you have to stop thinking and start *feeling*.

The fun part comes from creating your own patterns as you practice omitting different beats at random and replacing them with ghost strokes. Sit down with your uke and play whatever comes to mind - you're bound to stumble across a strumming pattern for that favorite song of yours that you'd been trying to figure out for the longest time.

Combining different strum patterns with different chord progressions such as C-G7-C, G-C-D7-G, F-Dm-Gm-C7-F, etc. will help keep things interesting and make it even easier to "discover" songs. Check out the video companion to this report if you need even more clarity.

Several other strumming secrets will help you recreate the sounds you hear and the songs you love - see Report #5 for advanced techniques such as left hand muting and slapping. Feel free to contact me with any questions or feedback.

Enjoy!

- Mitch Chang