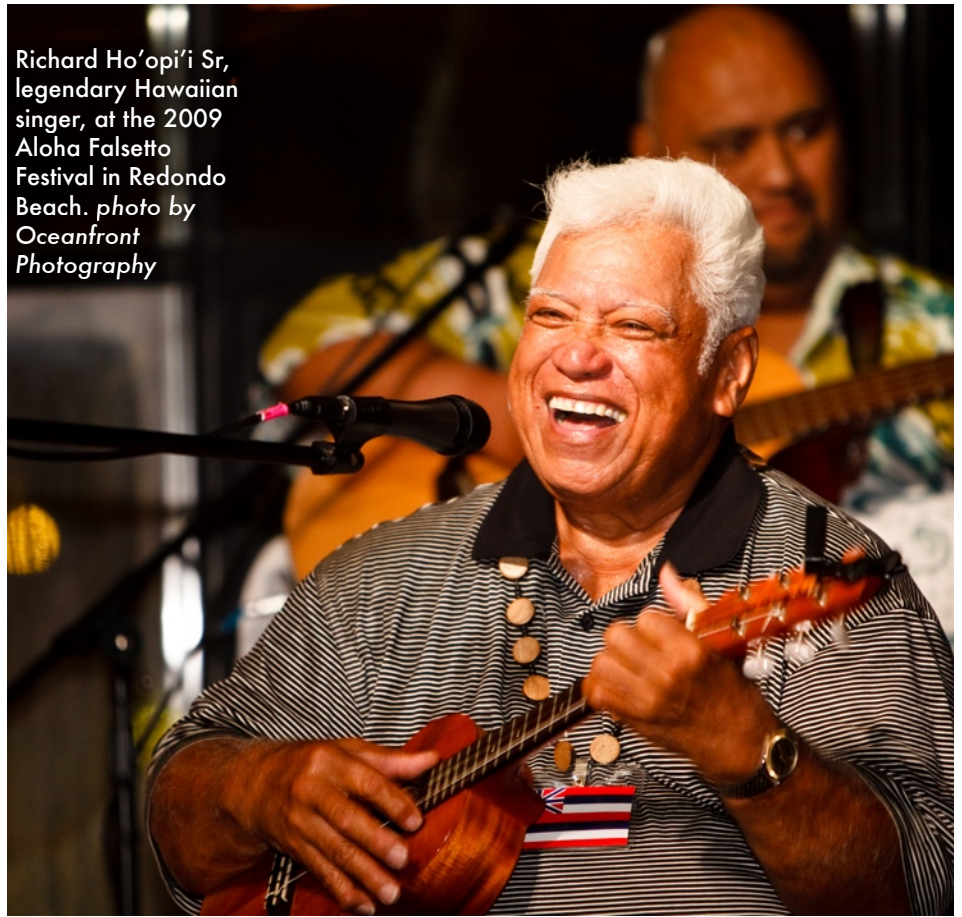


# Big Three Chords



MASTERING  
I, IV, V CHORD  
PROGRESSIONS

Richard Ho'opi'i Sr, legendary Hawaiian singer, at the 2009 Aloha Falsetto Festival in Redondo Beach. photo by Oceanfront Photography



## Can you really learn *hundreds* of songs...by ear...overnight?

### Yes, you can!

Have you ever wondered about that one friend who always seemed to be able to figure out songs in a snap...even though they'd never even heard the song before?

You've always felt that surely there must be some sort of pattern to it all and perhaps you've even noticed some similarities among songs you've been playing but could never quite connect the dots.

Well here's the good news: Can you count to five? Can you recite the

alphabet from A to G? Then you just passed the most stringent requirements to pass this course!

Learning the "Big Three" chords will open your ears to all you've been missing out on all these years and those same old song sheets will now suddenly light up for you as you experience all those familiar tunes in a whole new way.

Ditch the feelings of frustration at feeling stuck looking at a piece of music paper because you can't seem to remember which chords you're supposed to play next!

When you can free yourself from the music stand, you can spend more time enjoying being in the moment which means having more fun!

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### Noteworthy Ukulele Players (surprised at some of these names?)

George Harrison  
Tiny Tim  
Bill Tapia  
Jake Shimabukuro  
Benny Chong

Lyle Ritz  
James Hill  
Troy Fernandez  
Abe Lagrimas  
Bryan Tolentino

Ohta San  
Byron Yasui  
William H Macy  
Greg Hawkes  
Johnny Winter

I - IV - V for the keys most commonly used for ukulele

I	IV	V
A	D	E
C	F	G
D	G	A
F	B $\flat$	C
G	C	D

And here are the rest:

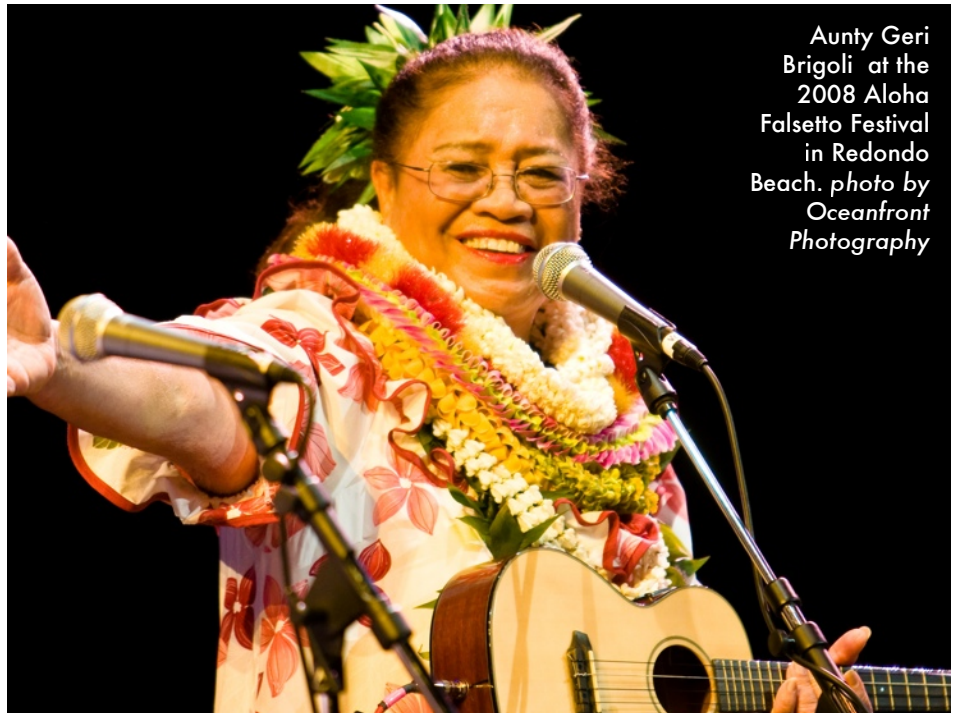
B $\flat$	E $\flat$	F
B	E	F $\sharp$
C $\sharp$	F $\sharp$	G $\sharp$
D $\flat$	G $\flat$	A $\flat$
E	A	B
F $\sharp$	B	C $\sharp$
G $\flat$	C $\flat$	D $\flat$

Note: Uppercase Roman numerals I, IV, V are typically used to denote 1, 4, 5 in the "industry" and indicate MAJOR chords. MINOR chords are written with a little "m" next to them like Fm, Am, Dm7, etc.



### What about chords like G7 and C7?

You will notice a V7 chord often used in place of a regular V chord just before returning to the I chord. This sort of substitution is perfectly acceptable and serves to heighten the tension of a V resolving to I. Dominant 7th chords, as they're called, also lend a bluesy feel to the music.



Aunt Geri Brigoli at the 2008 Aloha Falesetto Festival in Redondo Beach. photo by Oceanfront Photography

## Talk To The Hand!

OK let's jump right into this!

Stick out your thumb as if you're hitchhiking. Let's call that thumb "ONE", your index finger "TWO", middle finger "THREE", ring finger "FOUR" and the pinky "FIVE". So far so good?



Now if we were to call that same thumb "A" and we moved forward through the alphabet, your index finger would be "B", middle finger "C", ring finger "D" and the pinky would be "E". Still with me? Okay, great.

Now pick up your ukulele and strum the A chord (ONE) followed by the D chord (FOUR), followed by the E chord (FIVE) then back to A. Repeat a few times. Sounds good doesn't it? This is known as a "I - IV - V - I" chord progression.

Let's apply the same process to the key of C where C is now "1" on the thumb. Then it follows that the index finger=D/2, middle=E/3, ring=F/4, pinky=G/5. Now strum the C chord (1), followed by the F chord (4), the G chord (5) and back to the C chord. You just played a I - IV - V - I chord progression in the key of C. And guess what - you even *modulated* from the key of A to the key of C, just by starting with a different letter on your thumb!

Really? Is that all there is to it? Yep, that's basically it! Now we move on to the next page - training our ear to hearing and recognizing different combinations of I, IV and V chords, regardless of what key a song is in. To help you achieve this, chord progressions to many well-known songs are used to illustrate this concept on page 4.

## Sound-alike Songs

1999 (Prince)/Sussudio (Phil Collins)

Ghostbusters (Ray Parker Jr)/I Want A New Drug (Huey Lewis & The News)

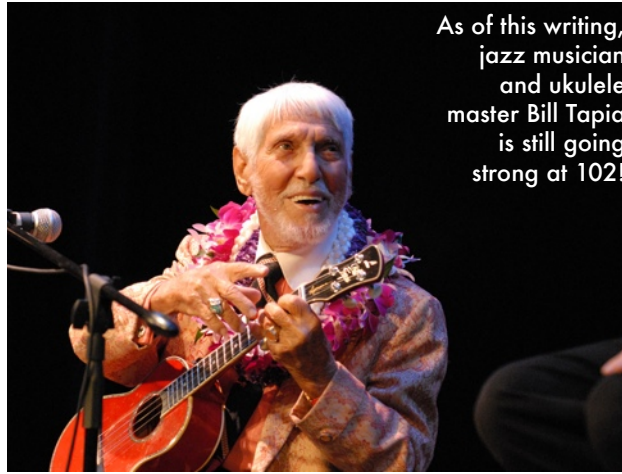
Sloop John B (Beach Boys)/Rhinestone Cowboy (Glen Campbell)

Honey Baby (Three Plus)/Drop (Mana'o Company)

How Can I Get Over (Pure Heart)/What's Up (4 Non Blondes)

Million (Kawaihae)/No Woman No Cry (Bob Marley)

*Prince and Huey Lewis considered Sussudio and Ghostbusters so similar to their own songs that they filed lawsuits, claiming copyright infringement. But I find it easy to believe that since musicians find inspiration from so many different sources and aspects of their lives, it's sometimes hard to tell if the tune they're hearing in their head comes from divine inspiration or other lingering influences. The bottom line is that they're always LISTENING.*



As of this writing, jazz musician and ukulele master Bill Tapia is still going strong at 102!

when we practiced hearing/singing those intervals.

Ever hear a song on the radio and mistook it for a different tune? Happens all the time but why? Because so many songs contain the same elements like similar melody, rhythm, chords, or all of the above. Sometimes just

enough to fool us at first and sometimes blatant ripoffs like "He's So Fine" and "My Sweet Lord"

Consider the similarities between these songs:

- "Twist And Shout"/"La Bamba"
- "Good Lovin'"/"Me and Julio Down By The Schoolyard"
- Twinkle Twinkle Little Star/ABC Song

If you were to figure out what makes one of the songs in the pair tick - say, a certain chord progression - then it follows that that same formula should apply to the other, right?

Consider, too, that the above hit songs owe their popularity to their memorable hooks. So what makes a song so "hum-mable"? One big reason is simple harmonic movement (chord progressions) involving only two or three chords. Simple harmony usually makes for simple melody. Think of some very catchy tunes you know and love to hum. Whether it's "I Hate Myself For Loving You" by Joan Jett (which even *my mother* can be heard singing to herself...but hopefully not about me) or "Old MacDonald", chances are it's only a few chords backing that melody.

## Sounds Like....?

In music school ear training, we learned to identify certain tonal intervals with specific songs we were already familiar with. For example, the interval between the notes C and F is called a "Perfect Fourth" and sounds just like the first two notes of "Here Comes The Bride". The interval between C and A sounded like "My Bonnie" and C to the next higher register C are the first two notes to "Somewhere Over The Rainbow" - that interval is called an "octave".

In other words, we learned by association; when we heard two notes, we were conditioned to think of a certain song and were then able to name the interval. Notice it was just the *interval*, not necessarily the EXACT notes. *Relative Pitch* is being able to hear relationships between notes while *Perfect Pitch* is the ability to name those specific notes. All worthy musicians have worked hard to develop a strong sense of *Relative Pitch* while *Perfect Pitch* is an enviable skill only a lucky few are born with.

Fortunately, relative pitch for chord progressions can be learned very quickly - you just need the right reference points like how we had

## Chord progressions to some familiar tunes:

I - V - I

(ex: C - G - C)

- Achy Breaky Heart
- Jambalaya
- Clementine
- Iko Iko

I - IV - I

(ex: C - F - C)

- Walk On The Wild Side
- Gymnopédie
- What I Got (Sublime)

I - IV - V - I

(ex: C - F - G - C)

- Twist and Shout
- Stir It Up
- Wild Thing

I - IV - I - V - I

(ex: C - F - C - G - C)

- Brown Eyed Girl
- Good Lovin'
- Me and Julio Down By The Schoolyard
- The Lion Sleeps Tonight

I - V - I - IV - I

(ex: C - G - C - F - C)

- Don't Stop Believing
- Let It Be
- Can You Feel The Love Tonight

The right chord progression and the proper strumming go hand in hand! See "THE Best Strumming Lesson...Period".

Songwriter Harlan Howard once said "All you need to write a country song is three chords and the truth." This is the crux behind this lesson on the "Big Three" chords: I, IV, V.

## One Chord Songs

The easiest song of all has just one chord the whole way through. You say you don't know any one-chord songs? Take another listen to "Bad To The Bone" (G chord) or "Chain of Fools" (C chord) - no harmonic movement. Don't mistake increased or decreased volume for a change in chords.

## Two Chord Songs

Lou Reed once said "One chord is fine. Two chords is pushing it. Three chords and you're into jazz."

That may be true but let's push the envelope and add another chord to the mix.

I - V - I

The strongest and most compelling two-chord song will alternate between the I chord and the V chord. This is the most effective example of "tension and release", a principle that makes music what it is. No other chord resolves as strongly to the I chord than the V chord. LISTEN as you strum through the examples to the left.

I - IV - I

Speaking of Lou Reed - a trademark of some of his most popular songs is a simple I-IV-I chord progression. Try strumming C-F-C and you'll hear "Heroin" and "Walk On The Wild Side" clear as day. Notice how it's a more mellow, meandering kind of harmonic movement, perfectly suited to Reed's narrative singing/speaking style.

## Three Chord Songs

If you feel two chords aren't interesting enough for you, you can always venture into "jazz" territory (thanks Lou). You can mix up the I, IV and V chords a few different ways - here are two of the most basic:

I - IV - V - I

A very strong, straightforward and natural sounding progression. This should immediately remind you of a dozen songs right away. Tempo, rhythm, and strumming pattern are factors that differentiate songs containing the same chord progression.

I - V - IV - I

The reverse of the above, this chord progression resolves in a natural albeit softer way. To me, this has a campfire song kind of feel. "Knockin' On Heaven's Door" is a great example of this progression. Speaking of heaven, notice how IV - I sounds like the "Amen" at the end of a hymn?

There are other variations, to be sure, as you can see in the examples to the left. It's well worth your time to sit down with your uke and strum through the examples in this lesson to get familiar with the sound of each type of chord progression.

Flip through the songs in your favorite ukulele songbook and see how they fit these patterns as you take note of other recurring patterns.

Understanding chord progressions will truly open up your ears and is the biggest key to freeing you from having to rely on song sheets and books. It's liberating!

- Enjoy!

Mitch Chang

