



approachable music

HOW TO PLAY UKULELE CHORD MELODY

A guide that uses basic songs

by Joshua Espinosa

approachablemusic.com

introduction

Most people use the ukulele to support, or accompany, their voices as they sing the tune of a song. In music terms, this skill is called **vocal accompaniment**. Now, if you stop to think about it, singing and playing at the same on the ukulele actually requires two instruments: the ukulele and your voice.

The thing is, though, the ukulele by itself is versatile enough that you can use it for both actions. It can "sing" the tune of the song and at the same time, also handle the background music that chords provide — all without ever using your voice.

This style of playing is called chord melody, and it's useful for music teachers who want to use the ukulele for a complete educational program, players who want to go beyond the basics and even beginners who are uncomfortable singing. Here's how to get started with chord melody on the ukulele.

the mindset chord melody requires

In general, most ukulele chord melody resources you'll find are for jazz tunes or songs from other complex genres, mostly because the style is usually perceived as only being for advanced players.

But the truth is, even beginners can learn chord melody as long as they start with approachable songs that revolve around basic chord changes.

You should know, though, that by dipping your toes into chord melody, you're actually entering the world of real musicianship, and realistically, the best way to gain traction with the style and eventually get good at it, is to simply embrace learning the music concepts associated with it.

That might seem scary now, but if you start with baby steps and go incrementally from there, in time, you'll find that music is nothing to be afraid of — it's all notes, chords and rhythms, along with how they're all written out for future use.

Of course, you could go the route of skipping the "music" part of chord melody, but ultimately, all of the ukulele's best secrets are kept at the crossroads of your own personal playing abilities, influences and yes, musical knowledge.



the definition of chord melody style

Performing any song requires two musical elements to be played at the same time: the song's tune, called the **melody**, and also, the chords associated with it, called the **chord progression**. One without the other feels incomplete — if you simply play the song's chord progression without its melody, no one will know which song you're playing, and if you play the melody without the chord progression, the song will sound too empty or thin.

In practice, musicians usually play these elements with different instruments, and often, it takes more than one person to handle the job. For example, a guitar player might play a song's chords and sing the melody — that's one player handling both elements with two instruments. Of course, if the same guitarist played the chords while a singer sang the melody, that would be two players handling both elements with two instruments. The chord melody style of playing is unique in that it specifically **revolves around the concept that one person handles both elements on one instrument**.



what ukulele chord melody looks like

The instrument where chord melody is perhaps played most often is the piano, where it's typical that players play a song's chords with the left hand while playing the melody with the right. The piano, in fact, may be the instrument that's most intuitive for chord melody because the way it's usually played, both hands are totally independent of each other and also basically do the same thing — each one can both, set down fingers on the keys for notes and chords and also pulse out rhythmic patterns for those notes and chords. Since each hand is free to do whatever it wants, it makes it pretty straightforward to, for instance, pulse out the rhythm for a C chord with the left hand while at the same time, playing the individual notes of a melody on the right.

The ukulele, though, is different — your hands are dependent on each other. One hand, the **chord hand**, does the job of placing down fingers for notes or chords on the fingerboard, while the other, the **rhythm hand**, plays those notes and chords with strum or picking patterns. In general, you can't have one without the other, so **in ukulele chord melody playing, the rhythm hand sticks to its job and is still responsible for the rhythm aspect of playing.**

That means that **the chord hand is tasked with setting down fingers for both, a song's chords and its melody at the same time, which is done by taking multiple versions of the same chord and changing them based on which melody note needs to be played at any given moment.**



the most prominent pitch concept

Before learning to play chord melody on the ukulele, it's helpful to understand how chords and melody work together to form songs.

At its core, a chord is simply a few notes all played at once, and by adding in a melody note, you're really just adding another to the pile.

The human ear works in a way that can make sense of the note pile by first, dialing into the most prominent pitch in the set — usually either the shrillest or the loudest. From there, the rest of the notes are considered background noise.

Music, of course, is essentially the study of how we can take advantage of how the ear works, and the **most prominent pitch concept** is central to how musicians organize chords and melody into all types of musical pieces.

In fact, all the melody notes in a song, which are collectively called **the melody line**, act as the most prominent pitch at the given moment they're in use, while the rest of the notes in the chord that are being played alongside each one is relegated to being background noise.

Now, it should be noted at this point that the ear also considers sung notes as prominent pitches, likely because people are trained from early on to listen to someone speaking to them. That's why when you sing even quietly while playing the ukulele, your voice comes through well, even when you play some pretty shrill notes in the chords you're strumming.



how chords are shaped in chord melody

The most prominent pitch concept is key to understanding how the chord hand can play both, a song's chord progression and its melody line at the same time during chord melody playing on the ukulele.

Basically, **to play each melody note in a song, you need to play a chord that's shaped in a way that features the melody note as its most prominent pitch.**

Now, here's a good time to clarify the fact that it's not entirely accurate to refer to the ukulele chords that you know simply as "chords."

See, **the word, "chord" is actually a music theory term that essentially means "the sound that's produced by multiple notes being played at the same time."**

To produce chord sounds on an instrument, you use specific finger placements, called **chord shapes**. So, the ukulele "chords" we know are actually chord shapes that produce the chord sound we intend to play. That means that when we say, "we're playing a C chord," we're actually implying that we're using a chord shape to produce the C chord sound.

The difference between chords and chord shapes may seem subtle, but it's important for chord melody, which at its core, requires you to switch through a variety of chord shapes that produce the same fundamental chord sound.



you already unintentionally play chord melody with the basic ukulele chords

By the sheer nature of the way the ukulele is designed, when you play chord progressions, you also unintentionally play chord melody. Consider that if you play your basic C chord all by itself, one note sticks out above the rest — the one that you're playing on the third fret of the A string.

When you switch to an F chord, a different note stands out — the open A string — and if you play a G chord, it's the note that you're playing on the second fret of the A string. To take things a step further, when you play those three chords one after another, those prominent pitches result in a short melody line. Now, this little melody line itself isn't all that notable, but it's a representation of melody notes and chords played at the same time, which is exactly what we're trying to achieve with ukulele chord melody playing. So, if it's already done unintentionally, that means we can also do it deliberately.

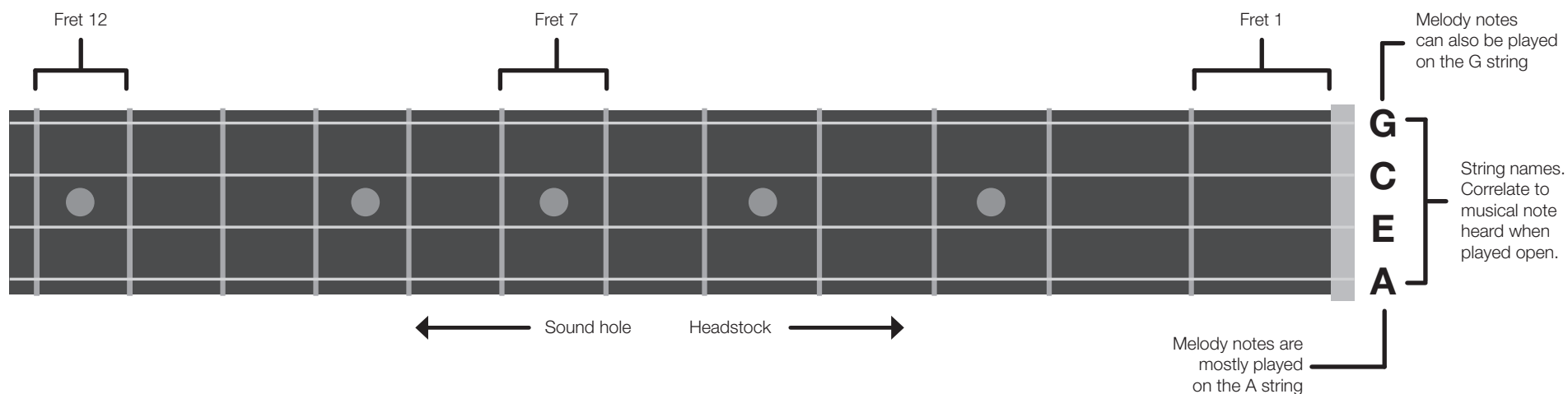


the strings melody notes are played on

Shifting from unintentionally to deliberately playing chord melody starts with looking at how we can take advantage of the way the ukulele is built. Consider that it has two low strings, C and E, and two high ones, G and A. Of all four, the A string is the most shrill, or in music terms, the **highest pitched**, so due to the nature of the most prominent pitch concept, notes played on the A string will stand out more than those played on any other string. That means that **in ukulele chord melody playing, you'll usually play melody notes on the A string and the rest of the notes of the chord on the C, E and G strings.**

Now, being that the G string is also a high string, it can also be used for melody notes while you play the rest of the notes of the chord on the C, E and A strings. But since the A string is higher pitched, in this scenario, you'll have to be careful with how you play the note on it. If it becomes too prominent, it overtakes the melody note being played on the G string, and becomes the melody note itself. This is notable because even though in chord melody style, you'll mostly play chord shapes with melody notes on the A string, you'll also need to learn how to play chord shapes with melody notes on the G string.

What ukulele strings to play melody notes on



rethinking chord shapes

If you've only played ukulele to sing songs, you might know little else about chord shapes other than the fact that when you see a chord symbol over a lyric, you play the one you know — basically, you see a C on the song chart, so you play the basic C chord shape you learned on day one.

But playing chord melody requires a deeper understanding of ukulele chords. See, for any chord symbol you encounter, there's theoretically, an endless possibility of chord shapes you can choose from to play it.

Now, within the context of singing songs, you're pretty much free to choose chord shapes based on arbitrary reasons, such as how easy they are to play or how good they sound as a backdrop to singing.

In fact, it's for these two reasons in particular why largely, everyone typically uses the same chords when they play most popular music songs.

With chord melody, though, you choose chord shapes not arbitrarily, but based on the melody note that's being called for you to play. That means that **at the very least — and to get started — in every chord shape you play, you have to be able to identify the melody note by name.**

However, if you really want to get good at playing chord melody style, **you'll want to start thinking of "ukulele chords" less as one chord shape that can be used to play one chord sound and more as one chord sound that can be played in a variety of shapes.**

This eventually leads you to the importance of knowing not only what the melody note is in a given chord shape, but also what the rest of the notes are, if only on a vague level. Ultimately, when you begin looking at a chord as a collection of notes that each do its part in chord melody, you start setting yourself up for being able to find chord shapes that create its sound all over the fretboard by yourself on the fly, and really, the sky's the limit from there.



the melody note in your basic C chord

For chord melody, you'll inevitably learn a lot of new chords, but the fact is, the basic ones that most people use to sing songs still get used quite a bit.

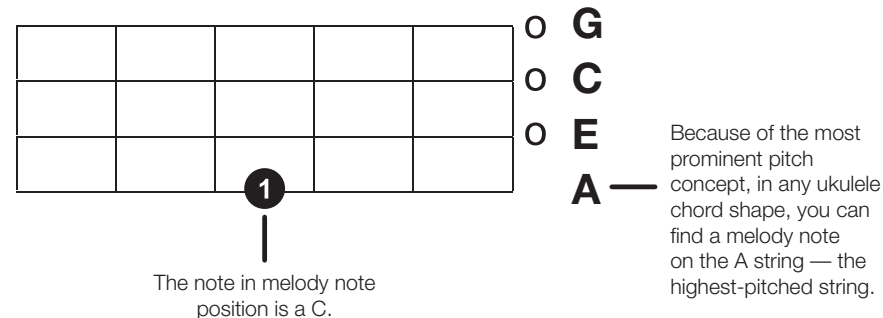
The basic C chord shape, for example, is one you'll still use perhaps more than any other, so let's look at it through the lens of chord melody.

To make the shape, you simply put a finger on the third fret of the A string, leaving all the other strings open. Now, **because of the most prominent pitch concept, in any ukulele chord shape, you can find a melody note on the A string — the highest-pitched string.**

With that in mind, in this particular chord shape, you happen to be playing a C note on the A string. So, in your basic C chord shape, you're playing a C melody note. Ultimately, that means that **anytime you need to play a C chord with a C melody note, your basic C chord shape will work.**

Basic C chord shape chord chart*

C — A C chord shape with a C melody note



Basic C chord shape on the ukulele



*Though you often see chord charts rotated counter-clockwise, if you think about it, that's a bit counterintuitive because nobody plays ukulele vertically. If you print this out and hold it up to your ukulele, this is the how your fingers would land. Plus, this is how a chord will look in pictures and in video tutorials. But if the rotation of this chart bothers you, simply rotate it counterclockwise.

the melody notes in other basic chords

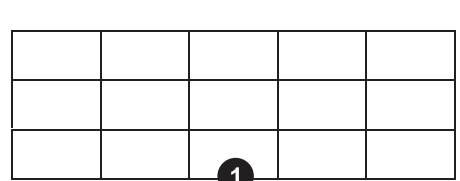
Once you're aware that a melody note in a ukulele chord shape can always be found on the A string, **finding the melody notes in all your basic chords is pretty straightforward — you simply need to identify the note that's being played on the A string in each chord shape.**

For instance, when you play the basic F chord, you leave the A string open. Of course, it's called the A string because when you play it open, it rings out an A note. So, you can deduce from there that **the melody note in the basic F chord is an A note.** When you play the G chord shape, you have a finger on the second fret of the A string, which plays a B note, so that means that **the melody note in your basic G chord is a B note.**

As you probably know a bunch of chords, now's a good time to play others you know and try to identify the melody notes in each shape. Even if you can't yet name the actual notes, at least try to identify which fingers are playing it on what fret or if it's an open string note — for now, just see the chords in a new light.

Basic C, F and G chord charts with melody notes identified

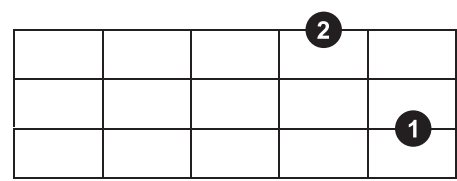
C — A C chord shape with a C melody note



The note in melody note position is a C.

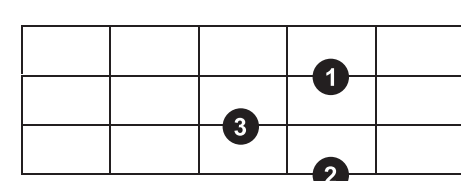
A melody note can always be found on the A string.

F — An F chord shape with an A melody note



Since this shape is played with the A string open, the note in melody note position is an A.

G — A G chord shape with a G melody note



The note in melody note position is a B.

all the notes on the A string

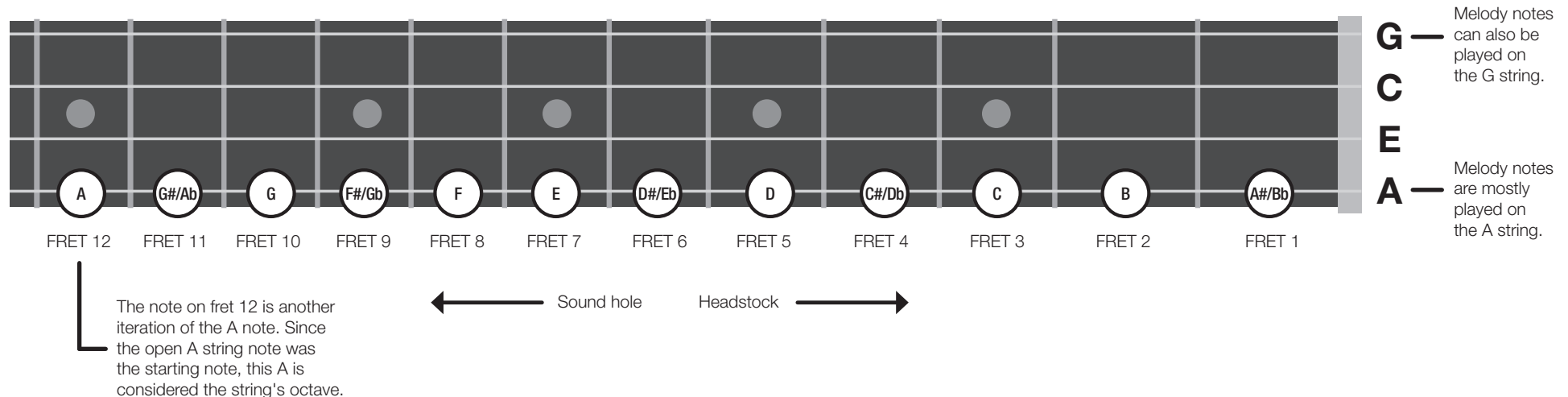
Because chord melody relies so much on the A string for melody notes, it'll be useful to memorize all the notes on that string up to about fret 12. Here's a chart that has them all. As you study it, note that in music, some notes have two different names. For example, while the note played on the second fret of the ukulele's A string is simply called a B note, or B for short, the one on the first fret of the A string is called A#/Bb, which is pronounced "A sharp or B flat."

A note with two names has exactly the same sound, but is called one or the other depending on how it's being used.

For basic chord melody playing, all you have to know about notes with two names is that you'll always be asked to play the note by one name or the other and never by both names at once because in music theory, even though they sound exactly the same, they're considered completely different notes. So, when you get asked to play a Bb note, play A#/Bb, but think of it only as Bb. The same goes for A# — play A#/Bb, but think of it only as A#.

Something else to be aware of is that notes on the A string are ordered according to a music scale — a set of notes — called the **chromatic scale**. Now, it's the nature of all music scales that they're names eventually loop back to the starting note's name, and each iteration of the starting note's name, except for the one you actually start with, is called in musical terms, an **octave**. So, keeping in mind that the first note on the A string is A — which comes from the open string — at fret 12, the note names loop back again to A. Since A is the starting note in this case, the A on the 12th fret is considered the octave.

All the notes up to fret 12 on the A string



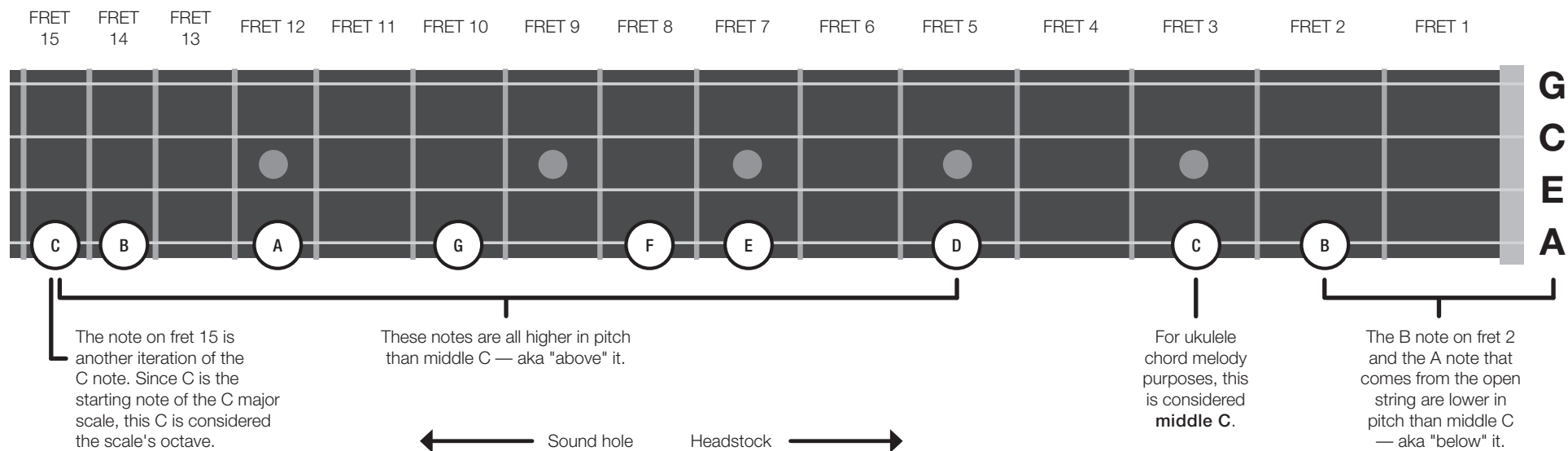
the C major scale on the A string

In chord melody, while any note on the A string is in play, you'll play certain notes most frequently. These notes come from another music scale that's considered a subset of the chromatic scale called the **C major scale**. On the ukulele's A string, the C major scale starts with the C note on the third fret.

The C note on the third fret of the A string is central to ukulele chord melody playing — all the other notes revolve around it, and you'll often begin and almost always, finish songs with it. It's known musically as **middle C**, and even though it technically doesn't sound exactly like middle C on the piano — the white key right in the middle of the keyboard — on the ukulele, it functions in exactly the same way. From middle C, going toward the sound hole, the next note in the C major scale is D, which can be found on fret 5 of the A string, followed by E on fret 7, F on fret 8, G on fret 10, A on fret 12, B on fret 14, and then another iteration of C on fret 15. **Because the scale started with C, the iteration of C on fret 15 is considered the C major scale's octave.**

You should also be aware of the fact that all the notes from D to the octave on fret 15 are higher in pitch than middle C. **Colloquially, they get referred to as notes "above" middle C.** From middle C going toward the tuners, there are two more notes from the C major scale on the A string — the B note on fret 2 and the A note that comes from playing the open A string. **They're lower in pitch than middle C and are considered "below" it.**

C major scale notes on the A string

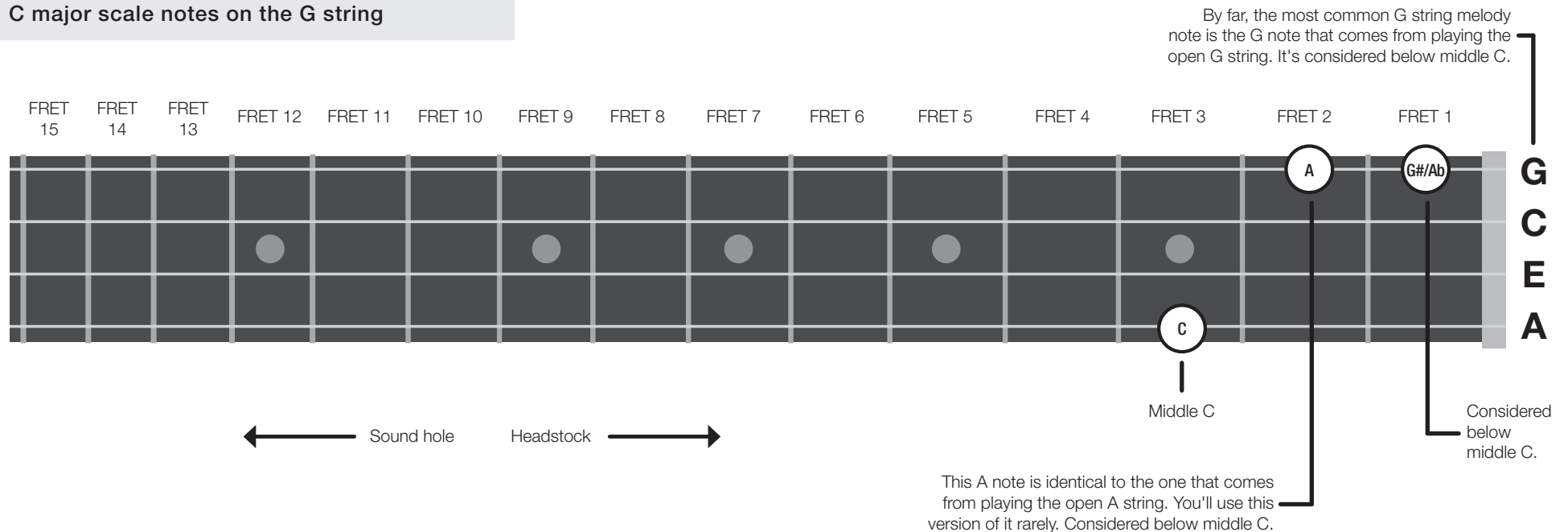


notable melody notes on the G string

While you'll mostly play melody notes on the ukulele's A string, you'll also need to play some on the G string. By far, the most common G string melody note that you'll use in ukulele chord melody is the G note that comes from playing the open G string. It's lower in pitch than middle C and considered below it.

You'll also sometimes need the G#/Ab on fret 1 of the G string, which is below middle C as well. Finally, there's the A note on fret 2 of the G string. It's another one that's below middle C and is actually identical to the open A string note. In practice, you won't use this version of that A note often — you'll almost always produce that note by simply playing a chord that uses the open A string. But every once in a while, it makes sense to do it on the G string.

C major scale notes on the G string



playing chords with G string melody notes

Playing chords with melody notes on the G string can be tricky because you have to account for the fact that the A string is higher than almost any note that you'll play on it.

While one solution is to play chord shapes that omit the A string all together, it actually sounds better, is more intuitive and takes less work to simply be careful with it.

In fact, **the best way to handle a chord that has a melody note on the G string is to emphasize the G string more than the A string.** This is usually done by playing the note on the G string more loudly than anything you're playing on the A string, but there are also other techniques that you might pick up with experience.

Now, in ukulele chord melody playing, the open G string note — the G note below middle C — is far and away the most common G string melody note you'll encounter. It's also almost always either played as part of a C or G chord sound.

The basic C chord shape, of course, makes use of the open G string, so **it can be used to cover not only situations that call for a C chord with a middle C melody note, which is the melody note on its A string, but also ones that call for a C chord with a G note below middle C — the melody note on its G string.**

The basic G chord shape works similarly, as it also makes use of the open G string. **It can be used to cover not only situations that call for a G chord with a B note below middle C, which is the melody note on its A string, but also ones that call for a G chord with a G note below middle C — the melody note on its G string.**

In both cases, when you're playing the G melody note below middle C, emphasize the open G string by playing it louder than the note on the A string.

Make sure that the A string note doesn't become too prominent or else it will take over the G string melody note and become the melody note itself.

C chord with a G melody note below middle C

C — A C chord shape with a G melody note below middle C

Don't let this C note become more prominent or else it will take over and become the melody note itself.

The melody note is the G note that comes from the open G string. When playing this chord, emphasize this string over the A string.

C chord with a G melody note below middle C

G — A G chord shape with a G melody note below middle C

Don't let this B note become more prominent or else it will take over and become the melody note itself.

The melody note is the G note that comes from the open G string. When playing this chord, emphasize this string over the A string.

the ukulele and the key of C major

In music, the main scales that come from the chromatic scale, as the C major scale does, each create a unique sound called a **key**. Now, the term, "key" is actually pretty abstract, but, it's mostly used by musicians to group together the musical elements that create the sound — the main scale and a set of chords that sound good when played along with it.

In ukulele chord melody playing, the melody notes that come from the C major scale and the chords you'll use to play them combine to create the **key of C major**.

That means that when someone says that a song is in the "key of C major" — or "in C" — they're basically implying that notes from the C major scale are mostly getting used along with the set of chords that sounds good with it.

As far as the set of chords, each key has seven basic chords associated with it. In C major, those chords are C, Dm (short for "D minor"), Em, F, G, Am and Bdim (short for "B diminished").

If you've been playing ukulele for a while, you might recognize a lot of these chords as ones you play quite often, which makes sense because the ukulele is practically built to play the key of C — while you can play all the other keys on it, C major is the most intuitive.

For chord melody playing, you'll also mostly stick with the key of C, and realistically, there's so much to learn in that key alone that you may never need to switch to another one.



visualizing it all together in a lead sheet

Now's a good time to take inventory of all the moving parts in ukulele chord melody playing. For starters, **you need to know what the current melody note is at any given time as well as whether it's above, below or exactly middle C**. You also need to know **what chord sound gets played along with it**. From there, you can decide which chord shape satisfies the requirements for both the melody note and the chord sound.

Ultimately, it's a lot to keep track of off the top of your head, so it's highly beneficial to use some kind of reference. Realistically, **the best one for the job is a lead sheet, which is a form of sheet music that highlights only the song's melody line, chords and, if applicable, lyrics**.

Now, using a lead sheet for chord melody is less like reading music in the traditional sense and more like decoding a song's cheat sheet. Sure, you'll have to identify the melody note symbols, but there really aren't that many you have to know, and they can usually be memorized quickly. Also, chords are treated the same way they would be in a basic song chart with lyrics — they're simply written out above the notes as chord symbols. Plus, if you know the song's tune well — and especially if there are lyrics — it's pretty intuitive to use the lead sheet only as a reference for the melody line notes and chord changes while you do everything else by ear. Of course, if you already know how to read music, then a lead sheet should be pretty straightforward.

Lead sheet for the first half of "Mary Had a Little Lamb"

C — Chord symbol

The lead sheet is written on a single staff in 4/4 time. It features a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The melody is composed of quarter and eighth notes. Chord symbols (C, G) are placed above the staff at specific measures. Lyrics are written below the staff, aligned with the melody notes. A legend indicates that 'C' represents a chord symbol. A note explains that all note symbols in a lead sheet represent a melody note. The sheet ends with a double bar line.

Ma - ry had a lit - tle lamb, lit - tle lamb, lit - tle lamb.

All the note symbols in a lead sheet represent a melody note.

Song lyrics

5

G C

Ma - ry had a lit - tle lamb whose fleece was white as snow.

basic lead sheet terminology

Let's take a quick tour of the lead sheet. For starters, all the symbols in a lead sheet are collectively called **music notation**. The five horizontal lines that everything is written on is called **the staff**. The lines themselves are called **staff lines**. The circle-type symbols with lines extending from them are called **note symbols**. Note symbols can sit on, between, above or below the staff lines, and there are different types with slightly varying characteristics.

The staff can be extended either way with short lines, called **ledger lines**, that are just wide enough for a note symbol. Each iteration of the staff, along with the lyrics and chord symbols that go with it, is called a **system**, which is more colloquially known as **a line of music**. The note names that are associated with note symbols are determined by the **treble clef** symbol — the first thing you see on the staff. There are actually two clefs in music — the other is called the **bass clef**, and when that one is present, notes are named differently. Lead sheets, though, almost always have notes that are defined by the treble clef.

The symbol with two stacked numbers is called the **time signature**. It gives us a number to count to repeatedly throughout a song. After each completed count, there's a horizontal line called a **measure line** that breaks the staff up into small sections of note symbols. Each section contains a full turn of the count and is called a **measure** or a **bar**, terms that are used interchangeably. Measures are usually referred to by a number — measure 1, 2 and so on — and sometimes, measure numbers are shown above the starting measure of each system after the first one, which helps make things easier to navigate.

Basic lead sheet elements in a line of music

The diagram illustrates a line of music on a staff, with various elements labeled:

- Treble clef**: The symbol at the beginning of the staff.
- Time signature**: The 'C' symbol indicating common time.
- Ledger lines**: Short lines extending below the staff to accommodate notes below the bottom line.
- Two notes connected**: A horizontal line connecting two notes, indicating they are played simultaneously.
- Standalone note**: A single note symbol on the staff.
- Measure (or bar) line**: A vertical line separating measures.
- Chord symbol**: The 'G' symbol indicating a G major chord.
- Standalone note**: A single note symbol on the staff.
- Measure line**: A vertical line at the end of the staff.
- Lyrics**: The words 'Hush', 'lit - tle', 'ba - by', 'don't', 'say', 'a', 'word,' written below the staff.
- Measure 1**: The first measure of the line.
- Measure 2**: The second measure of the line.
- The staff, made up of five staff lines**: A bracket indicating the five horizontal lines of the staff.

the most common music note names

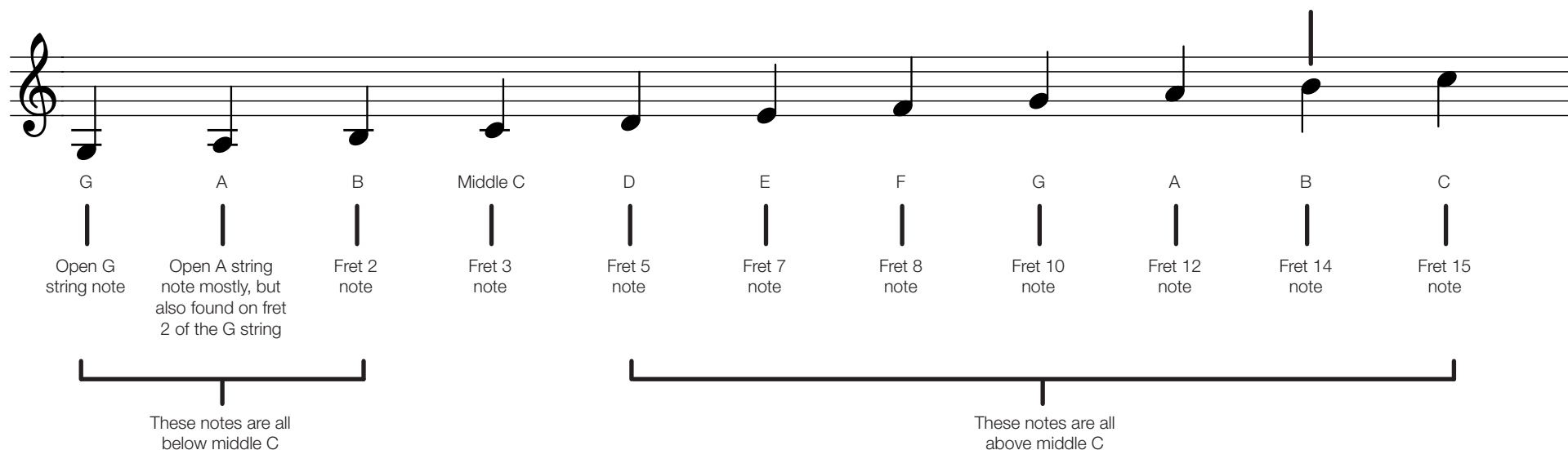
Identifying notes in music notation can seem scary at first. But **for ukulele chord melody playing in the key of C, you really only have to be able to recognize the 11 notes that you'll use most frequently.** Here's a chart that shows them all, along with where they can be found on the ukulele.

Importantly, note that middle C sits on the first ledger line below the staff. As you can visually deduce from there, **any other note that makes use of a ledger line would be considered below middle C** and **any note that does not make use of a ledger line would be considered above middle C.**

Also, now's a good time to point out that any note symbol below the middle staff line has its flag pointing upwards while those above the middle staff line have their flag pointing downwards. This is purely for readability purposes and doesn't matter much otherwise.

The 11 most common note names for ukulele chord melody

Notes above the middle line have their flag pointing downward, purely for readability. Notes below the middle line have their flag pointing upward.



How to learn the note names

While there are a lot of tricks to learning music notes, ultimately, the best way to learn them for chord melody playing on the ukulele is to actually use a lead sheet for songs while keeping this reference handy. Do it often enough and eventually, you'll memorize them.

identifying notes in a song's lead sheet

When you play ukulele to sing songs, you mostly stay on a chord shape until you're asked to change it by a different chord symbol. But in chord melody style, you change chord shapes based on when the melody note changes, and in general, notes change more often than chords.

So, **to decode a lead sheet for chord melody purposes, the first thing you have to do is go through and identify all the notes.** These are your melody notes. You'll also need to determine whether the note is above, below or exactly middle C, which can be conveyed through a basic arrow system.

If a note is **above middle C**, following its name, it'll have an arrow pointing upwards. If it's **below middle C**, it'll have an arrow pointing downwards. If the note is **exactly middle C**, it'll have no arrow at all. Let's identify all the notes in the first line of "The Wheels on the Bus."

Notes in the first line of "The Wheels on the Bus"

The wheels on the bus go 'round and 'round, 'round and 'round,

G↓ C C C C E↑ G↑ E↑ C D↑ B↓ G↓

Note name with an arrow pointing downward denotes that the note is below middle C.

Note name with no arrow denotes that the note is middle C.

Note name with an arrow pointing upward denotes that the note is above middle C.

Why a lead sheet and not tablature?

While tablature — tab, for short — is a popular song reference among ukulele players, it's an inherently limited resource. For almost every song that's written, there's a lead sheet for it, but not usually ukulele tab. So by learning to decode a lead sheet, you simply have more access to more songs.

decoding the lead sheet for chord shapes

After identifying all of the melody notes in a lead sheet, determining which chord shapes are needed to play the song in chord melody style is pretty straightforward — **you simply take whatever the current chord symbol says and combine it with whatever the melody note is at a given point.**

For example, a measure with a C chord symbol above it means that until instructed otherwise, the chord sound is C. If the first note in the bar is middle C, then you need to play a shape that makes a C chord sound and has a middle C melody note. If, the next note is an E above middle C, then you need to switch to a shape that makes a C chord sound and has an E melody note above middle C. When the chord symbol changes, you follow the same concept, using the different chord sound. Now, something to note is that lead sheets often contain measures without chord symbols above them. In these cases, simply continue on with whatever chord you were working with last — you haven't been instructed to change anything, so don't.

There is one exception to this rule, though. Many songs don't have a chord symbol above the very first bar. A bar like this is called a **pickup measure**. At this point, **play any melody notes in a pickup measure all by themselves without a chord shape** — no chord is called for, so no chord gets played.

Notes in the first line of "The Wheels on the Bus"

The musical notation is in 4/4 time. The first measure is a pickup measure with a single eighth note G4. The second measure has a C chord symbol and four eighth notes: C4, E4, G4, and F4. The third measure has an E4 note. The fourth measure has a G chord symbol and three eighth notes: G4, E4, and C4. The fifth measure has a G chord symbol and three eighth notes: D4, B3, and G3.

Pickup measure

C — C chord symbol means to play a C chord sound until further notice.

No chord symbol over this measure means to continue with the chord that you were last instructed to play. In this case, it's C.

G — Here, the chord sound changes from C to G. Play this until further notice.

The wheels on the bus go 'round and 'round, 'round and 'round,

G↓ C C C C E↑ G↑ E↑ C D↑ B↓ G↓

Since the pickup measure has no chord above it, play this melody note all by itself.

For all four of these notes, you need to play a shape that makes a C chord sound and has a middle C melody note.

Here, you need to play a shape that makes a C chord sound and has an E melody note above middle C.

Since the chord sound hasn't changed, you still need to play shapes over these melody notes that make a C chord sound.

Now, the chord symbol changed to G, so each of these melody notes requires a shape that creates the G chord sound along with the given melody note. For instance, for the first note in this measure, you need to play a shape that makes a G chord sound and has D melody note above middle C.

chord melody chord symbols

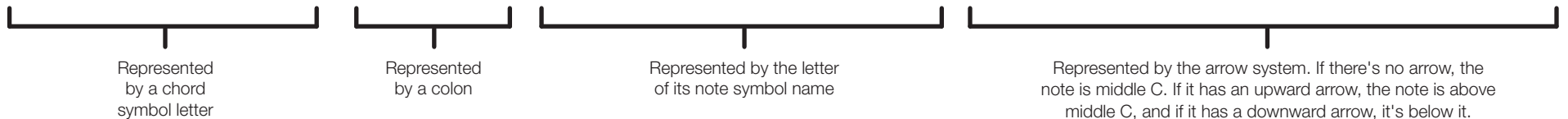
At its core, ukulele chord melody requires you to switch through chord shapes that are based on three important pieces of information: **the chord sound it makes, the melody note it has and how that melody note relates to middle C**. For example, when the chord symbol says "C" and the current melody note is an E above middle C, then you need to play a chord shape that makes a C chord sound and has an E melody note above middle C.

Of course, that's a lot of information to read, which would make it difficult to process while playing, especially at faster speeds. Now, music concepts like these are usually depicted with a symbol, but unfortunately, there isn't one that defines chord shapes that have everything we need to play ukulele chord melody. So, we have to make one. Actually, we've already started this process with the arrow system that conveys whether or not a melody note is above, below or exactly middle C. Combine that with the melody note name that comes from the note symbol and 2/3 of the information is already in symbol form.

For the chord sound, we can simply use a chord symbol, just like a song chart or a lead sheet would. But because the chord sound and melody note are both letters, which can cause confusion, let's add a colon to separate them. Now, when you need to play a chord shape that makes a C chord sound and has an E melody note above middle C, **you'll just see C:E↑, which essentially translates to "a C chord with an E melody note above middle C."**

Ukulele chord melody chord symbol formula

[Chord symbol] with a(n) [melody note name] [above, below or is] middle C



chord melody symbol examples

Ultimately, the ukulele chord melody chord symbol, which we can shorten to "**ukulele chord melody symbol**" has three versions. One depicts a chord with a middle C melody note, one shows a chord with a melody note above middle C and the other conveys a chord with a melody note below middle C. Let's see the chord melody symbol in action. All of the chord shapes you'll play in this style will use chord symbols that follow the formula of one of these three examples.

Ukulele chord melody symbol depicting a chord with a middle C melody note

C chord with a middle C melody note = C:C



Represented by the
C chord symbol letter



Represented
by a colon



Represented by the
C note name letter



Symbol has no arrow because the
melody note is exactly middle C

Ukulele chord melody symbol depicting a chord with a melody note above middle C

C chord with an E melody note above middle C = C:E↑



Represented by the
C chord symbol letter



Represented
by a colon



Represented by the
E note name letter



Represented by the
arrow pointing upwards

Ukulele chord melody symbol depicting a chord with a melody note below middle C

C chord with a G melody note below middle C = C:G↓



Represented by the
C chord symbol letter



Represented
by a colon



Represented by the
G note name letter



Represented by the arrow
pointing downwards

adding chord melody symbols to a lead sheet

With ukulele chord melody symbols, lead sheets can be prepared in a way that looks almost exactly like a basic song chart — essentially you attach a chord symbol to a lyric and change shapes as necessary. Here, all the chord melody symbols are added to the first line of "The Wheels on the Bus."

Now, note that in the pickup measure, the chord sound portion of the chord melody symbol is labeled **"NC,"** which stands for **"no chord."** This is a standard abbreviation in music notation and here, it **essentially translates to "don't play a chord shape for this note — play it by itself."**

Notes in the first line of "The Wheels on the Bus"

The musical notation shows the first line of "The Wheels on the Bus" in 4/4 time. The melody is written on a single staff. The first measure is a pickup measure (half note) with the chord symbol **NC** above it. The following measures are grouped into three sections: measures 2-7 (C chord), measures 8-10 (G chord), and measures 11-13 (G chord). The chord melody symbols are: **NC:G↓**, **C:C**, **C:C**, **C:C**, **C:C**, **C:E↑**, **C:G↑**, **C:E↑**, **C:C**, **G:D↑**, **G:B↓**, and **G:G↓**. Brackets indicate that notes 2-7 are played with a C chord sound and notes 11-13 are played with a G chord sound.

The NC stands for "no chord." Play the note in the pickup measure by itself.

All of these melody notes are played with a C chord sound.

All of these melody notes are played with a G chord sound.

the limitations of the basic chord shapes

By adding ukulele chord melody symbols to a lead sheet, you get a clear picture of what chord shapes you need to cover each melody note in a song. It also becomes obvious, though, that the basic chord shapes have their limitations. For example, take the first line of "The Wheels on the Bus."

Minus the melody note in the pickup measure, it has 11 notes. Yet, only seven of them can be covered by the basic chord shapes that most people play. Any instance of C:C, of which there are five, can be handled by the basic C chord shape and both, the G:B↓ and the G:G↓ can be handled by the basic G chord shape. For all of the rest, you need to use other chord shapes. That means that you have to learn some new ukulele chords.

The first line of "The Wheels on the Bus"

The musical notation is in 4/4 time. The first measure is a pickup measure with a single eighth note G2. The following measures contain the melody: "The wheels on the bus go 'round and 'round, 'round and 'round,". Chord shapes are indicated above and below the notes. Brackets and vertical lines group notes that can be covered by a single basic chord shape.

Chord shapes indicated:

- NC::G↓ (above the pickup note)
- C:C (above the notes for "wheels", "on", "the", "bus")
- C:E↑ (above "go")
- C:G↑ (above "'round")
- C:E↑ (above "and")
- C:C (above "'round,")
- G:D↑ (above "'round")
- G:B↓ (above "and")
- G:G↓ (above "'round,")

Annotations:

- The NC stands for "no chord." Play the note in the pickup measure by itself.
- The basic C chord shape works for these chords. (points to the four C:C chords)
- The basic C chord shape works for this chord. (points to the C:G↑ chord)
- The basic G chord shape works for these chords. (points to the G:B↓ and G:G↓ chords)

an overview of core chord concepts

In many ways, learning chord melody chords is similar to learning chords for singing songs. Ultimately, you'll look at a chord chart, which will tell you how to set your fingers on the ukulele to create a chord. But chord melody playing requires you to make decisions based on the relationship between chords and melody notes, so it helps to understand some fundamental chord concepts. From there, you can make informed choices that will not only help you sound your best but also might make playing chord melody more intuitive. So, let's assume you know nothing about chords and study them from there.

When you set your fingers for a ukulele "chord," you're actually using a **chord shape** to create a **chord sound**. In practice, musicians usually use the word "chord" to imply the fact that the shape creates the sound, but they're not technically the same thing, and in music theory, the word always refers to the sound.

The first thing you have to know about a chord — the sound — is what it is exactly. By definition, **a chord is simply a collection of notes that's played simultaneously**, and the notes that make up a chord are typically referred to either as **notes in the chord** or more formally, as **chord tones**.



triads and tetrads

Theoretically, chords can be created from an endless possibility of note combinations, but the chords in the chord sets that work with the main scales that derive from the chromatic scale to create keys are considered to be the most important.

The chord set in each key contains seven three-note chords. Without getting too deep into the music theory, a three-note chord that's associated with key's chord set can be referred to as **triad chord** or **triad**, for short.

Each of the seven triads in a key's chord set is made up of three notes that come from the main scale that it's associated with. So, in essence, the scale creates the chord set.

Now, a triad is the basic, foundational chord at the heart of every chord musicians ever play. In fact, triads are the chords they play the most, but they also often start with one and either add to or subtract from its notes.

It's perhaps most common that one extra note — which is not required to come from the main scale — is added to a triad, turning it into a four-note chord, called a **tetrad**.

Tetrads also often have other notes from the starting triad altered, which gives them a tastefully dissonant sound. In general, tetrads are associated with chords that have a "7" in their names, such as C7 (pronounced "C seven") or Cmaj7 (short for "C major seven").



applying chord concepts to the key of C

Let's look at the core chord concepts through the lens of the key of C, since you'll be using it most in your ukulele chord melody playing. The chord set in the key of C contains seven chords: C, Dm, Em, F, G, Am and Bdim. Each of these chords is comprised of three chord tones that are simply notes that come from the main scale of the key — the C major scale. For example, the C chord has three chord tones, C, E and G, all of which are notes in the C major scale.

All seven of these chords are considered triads because they have three notes and are associated with a specific key's chord set — C. Now, when playing in the key of C, you'll play these triads most of the time, but an extra note can be added to any of them to turn it into a chord with four chord tones — a tetrad.

In the key of C, the most common tetrad is a G7 chord, which starts as a G chord triad that has G, B and D as its chord tones, and then has an F note added to it. In this case, the note that's added to the triad (G) to form the tetrad (G7) does happen to come from the C major scale, but often it won't. Consider the C7 chord, which starts as C chord triad and then has a Bb note added to it, which is not part of the C major scale.



the connection between chord tones, melody notes and songs

From a music theory standpoint, the connection between chords, melody notes and songs can really be quite complex, but it essentially boils down to the fact that for ukulele chord melody in the key of C, **you'll play seven three-note chords most of the time, but you'll also mix in some four-note chords.**

Now, something to note about songs is that **melody notes are usually — but not always — chord tones of the chord that's supposed to be played along with it.** For example, most of the melody notes in a measure that has a C chord symbol above it will be either C, E or G — the C chord's chord tones.

This means that when you see a C chord symbol — or a chord symbol for any other triad — you need to have at least three chord shapes to draw from, as it's possible that any of the three chord tones could be a melody note. Of course, when you factor in four-note chords, which requires you to have at least four chord shapes available, as well as the concepts behind whether a note is above or below middle C, the amount of chord shapes you need for chord melody starts to exponentiate. That's largely the reason why simply focusing on playing the style in the key of C can keep you busy for quite a long time.



chord tones in 14 common key of C chords

In the key of C, you're most likely to come across 14 different chords — the seven triads that come with the key's chord set, as well as seven tetrads that derive from those triads. Here's a reference chart that details all the chord tones in each of those 14 chords.

Chord	Chord Tones	Starting Triad	Chord Type
C	C E G	–	Triads from the main chord set in the key of C
Dm	D F A	–	
Em	E G B	–	
F	F A C	–	
G	G B D	–	
Am	A C E	–	
Bdim	B D F	–	
G7	G B D F	G	Tetrad with one note from the C major scale — the main scale in the key of C — added
C7	C E G B $\flat$	C	Tetrad with one note from outside the C major scale added
D7	D F $\sharp$ A C	D	Tetrad with one note from the C major scale added AND one note from the starting triad altered to a note outside the scale
E7	E G $\sharp$ B	Em	
A7	A C $\sharp$ E G	Am	
B7	B D $\sharp$ F $\sharp$ A	Bdim	Tetrad with one note from the C major scale added AND two notes from the starting triad altered.
Fm	F A $\flat$ C	F	A chord where the starting triad is altered to a note outside the scale

reading a chord melody symbol chord chart

To learn chord shapes for chord melody, you'll use a chord chart. Reading a chord chart for a chord melody chord is just like reading one for any other ukulele chord — **the only differences are that the name reflects a chord melody symbol**, which has to be deciphered in its own right, and **an asterisk on either the A or G string name indicates which string contains the melody note**. Here's how to read a chord chart for a chord melody chord.

Chord melody symbol. — **C:E** ↑

This reads as "a **C** chord with an **E** melody note above middle **C**."

The first letter conveys the chord sound that the entire shape will create.
The colon essentially translates to "with a(n)."
The second letter indicates the melody note name.
Arrows represent whether the melody note is above or below middle C. No arrow on the chord melody symbol means that the note is exactly middle C.

Fret number. If there's no fret number here, it's fret 1 by default.

'O' means to play the string as an open string.

String names, which coincide with the open string notes.

An asterisk indicates which string the melody note is played on. If the A string has an asterisk, the melody note is on the A string. Same goes for if the asterisk is on the G string.

Because the previous fret number is marked as the seventh, this is the eighth fret. If the previous fret number had no number, it would be fret 1 by default, so this would be fret 2.

The numbered circles represent your fingers.
1 = Index
2 = Middle
3 = Ring
4 = Pinkie
5 = Thumb

← Sound hole Tuners →

Note: All the chord charts in this guide can be rotated counterclockwise to coincide with how they're often shown in other resources. But this is how the chord will look in pictures and video tutorials. If this way bothers you, just rotate the chart counterclockwise.

a plan for learning chord melody chords

When you account for all the combinations of chord sounds and melody notes that result from the 14 most common chords in the key of C, **there are over 50 possible chord shapes that can be used in ukulele chord melody playing**. Some of these are the basic chords used for song playing, which just need to be translated to chord melody. From there, it's probably best to learn new chords as they come up in songs — some you'll use often, and others, hardly ever.



chord melody symbol shorthand

At this point, when you see the symbol "C:E↑" you probably stumble over it as you read it. This makes sense as it's a completely new symbol with a long translation — "a C chord with an E melody note above middle C" doesn't exactly roll off the tongue.

So, let's define some shorthand that will help make reading and referring to chord melody symbols more intuitive. Perhaps **the best way to think of C:E↑ is simply as "C with an E above," which leaves the information about its relationship to middle C implied.** This works because the words, "middle C" are common to all versions of the chord melody symbol, and as long as you know in the back of your mind that "above" or "below" relates to middle C, then leaving it implied will simply makes things more efficient. So, when you see G:G↓ simply say or think, "G with a G below," implying that the note is below middle C.

Of course, for chords that convey middle C melody notes, you don't need the "above" or "below" part at all — C:C is just "C with a C." In fact, as you gain experience with chord melody symbols, you can probably even drop the "above" or "below" for all of them, and your intuition will take care of the rest.



your first three new chord melody chords

To figure out which chord melody chords to learn first, let's look at the first line of "The Wheels on the Bus." The line starts with NC:G↓ (No Chord with a G below) which means all you have to play there is the open G string. From there, all five instances of C:C (C with a C) can be played with the basic C chord shape and both, the G:B↓ (G with a B below) and the G:G↓ (G with a G below) can be handled by the basic G chord shape. So, there's nothing new to learn there, but you do have to shift toward viewing those chord shapes through the lens of chord melody. Now, the rest of the chords, C:E↑ (C with an E above), C:G↑ (C with a G above) and G:D↑ (G with a D above) are likely unfamiliar, giving us our first three chord melody chords to learn, all of which have their melody notes on the A string.

The first line of "The Wheels on the Bus"

Chord shapes indicated above the staff: C (above the first measure), G (above the last measure).

Chord shapes indicated below the staff: NC:G↓, C:C, C:C, C:C, C:C, C:E↑, C:G↑, C:E↑, C:C, G:D↑, G:B↓, G:G↓.

Lyrics: The wheels on the bus go 'round and 'round, 'round and 'round,

The 3 new chord shapes needed for the first line of "The Wheels on the Bus"

C:E↑ 7

○ G
○ C
○ E
A*

C chord with an E melody note above middle C
Shorthand: C with an E above

C:G↑ 7

○ G
○ C
○ E
A*

C chord with a G melody note above middle C
Shorthand: C with a G above

G:D↑ 5

○ G
○ C
○ E
A*

G chord with a D melody note above middle C
Shorthand: G with a D above

chord melody and strumming

Even if you're an experienced ukulele player, one of the most challenging aspects of playing chord melody is figuring out how to apply a strum to it. But the thing is, playing rhythm well in chord melody is an even more advanced skill than simply being able to move through the constantly changing chord shapes. So, let's take that layer of complexity out all together and learn a strumming method that not only makes it fairly straightforward to start playing songs in the chord melody style right away, but can also serve as the foundation for more advanced chord melody rhythm techniques.



the one-downstroke-per-syllable strum

The most intuitive way to get started with ukulele chord melody rhythm is to **strum one downstroke per lyric syllable while playing nothing during the pauses in the song**. See, lyrics are simply a representation of a song's melody notes in word syllables, and **the one-downstroke-per-syllable strum** allows you to change chords as the melody notes require you to in the most natural way possible — if you think about it, you never change chords on an upstroke while you're singing songs, so you wouldn't do it that way in chord melody either. Now, to get used to the one-downstroke-per-syllable strum, let's take a step back from chord melody and use it to simply sing the first line of "The Wheels on the Bus." **Follow the song chart and use the basic chords to sing the song exactly as you know it, but only use one downstroke per syllable and play nothing during the song's natural pauses.**

Song chart for the first line of "The Wheels on the Bus"

↓ = DOWNSTROKE

C

G



The wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round

No chord over this, so sing the syllable without playing a chord.

There's a pause after this syllable. Play nothing through it.

There's also pause after this syllable.

Instructions

Before you play it on the ukulele, sing the line as you know it, at least in your head. Take note where all the little pauses are. Then, using the song chart, sing the line exactly as you know it while strumming a single downstroke as you sing each syllable. Work slowly, change chords on the appropriate syllable and don't play anything during the natural pauses of the tune. Don't rush the pauses. There should be no difference between how you sing it in your head and how you sing it with the ukulele, except for the fact that you're adding in the instrument.

On the first syllable — the word "The" — there's no chord, so sing it all by itself, without any chord.

(Then, using a C chord, play a downstroke as you sing) **wheels** (then...)

(Stay on C and play a downstroke as you sing) **on** (then...)

(Stay on C and play a downstroke as you sing) **the** (then...)

(Stay on C and play a downstroke as you sing) **bus** (then...)

(Stay on C and play a downstroke as you sing) **go** (then...)

(Stay on C and play a downstroke as you sing) **round** (then...)

(Stay on C and play a downstroke as you sing) **and** (then...)

(Stay on C and play a downstroke as you sing) **round** (wait for the pause, and then...)

(Switch to G and play a downstroke as you sing) **round** (then...)

(Stay on G and play a downstroke as you sing) **and** (then...)

(Stay on G and play a downstroke as you sing) **round** (wait for the pause, and then you'd continue on with the song)

putting everything together in 3 steps

At the end of the day, basic ukulele chord melody playing requires three main steps. First, you need to get a lead sheet and identify which chord shapes are needed to play the song it conveys. Then, you need to learn any chord shapes you don't know and also translate the ones you do know to chord melody. The last step is, of course, actually playing the song, which you can do with the one-downstroke-per-syllable strum.

Let's use this three-step process to play the first line of the "The Wheels on the Bus" in ukulele chord melody style.



step 1: identify chord shapes in a lead sheet

Here's a lead sheet that shows the first line of "The Wheels on the Bus" with all the ukulele chord melody symbols that we need written in.

The first line of "The Wheels on the Bus"

Lead sheet for the first line of "The Wheels on the Bus" in 4/4 time. The melody is written on a treble clef staff. Chord shapes are indicated above the staff: C for the first measure and G for the last measure. The lyrics are written below the staff, with chord symbols written below the lyrics.

Chord shapes: C (first measure), G (last measure)

Lyrics: The wheels on the bus go 'round and 'round, 'round and 'round,

Chord symbols: NC:G↓, C:C, C:C, C:C, C:C, C:E↑, C:G↑, C:E↑, C:C, G:D↑, G:B↓, G:G↓



step 2: learn or translate needed chord shapes

Here are the chord charts for all the chord shapes needed to play the first line of "The Wheels on the Bus." Each has an A string melody note except for G:G↓ (G with a G below). For G:G↓, be sure to emphasize the G string over the A string. Note that G:B↓ (G with a B below) and G:G↓ have the same shape — so, one shape works for two different melody note situations. For NC:G↓ (No Chord with a G below), there's no chord shape — you'll just play the open G string.

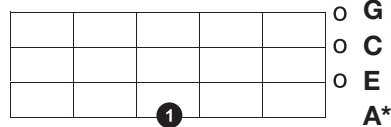
The first line of "The Wheels on the Bus"

The wheels on the bus go 'round and 'round, 'round and 'round,

NC:G↓ C:C C:C C:C C:C C:E↑ C:G↑ C:E↑ C:C G:D↑ G:B↓ G:G↓

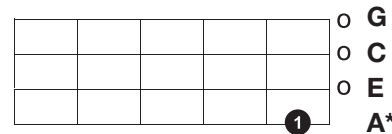
Chords needed for the first line of "The Wheels on the Bus"

C:C



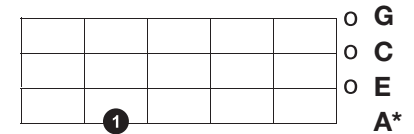
C chord with a middle C melody note
Shorthand: C with a C

C:E↑



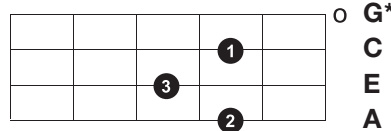
C chord with an E melody note above middle C
Shorthand: C with an E above

C:G↑



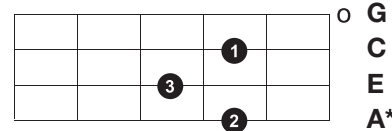
C chord with a G melody note above middle C
Shorthand: C with a G above

G:G↓



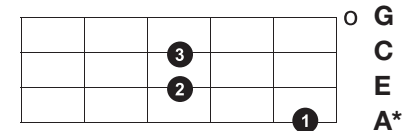
G chord with a G melody note below middle C
Shorthand: G with a G below
Note: Melody note is open G

G:B↓



G chord with a B melody note below middle C
Shorthand: G with a B below

G:D↑



G chord with a D melody note above middle C
Shorthand: G with a D above

step 3: play the line in chord melody style

To play the first line of "The Wheels on the Bus" in ukulele chord melody style, start by plucking the G string to cover NC:G↓. Then, using the song's tune exactly as you know it for reference, play the rest of the chord melody symbols using the one-downstroke-per-syllable strum. Switch chord shapes as necessary and be sure to give appropriate space to the natural pauses in the song. Also, make sure to emphasize the G string for G:G↓.

The first line of "The Wheels on the Bus"

↓ = DOWNSTROKE

There's a pause after this syllable. Leave enough space for it.

There's a pause after this syllable. Leave enough space for it.

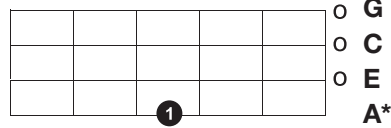
Simply pluck the G string to cover this chord symbol. — NC:G↓

The wheels on the bus go 'round and 'round, 'round and 'round,

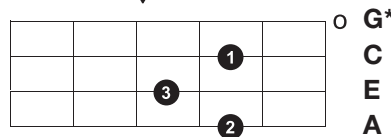
C:C C:C C:C C:C C:E↑ C:G↑ C:E↑ C:C G:G↓ G:B↓ G:G↓

QUICK REFERENCE
Chords needed for
the first line of "The
Wheels on the Bus"

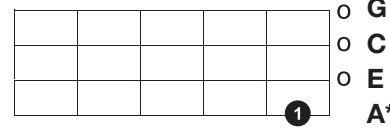
C:C



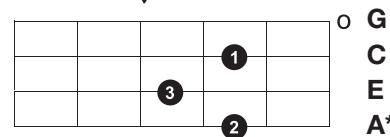
G:G↓



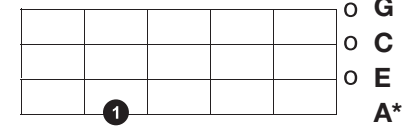
C:E↑



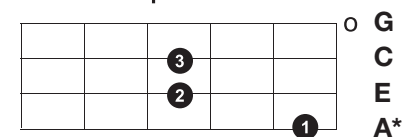
G:B↓



C:G↑



G:D↑



the rest of your first chord melody song

As a whole, the first line of "The Wheels on the Bus" is indicative of most of the core ukulele chord melody principles, and once you can get through it, you'll have already gained good traction with the style. In fact, to play the rest of the song, there are no new principles to learn, though you do have to translate one extra chord into chord melody — C:G↓, which is simply played with a basic C chord shape that has its melody note as the open G string.

The rest of "The Wheels on the Bus"

↓ = DOWNSTROKE

There's a pause after this syllable. Leave enough space for it. Another pause happens here.

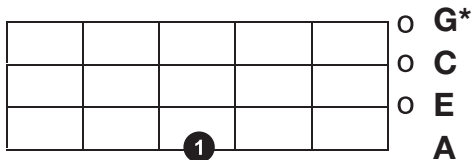
'round and 'round. The wheels on the bus go 'round and 'round all through the town.

C: E↑ C: C C: C C: G↓ C: C C: C C: C C: E↑ C: G↑ C: E↑ C: C G: D↑ G: G↓ G: G↓ C: C

↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓

New chord needed to play the rest of "The Wheels on the Bus"

C:G↓

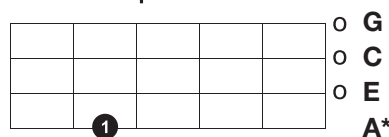


C chord with a G melody note below middle C
Shorthand: C with a G below
Note: Melody note is open G

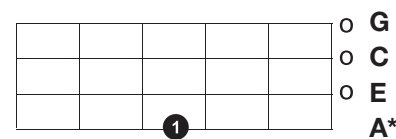
QUICK REFERENCE

The other chords needed for the rest of "The Wheels on the Bus"

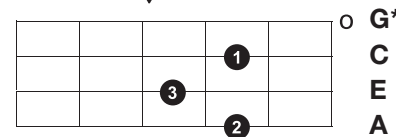
C:G↑



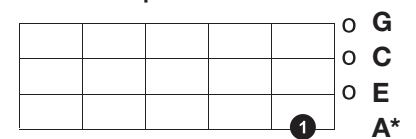
C:C



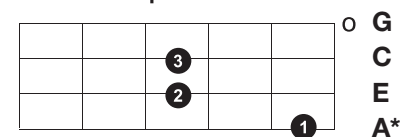
G:G↓



C:E↑



G:D↑



non-chord-tone melody notes

The song, "The Wheels on the Bus" is somewhat rare in that every melody note in the song is a chord tone of the chord sound that's supposed to be played along with it. But in almost every other song, there are at least a few instances where this isn't the case. For example, let's study the first couple of measures of "Mary Had a Little Lamb." Here, both measures call for a C chord to be played along with the melody notes they depict.

Now, if you keep in mind that a C chord's chord tones are C, E and G, it's pretty straightforward to turn the first melody note in measure 1 into a chord melody symbol — it's an E above middle C and can be played with a C:E⁺ chord shape. But the next melody note is a D above middle C, which is not one of the C chord's chord tones. At this point, it might seem logical to simply learn and use a C:D⁺ chord shape, but there are a few things to consider before going this route. So, let's discuss the issues that **non-chord-tone melody notes** present and then learn to handle them in the best possible way.

Notes in the first two measures of "Mary Had a Little Lamb"

C

The musical notation shows a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. The melody consists of the following notes: E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (half), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), and E4 (half). The notes are aligned with the lyrics: Ma - ry had a lit - tle lamb,.

Ma	–	ry	had	a	lit	–	tle	lamb,
E note, which is one of the C chord's chord tones		D note, which is NOT one of the C chord's chord tones	C note, which is one of the C chord's chord tones	D note, which is NOT one of the C chord's chord tones	E note, which is one of the C chord's chord tones		E note, which is one of the C chord's chord tones	E note, which is one of the C chord's chord tones

issues with non-chord-tone melody notes

Let's start the discussion about non-chord-tone melody notes by clarifying that in chord melody style, there are chord shapes for any combination of chord sound and melody note if you want one. That means that if you want to play a C:D[♯] chord shape in the first measure of "Mary Had a Little Lamb," you're absolutely free to do so. In fact, it's not even that difficult — you simply take the basic C chord shape, move it up two frets and emphasize the A string.

The thing is, though, chords with non-chord-tone melody notes sound rather dissonant, which is an acquired taste that works well for jazz and classical music but not necessarily for popular music. See, ultimately, chord shapes built around the triads sound best and are most common because all of those notes sound good together all of the time, and the other notes are left out simply because they don't fit in as well.

Now, the other big issue with playing chords that have non-chord-tone melody notes is all extra chords you'd need to learn — if you do the math, there are upwards of 40 extra chords to learn on top of the 50 or so you need just for the triads and tetrads in the key of C. So really, when it comes to playing chords with non-chord-tone melody notes, you have to consider whether or not it's worth doing all the extra work for chords that in the end, can sound kind of iffy.

Notes in the first two measures of "Mary Had a Little Lamb"

C

Ma – ry had a lit – tle lamb,

E note, which is one of the C chord's chord tones	D note, which is NOT one of the C chord's chord tones	C note, which is one of the C chord's chord tones	D note, which is NOT one of the C chord's chord tones	E note, which is one of the C chord's chord tones	E note, which is one of the C chord's chord tones	E note, which is one of the C chord's chord tones

handling non-chord-tone melody notes

In most popular music situations — meaning not jazz or classical — **the best solution for handling a non-chord-tone melody note is to simply play the note all by itself.** So, in the case of the second note in the first bar of "Mary Had a Little Lamb," instead of playing a C:D↑ chord shape, you would just pluck the D note on the 5th fret of the A string without a chord, and in the lead sheet, the note would be labeled as "NC:D↑." Going this route is really the most beneficial, as it limits the amount of chord shapes you have to learn, while keeping them only to the ones that always sound best.

But there's a more subtle benefit, too. See, it can sound somewhat one-dimensional to play a chord with every single melody note, and you'll sound a bit more polished if you mix in some notes that are played all by themselves, which can be referred to as **standalone notes.**

Considering that most melody notes are chord tones of the chord that's supposed to be played along with it, playing non-chord-tone melody notes as standalone notes can help break things up without much extra work. So, **as a general rule, if the melody note is a chord tone of the chord that's supposed to be played along with it, play a chord shape. If not, play the note by itself.** Here are the first two bars of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" with all the chord melody symbols written in, taking into account that using standalone notes for non-chord-tone melody notes ultimately, sounds best.

Chord melody symbols in the first two measures of "Mary Had a Little Lamb"

C

Ma – ry had a lit – tle lamb,

C:E↑ NC:D↑ C:C NC:D↑ C:E↑ C:E↑ C:E↑

Non-chord-tone melody note.
Play this note all by itself by
plucking the D note on the
5th fret of the A string.

Non-chord-tone melody note.
Play this note all by itself by
plucking the D note on the
5th fret of the A string.

adding a chord to pickup notes

To this point, we've treated pickup notes as standalone notes, mostly because pickup measures don't usually have chord symbols. But pickup notes actually do go along with a chord — the chord symbol is just somewhat hidden. Now, music concepts surrounding pickup measures can be a bit complex, but it all boils down to the idea that **most of the time, any pickup notes can be played with the last chord symbol in the song's final measure.**

So, if you look at the full lead sheet for "The Wheels on the Bus," you can determine that a C chord can be played with the pickup measure's melody note, as it's the last chord in the song's last bar. That means that this melody note — a G below middle C — can be played as a chord, with C:G↓, instead of as a standalone note, with NC:G↓. Going forward, it's probably best to start thinking of pickup measures as measures that actually do have a chord over it — it's just an abstract one that comes from the song's final bar. This way, you'll be able to handle any type of pickup measure, including ones that have non-chord-tone melody notes and even ones that simply have a lot of notes to cover, which may require a mix of chords and standalone notes to sound best.

Full lead sheet for "The Wheels on the Bus"

C

G

The wheels on the bus go 'round and 'round, 'round and 'round,

C:G↓ C:C C:C C:C C:C C:E↑ C:G↑ C:E↑ C:C G:D↑ G:B↓ G:G↓

The chord that goes with the pickup measure is C — the last chord in the song's last bar. This is the resulting chord melody symbol.

This is the chord that goes over the pickup measure as it's last chord symbol in the song's last bar.

C

G

C

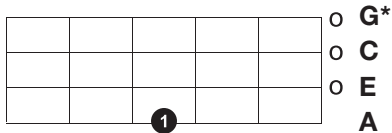
C:E↑ C:C C:C C:G↓ C:C C:C C:C C:C C:E↑ C:G↑ C:E↑ C:C G:D↑ G:G↓ G:G↓ C:C

the most common chord melody shapes

Ultimately in ukulele chord melody style, the stars of the show are the chord shapes that can simultaneously produce both a chord sound and a melody note. While there are over 50 possible chord shapes that you might use in the key of C, there are 11 that you'll play most often — they're the chords that you'll play whenever you see a C, F or G chord symbol. To practice them, and in turn, get started with chord melody, it's probably best to first, find songs that only use these three chords and then branch out from there. Here are 11 most common chord shapes for ukulele chord melody playing.

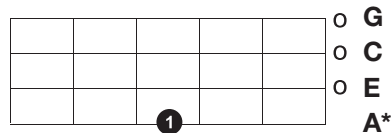
The 10 most common ukulele chord melody chords

C:G ↓



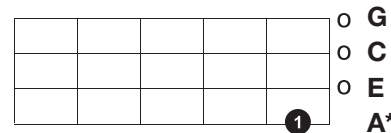
C chord with a G melody note below middle C
Shorthand: C with a G below
Note: Melody note is open G

C:C



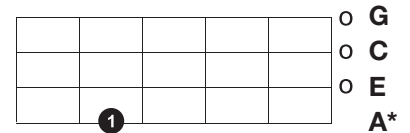
C chord with a middle C melody note
Shorthand: C with a C

C:E ↑



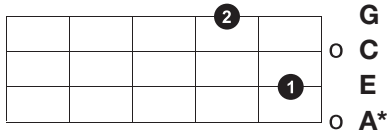
C chord with an E melody note above middle C
Shorthand: C with an E above

C:G ↑



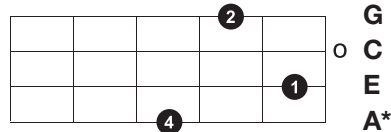
C chord with a G melody note above middle C
Shorthand: C with a G above

F:A ↓



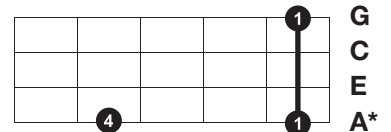
F chord with an A melody note below middle C
Shorthand: F with an A below

F:C



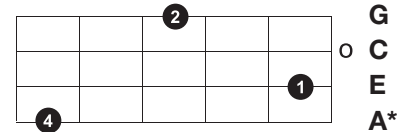
F chord with a middle C melody note
Shorthand: F with a C

F:F ↑



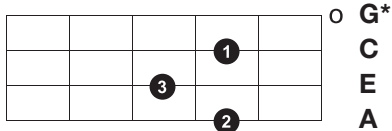
F chord with an F melody note above middle C
Shorthand: F with an F above

F:A ↑



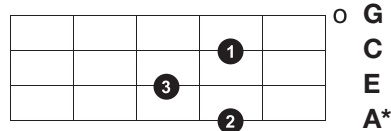
F chord with an A melody note above middle C
Shorthand: F with an A above

G:G ↓



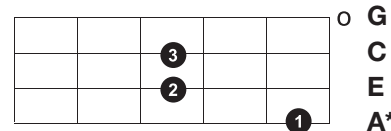
G chord with a G melody note below middle C
Shorthand: G with a G below
Note: Melody note is open G

G:B ↓



G chord with a B melody note below middle C
Shorthand: G with a B below

G:D ↑



G chord with a D melody note above middle C
Shorthand: G with a D above

Note: keep in mind that the asterisk in each chord chart indicates the melody note string. Also, the chord charts are rotated differently from other types of resources, in order to show how the chord will look in pictures and video tutorials. If this bothers you, rotate the charts counterclockwise.

an overview of all the chord melody chord shapes for songs in the key of C

While the 11 most common chord melody chords is a good starting point for the style, you're bound to need more chords. Realistically, the most practical way to learn new chords is to simply learn them as you need them. Some shapes you'll use often and some, you might never need. With all of them, keep in mind that the asterisk in each chord chart indicates the melody note string. Also, the chord charts are rotated differently from other types of ukulele resources, in order to show how the chord will look in pictures and video tutorials. If this bothers you, rotate the charts counterclockwise.

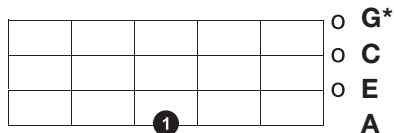
Let's take a look at all the chord melody chord shapes that you might realistically need to play ukulele chord melody style in the key of C.



key of C chord melody shapes: triads

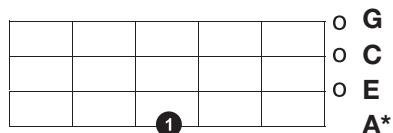
C chord shapes — notes in a C chord are **C E G**

C:G↓



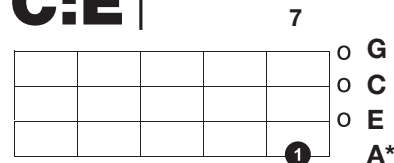
C chord with a G melody note below middle C
Shorthand: C with a G below
Note: Melody note is open G

C:C



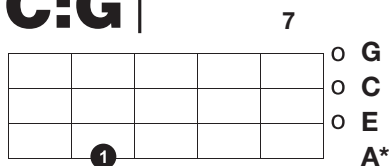
C chord with a middle C melody note
Shorthand: C with a C

C:E↑



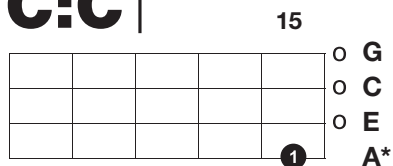
C chord with an E melody note above middle C
Shorthand: C with an E above

C:G↑



C chord with a G melody note above middle C
Shorthand: C with a G above

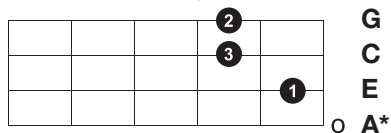
C:C↑



C chord with a C melody note an octave above middle C
Shorthand: C with an octave C

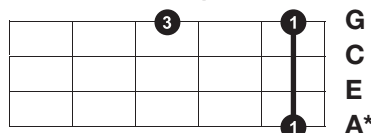
Dm chord shapes — notes in a Dm chord are **D F A**

Dm:A↓



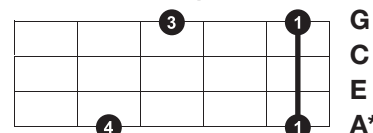
Dm chord with an A melody note below middle C
Shorthand: Dm with an A below

Dm:D↑



Dm chord with a D melody note above middle C
Shorthand: Dm with a D above

Dm:F↑

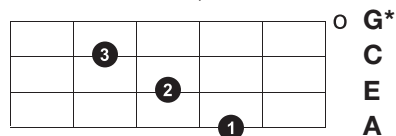


Dm chord with an F melody note above middle C
Shorthand: Dm with an F above

key of C chord melody shapes: triads

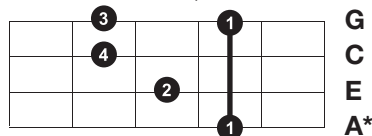
Em chord shapes — notes in an Em chord are **E G B**

Em:G↓



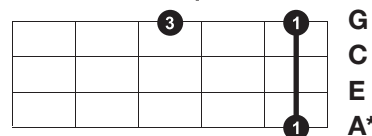
Em chord with a G melody note below middle C
Shorthand: Em with a G below
Note: Melody note is open G

Em:B↓



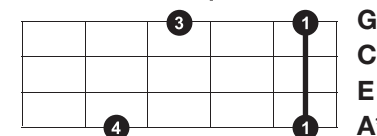
Em chord with a B melody note below middle C
Shorthand: Em with a B below

Em:E↑



Em chord with an E melody note above middle C
Shorthand: Em with an E above

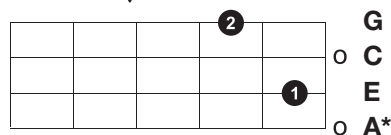
Em:G↑



Em chord with a G melody note above middle C
Shorthand: Em with a G above

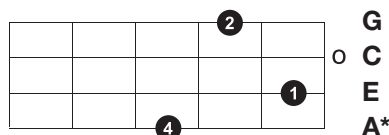
F chord shapes — notes in an F chord are **F A C**

F:A↓



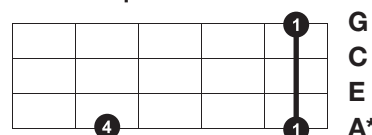
F chord with an A melody note below middle C
Shorthand: F with an A below

F:C



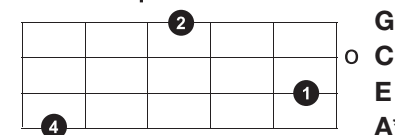
F chord with a middle C melody note
Shorthand: F with a C

F:F↑



F chord with an F melody note above middle C
Shorthand: F with an F above

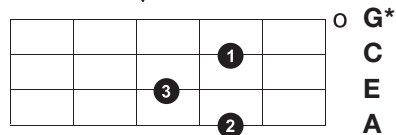
F:A↑



F chord with an A melody note above middle C
Shorthand: F with an A above

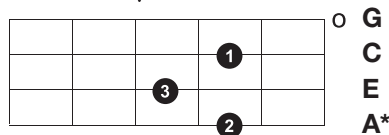
G chord shapes — notes in a G chord are **G B D**

G:G↓



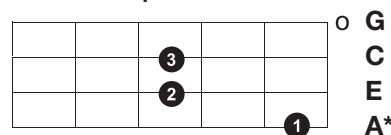
G chord with a G melody note below middle C
Shorthand: G with a G below
Note: Melody note is open G

G:B↓



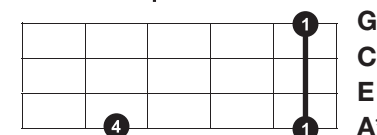
G chord with a B melody note below middle C
Shorthand: G with a B below

G:D↑



G chord with a D melody note above middle C
Shorthand: G with a D above

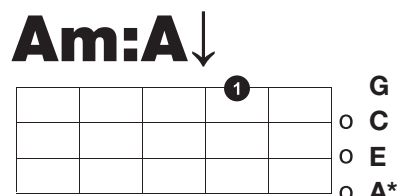
G:G↑



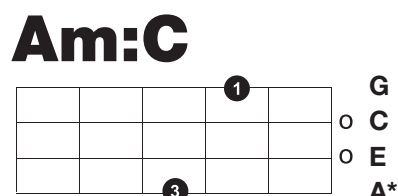
G chord with a G melody note above middle C
Shorthand: G with a G above

key of C chord melody shapes: triads

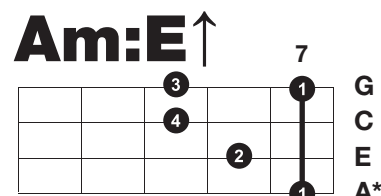
Am chord shapes — notes in an Am chord are **A C E**



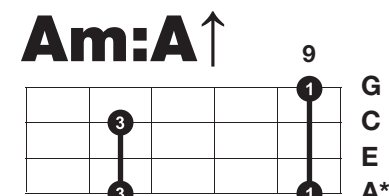
Am chord with an A melody note below middle C
Shorthand: Am with an A below



Am chord with a middle C melody note
Shorthand: Am with a C

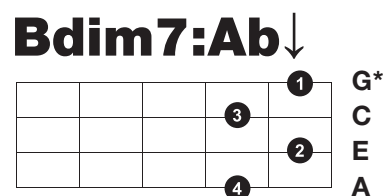


Am chord with an E melody note above middle C
Shorthand: Am with an E above

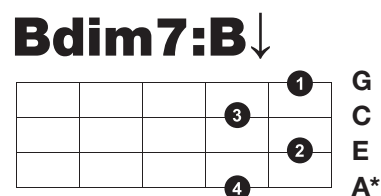


Am chord with an A melody note above middle C
Shorthand: Am with an A above

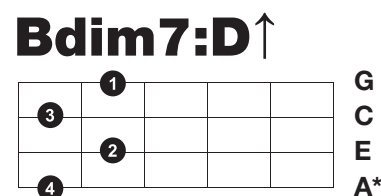
For Bdim, use Bdim7 chord shapes* — notes in a Bdim7 chord are **B D F Ab**



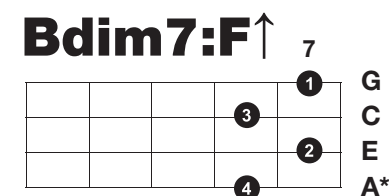
Bdim7 chord with an Ab melody note below middle C
Shorthand: Bdim7 with an Ab below
Note: Melody note is the Ab note on the G string



Bdim7 chord with a B melody note below middle C
Shorthand: Bdim7 with a B below



Bdim7 chord with a D melody note above middle C
Shorthand: Bdim7 with a D above



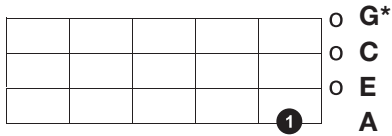
Bdim7 chord with an F melody note above middle C
Shorthand: Bdim7 with an F above

***A note about the Bdim chord shape:** in practice, musicians almost always use the "7" version of a diminished chord as opposed to the version without the "7."
 So, when you see a Bdim chord symbol, use the Bdim7 chord shapes. About the only style of music where you wouldn't do this is classical.

key of C chord melody shapes

C7 chord shapes — notes in a C7 chord are **C E G Bb**

C7:G↓

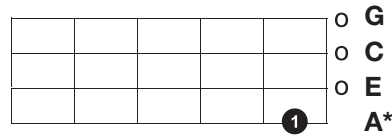


C7 chord with a G melody note below middle C

Shorthand: C7 with a G below

Note: Melody note is open G

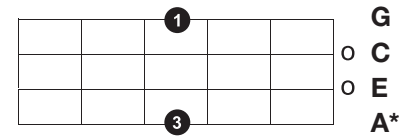
C7:Bb↓



C7 chord with a Bb melody note below middle C

Shorthand: C7 with a Bb below

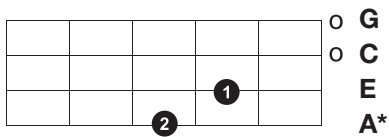
C7:C



C7 chord with a middle C melody note

Shorthand: C7 with a C

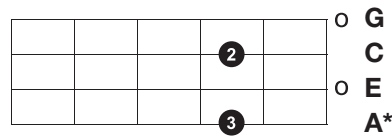
C7:E↑



C7 chord with an E melody note above middle C

Shorthand: C7 with an E above

C7:G↑



C7 chord with a G melody note above middle C

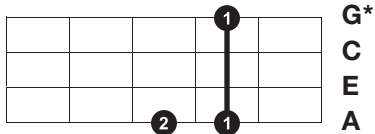
Shorthand: C7 with a G above



key of C chord melody shapes

D7 chord shapes — notes in a D7 chord are **D F# A C**

D7:A↓

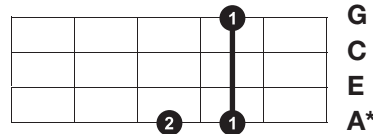


D7 chord with an A melody note below middle C

Shorthand: D7 with an A below

Note: Melody note is the A note on the G string

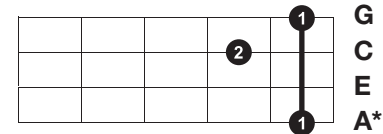
D7:C



D7 chord with a middle C melody note

Shorthand: D7 with a C

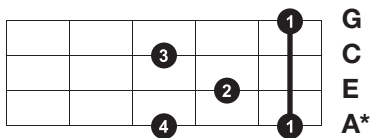
D7:D↑



D7 chord with a D melody note above middle C

Shorthand: D7 with a D above

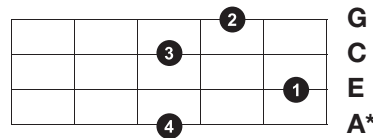
D7:F#↑



D7 chord with an F# melody note above middle C

Shorthand: D7 with an F# above

D7:A↑



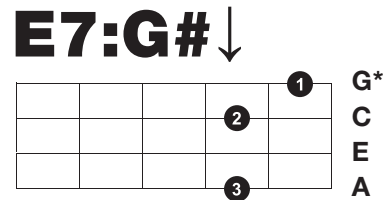
D7 chord with an A melody note above middle C

Shorthand: D7 with an A above

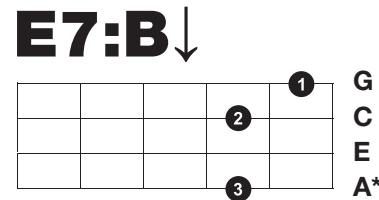


key of C chord melody shapes

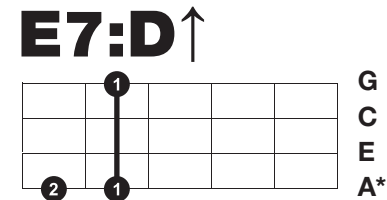
E7 chord shapes — notes in an E7 chord are **E G# B D**



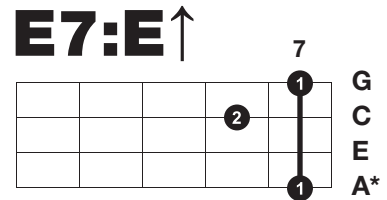
E7 chord with a G# melody note below middle C
Shorthand: E7 with a G# below
Note: Melody note is the G# note on the G string



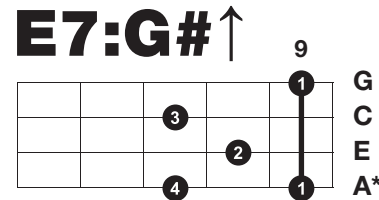
E7 chord with a B melody note below middle C
Shorthand: E7 with a B below



E7 chord with a D melody note above middle C
Shorthand: E7 with a D above

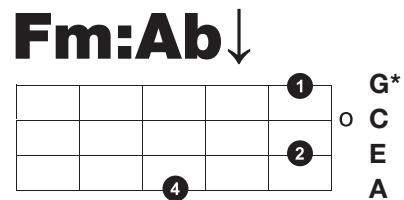


E7 chord with an E melody note above middle C
Shorthand: E7 with an E above

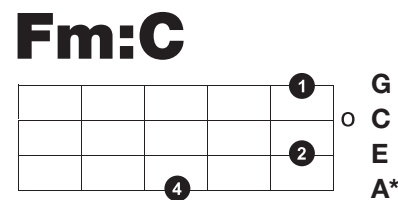


E7 chord with a G# melody note above middle C
Shorthand: E7 with a G# above

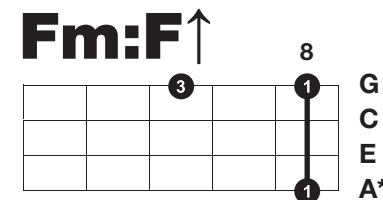
Fm chord shapes — notes in an Fm chord are **F Ab C**



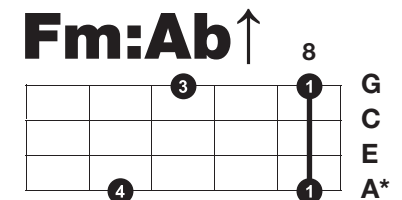
Fm chord with an Ab melody note below middle C
Shorthand: Fm with an Ab below
Note: Melody note is the Ab note on the G string



Fm chord with a middle C melody note
Shorthand: Fm with a C



Fm chord with an F melody note above middle C
Shorthand: Fm with an F above

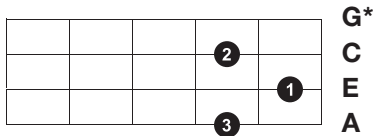


Fm chord with an Ab melody note above middle C
Shorthand: Fm with an Ab above

key of C chord melody shapes

G7 chord variations. Notes in a G7 chord are **G B D F**

G7:G↓

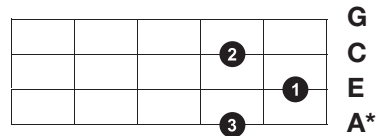


G7 chord with a G melody note below middle C

Shorthand: G7 with a G below

Note: Melody note is open G

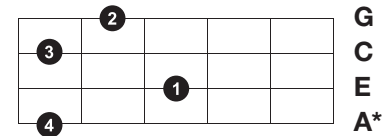
G7:B↓



G7 chord with a B melody note below middle C

Shorthand: G7 with a B below

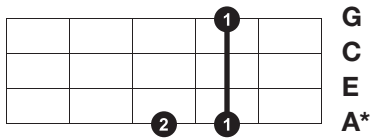
G7:D↑



G7 chord with a D melody note above middle C

Shorthand: G7 with a D above

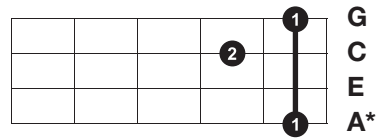
G7:F↑



A7 chord with an F melody note above middle C

Shorthand: G7 with an F above

G7:G↑



G7 chord with a G melody note above middle C

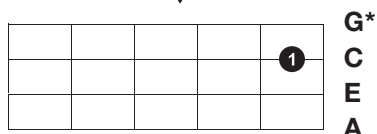
Shorthand: G7 with a G above



key of C chord melody shapes

A7 chord shapes — notes in an A7 chord are **A C# E G**

A7:G↓

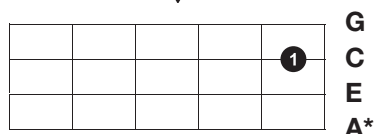


A7 chord with a G melody note below middle C

Shorthand: A7 with a G below

Note: Melody note is open G

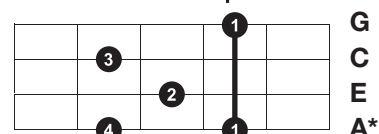
A7:A↓



A7 chord with an A melody note below middle C

Shorthand: A7 with an A below

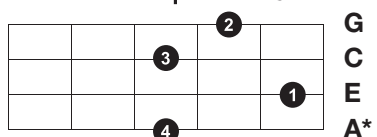
A7:C#↑



A7 chord with a C# melody note above middle C

Shorthand: A7 with a C# above

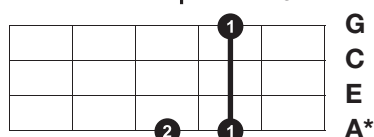
A7:E↑



A7 chord with an E melody note above middle C

Shorthand: A7 with an E above

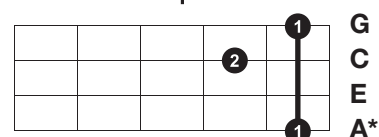
A7:G↑



A7 chord with a G melody note above middle C

Shorthand: A7 with a G above

A7:A↑

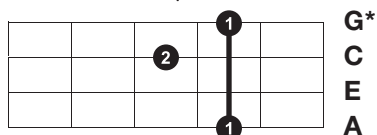


A7 chord with an A melody note above middle C

Shorthand: A7 with an A above

B7 chord shapes — notes in a B7 chord are **B D# F# A**

B7:A↓

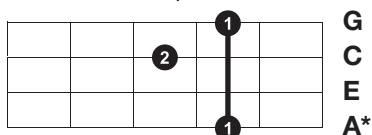


B7 chord with an A melody note below middle C

Shorthand: B7 with an A below

Note: Melody note is the A note on the G string

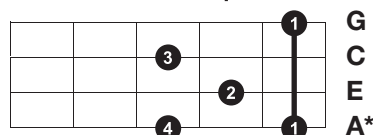
B7:B↓



B7 chord with a B melody note below middle C

Shorthand: B7 with a B below

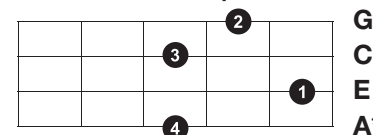
B7:D#↑



B7 chord with a D# melody note above middle C

Shorthand: B7 with a D# above

B7:F#↑



B7 chord with an A melody note above middle C

Shorthand: B7 with an F# above

song studies

At this point, we've covered everything you need to know to start playing ukulele chord melody. So, let's see how it all comes together in practice by studying a few songs. Each one we'll look at has all the chord melody symbols written in, as well as comments about anything notable.

Play each song using the one-downstroke-per-syllable strum and switch chord shapes appropriately. From there, you're ready to go pick out a song you like, find its lead sheet, write in the chord symbols, learn the shapes you don't know and start playing the tune in ukulele chord melody style.



song study: mary had a little lamb

Full lead sheet for "Mary Had a Little Lamb"

1 C G C

Ma - ry had a lit - tle lamb, lit - tle lamb, lit - tle lamb.

C:E↑ NC:D↑ C:C NC:D↑ C:E↑ C:E↑ C:E↑ G:D↑ G:D↑ G:D↑ C:E↑ C:G↑ C:G↑

3 G C

Ma - ry had a lit - tle lamb whose fleece was white as snow. And

C:E↑ NC:D↑ C:C NC:D↑ C:E↑ C:E↑ C:E↑ C:E↑ G:D↑ G:D↑ G:D↑ G:D↑ C:C C:C

5 G C

ev - ery where that Ma - ry went, Ma - ry went, Ma - ry went,

C:E↑ NC:D↑ C:C NC:D↑ C:E↑ C:E↑ C:E↑ G:D↑ G:D↑ G:D↑ C:E↑ C:G↑ C:G↑

7 G C

ev - ery where that Ma - ry went the lamb was sure to go.

C:E↑ NC:D↑ C:C NC:D↑ C:E↑ C:E↑ C:E↑ C:E↑ G:D↑ G:D↑ G:D↑ G:D↑ C:C

Notes

The numbers at the beginning of each line after the first one are called **measure numbers**, which provide a reference point that makes it more efficient to find and refer to lead sheet elements. In general, measure numbers are a courtesy — they aren't always there.

As far as the song itself, the only thing notable is that measures 3, 5 and 7 all contain non-chord-tone melody notes, which you'll play as standalone notes.

song study: twinkle, twinkle, little star

Full lead sheet for "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star"

Chords: C, F, C, F, C, G, C

Twink - le, twink - le, lit - tle star, how I won - der what you are.

Chords: C:C C:C C:G↑ C:G↑ F:A↑ F:A↑ C:G↑ F:F↑ F:F↑ C:E↑ C:E↑ G:D↑ G:D↑ C:C

5

Chords: F, C, G, C, F, C, G

Up a - bove the world so high, like a dia - mond in the sky.

Chords: C:G↑ C:G↑ F:F↑ F:F↑ C:E↑ C:E↑ G:D↑ C:G↑ C:G↑ F:F↑ F:F↑ C:E↑ C:E↑ G:D↑

9

Chords: C, F, C, F, C, G, C

Twink - le, twink - le, lit - tle star, how I won - der what you are.

Chords: C:C C:C C:G↑ C:G↑ F:A↑ F:A↑ C:G↑ F:F↑ F:F↑ C:E↑ C:E↑ G:D↑ G:D↑ C:C

Notes

This song is pretty straightforward, as it has zero non-chord-tone melody notes.

One thing to note, though, is that the first two notes in measure 5 should be played with a C chord, as that's the last chord called for — at the end of measure 4. Sometimes in a situation like this, you'd see the C from measure 4 over this measure as a reminder, but not always.

Also, in measure 2, the F:A↑ can be quite difficult to play because it's so far up the ukulele neck. If you find that you can't do it, simply play a NC:A↑ instead. You can always substitute a chord with a standalone note, just don't go overboard or your playing will sound too thin.

song study: bingo

Full lead sheet for "Bingo"

Chord progression for "Bingo" (4/4 time):

Measures 1-7: C, F, C, G, C, F

Measures 8-14: G, C, Am, Dm, G, C

Lyrics and Chords:

There was a far - mer, had a dog and Bing - o was his name - o, B - I - N - G - O!

Chords: C:G↓ C:C C:C C:C C:G↓ F:A↓ F:A↓ C:G↓ C:G↓ C:C C:C G:D↑ G:D↑ C:E↑ C:C C:E↑ C:E↑ F:F↑ F:F↑ F:F↑

Measures 15-21: G, C, Am, Dm, G, C

Lyrics: B - I - N - G - O! B - I - N - G - O! And, Bing - o was his name - o.

Chords: G:D↑ G:D↑ C:E↑ C:E↑ C:E↑ Am:C Am:C Dm:D↑ Dm:D↑ Dm:D↑ NC:C G:B↓ G:G↓ NC:A↓ G:B↓ C:C C:C

Notes

This song goes through a wide variety of chords and presents a lot of the general challenges you'll face while playing ukulele chord melody style. Realistically, when you can handle Bingo with ease, you'll be well on your way to being able to handle most popular music songs. Note that the pickup note in measure 1 is paired with a C chord, as that's the last chord symbol in the song's final measure. Also, both measures 11 and 12 contain non-chord-tone melody notes, which should be played as standalone notes.

building on this foundation

Playing ukulele chord melody in the key of C with the one-downstroke-per-syllable strum is a fun way to mix up your general song playing. But it's also a powerful skill that can really help you enhance your musicianship.

After you've been playing chord melody for a while, you'll probably want to start figuring out how to weave in a real, professional-style strum that's centered around a 16th note feel.

From there, try taking a song you sing and add in an instrumental break played in ukulele chord melody style. For example, for a song such as "Hush Little Baby," you might sing the first three verses and then play the melody once in chord melody style before going back to singing the fourth verse. Of course, by then, hopefully you're playing one of your favorite songs.

Chord melody playing is also a good jumping off point for learning more advanced music theory concepts. See, there are possible chords all over the fretboard, and if you know enough about how chords work and how to find notes on the ukulele, you can build your own chord melody shapes, which can make it more intuitive to play even the most difficult songs.

At the end of the day, start with easy songs, then branch out little by little to ones that have different challenges to solve. But ultimately, even the simplest songs played in the simplest ways sound pretty good in chord melody.



next steps

In the end, your success with chord melody playing really depends on the strength of your fundamental ukulele skills.

Having blind spots when it comes to the basic chords, how to strum or how to transpose will simply make gaining traction with ukulele chord melody style more challenging. If you need guidance on any of these skills, [click here for more PDF guides](#).

Approachable Music is on a mission to make learning music more accessible. We use accelerated learning ideals to teach the most important real-world music skills, so people can learn an instrument or improve on the one they're already playing as quickly as possible.

For more information about music lessons, or private workshops and classes specific to your organization, contact us at: **info@approachablemusic.com**

Find us on Facebook or Instagram: **[@approachablemusic](#)**