

Fingerpicking for Ukulele - An Introduction

Before we start: Fingerpicking on any instrument takes a lot of concentration and awareness of your own comfort. Ultimately, you're balancing technique with what feels comfortable, but it takes time to sort one out from the other. Be patient with yourself and, as I recommend for any new skill, practice in small chunks of time several times throughout the day and week.

1. Using Individual Fingers to Pluck Individual Strings (Warm Up)

Hold out your right hand with your palm flat to the floor. Press your thumb toward the floor, then your index finger, then thumb again, then middle finger. Repeat:

thumb - index - thumb - middle | thumb - index - thumb - middle (repeat)

Now go back to the ukulele and place your thumb on the C string and your index finger on the A string. These are your first two strings to pluck. Pluck THUMB (C) then INDEX (E). You're half way there! Now, shift your thumb and place it on the G string and your middle finger on the E string. Pluck THUMB (G) then MIDDLE (A). You're working from the middle two strings out to the outer two strings:

C E G A C E G A
thumb - index - thumb - middle | thumb - index - thumb - middle (repeat)

From the beginning, take it slow and steady. Find a tempo you can keep at a steady rate and see how long you can keep it up without any mistakes. When you do get tripped up (it happens to all of us!), don't worry, just pause, count yourself back in and start again.

2. Placing Fingerpicking Patterns on Tablature

As a quick review, standard time indicates that beats are organized into groups of 4. This timing is the most common found in music, especially in the songs we like to sing. As a result, our fingerpicking will also be organized into groups of 4.

Fingerpicking patterns are best laid out visually on what we call TABLATURE. Imagine your ukulele is turned on its side, with the tuning pegs on the left and the body on the right. The strings create four horizontal lines like this:

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

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Next: forget the image of the ukulele turned on its side, because we are going to start moving from left to right along the strings, but that process is more like reading a book, following a sequence of notes across time (not along the fretboard). Numbers on different string lines indicate what fret number needs to be pressed on the corresponding string.

For example, remember the warm up exercise we did? On tablature, it looks like this:

```
A -----0-----0-----0-----0-----  
E -----0-----0-----0-----0-----  
C -----0-----0-----0-----0-----  
G -----0-----0-----0-----0-----
```

Reading left to right, we see that we start with open C, followed by open E, open G, and open A. Keep “reading” and you’ll see the pattern repeats three times.

Next: Which finger is used to pluck which string? In general, I use the three fingers we warmed up with: thumb, index and middle. Those can be abbreviated as follows:

t = thumb *i* = index *m* = middle

These abbreviations can be added to the top of the tablature, lining up with each number:

```
      t i t m t i t m t i t m t i t m  
A -----0-----0-----0-----0-----  
E -----0-----0-----0-----0-----  
C -----0-----0-----0-----0-----  
G -----0-----0-----0-----0-----
```

Return to your warm up exercise, and try “reading” this tablature as you play, simply going back to the beginning after playing the pattern four times through.

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3. Fingerpicking Pattern #1: Standard time "titm"

Surprise! You've just learned your first fingerpicking pattern - the warm up exercise we began with is a basic fingerpicking pattern that can be used for most any song in standard time. Typically, the four notes of the pattern will be spread across two beats, like this:

t i t m t i t m t i t m t i t m

A -----0-----0-----0-----0-----

E -----0-----0-----0-----0-----

C -----0-----0-----0-----0-----

G -----0-----0-----0-----0-----

Count: 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4

Next: Let's try playing a few chords in this pattern. Remember that numbers placed on different strings indicate the fret number where your left hand needs to place fingers.

C chord

t i t m t i t m t i t m t i t m

E -----3-----3-----3-----3-----

A -----0-----0-----0-----0-----

C -----0-----0-----0-----0-----

G -----0-----0-----0-----0-----

F chord

t i t m t i t m t i t m t i t m

E -----0-----0-----0-----0-----

A -----1-----1-----1-----1-----

C -----0-----0-----0-----0-----

G -----2-----2-----2-----2-----

G7 chord

t i t m t i t m t i t m t i t m

E -----2-----2-----2-----2-----

A -----1-----1-----1-----1-----

C -----2-----2-----2-----2-----

G -----0-----0-----0-----0-----

Remember: Tablature is meant as a visual reference for something else. Just like it took us a while to figure out how letters make up words that we read on a page, it will take a while until we can read tablature with the same fluency.

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Next: Let's try transitioning between these most common chords in the context of a song. Let's start very simple:

F F F F C C F F
 London Bridge is falling down / Falling down, falling down
F F F F C C F F
 London Bridge is falling down / My fair lady

You may just want to follow the chord chart, which I would definitely encourage. If you want to double check yourself against tablature, here's how we break it down:

F F F F
t i t m t i t m t i t m t i t m

```

E -----0-----0-----0-----0-----
A -----1-----1-----1-----1-----
C -----0-----0-----0-----0-----
G -----2-----2-----2-----2-----
  
```

London Bridge is falling down

C C F F
t i t m t i t m t i t m t i t m

```

E -----3-----3-----0-----0-----
A -----0-----0-----1-----1-----
C -----0-----0-----0-----0-----
G -----0-----0-----2-----2-----
  
```

Falling down, falling down

F F F F
t i t m t i t m t i t m t i t m

```

E -----0-----0-----0-----0-----
A -----1-----1-----1-----1-----
C -----0-----0-----0-----0-----
G -----2-----2-----2-----2-----
  
```

London Bridge is falling down

C C F F
t i t m t i t m t i t m t i t m

```

E -----3-----3-----0-----0-----
A -----0-----0-----1-----1-----
C -----0-----0-----0-----0-----
G -----0-----0-----2-----2-----
  
```

My fair lady

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Practice Song: This Land is Your Land

Each chord = 1 "titm" fingerpicking cycle:

	t	i	t	m	t	i	t	m
A	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0
E	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0
C	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0
G	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0
Count:	1		2		3		4	

Chorus:

	(C)	F	F	C	
This land is your land,				this land is my land	
	C	G7	G7	C	
From Cal-i-for-nia				to the New York Is-land	
	C	F	F	C	C
From the redwood for-ests				to the Gulf Stream wa - a - ters	
	G7	G7	C		
This land was made for you and me					

Verse 1:

	C	F	F	C
As I was walking				that ribbon of highway
	C	G7	G7	C
I saw a - bove me				that endless sky way
	C	F	F	C
I saw be - low me				that golden val - ley
	G7	G7	C	
This land was made for you and me ... Chorus				

Verse 2:

	C	F	F	C
I've roamed and rambled				and I followed my foot - steps
	C	G7	G7	C
To the sparkling sands of				her diamond de - serts
	C	F	F	C
And all a - round me				a voice was sound - ing
	G7	G7	C	
This land was made for you and me ... Chorus				

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Practice Song: Oh Susannah

Each chord = 1 "titm" fingerpicking cycle:

	t	i	t	m	t	i	t	m
A	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0
E	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0
C	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0
G	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0
Count:	1	2	3	4				

Verse 1:

Oh I come from A-la-ba-ma with a banjo on my knee
 I'm going to Lou-i-si-a-na, my true love for to see
 It rained all night the day I left, the weather it was dry
 The sun so hot, I froze to death - Su-san-nah, don't you cry

Chorus:

Oh, Su-san-nah, don't you cry for me
 For I come from A-la-ba-ma with a banjo on my knee
 Oh, Su-san-nah, don't you cry for me
 For I come from A-la-ba-ma with a banjo on my knee

Verse 2:

I had a dream the o - ther night, everything was still
 I dreamed I saw Su - san - nah a - coming down the hill
 A buckwheat cake was in her mouth, a tear was in her eye
 Says I, "I'm coming from the south, Su - san - nah, don't you cry!"

Chorus

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Shenandoah

Each chord = 1 "titm" fingerpicking cycle:

	t	i	t	m	t	i	t	m	t	i	t	m	t	i	t	m
A	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0
E	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0
C	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0
G	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0	-----	0
	1		2		3		4									

Count in whole groups, one at a time

Verse 1:

C C C C F F C
Shen-an-do-ah, I long to hear - ear you

C F F F F C C C C
A - way, you rolling river

Am Am Am Am F F F F
Oh Shen-an- do -ah, I long to hear you

C C C C C C C C Am Am F C
A - way, I'm bound away, cross the wide Miss-our-i

Verse 2:

C C C C F F C
Shen-an-do-ah, I love your da - augh - ter

C F F F F C C C C
A - way, you rolling river

Am Am Am Am F F F F
I'll take her 'cross the rolling water

C C C C C C C C Am Am F C
A-way, I'm bound a-way, 'cross the wide Miss-our-i

Repeat Verse 1