

Ukulele Gets the Blues

Uncle Brukulele here, with another rollicking romp through Ukuleleland.

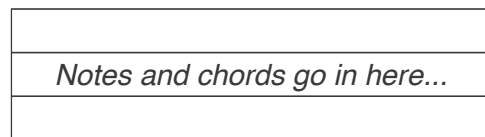
Here we set our sights on the blues. Perhaps the blues is not the first musical genre that springs to mind when contemplating the ukulele. But if the American ragtime banjo and the Greek-Turkish bouzouki can find homes in the music of Ireland, why not plunge the happy-go-lucky Hawaiian ukulele into the pit of despair that is the American blues. (Of course, Cousin Brucelele is exaggerating to some extent. That's what he does.)

A book I wrote called Ukulele From Scratch would be a good place to get a general introduction to the Jumping flea, but there's no *need* to go there first. As long as you know your basic chords, you'll have enough to get going.

Comping the Blues

First things first. Intelligent people argue all day about what does and what does NOT constitute the blues. But not many of them would object if we were to start our adventure with a foundational musical structure known as the *Twelve Bar Blues*. Most of our music is partitioned into units of time known as **bars**, or **measures**. Here comes one now:

This bar has 4 beats in it, and this is known as the **4/4 Time Signature**, where there are 4 strong counts, each lasting a quarter of the bar. You also see four "+" counts, which are weaker counts that come between the stronger, numbered ones. Each **Quarter note** takes as long as two **Eighth notes**.



1 + 2 + 3 + 4 +

The most fundamental function for an instrument like a uke or guitar or piano to perform is to *accompany* a singing voice, or some other instrument, that is providing a **melody**, or **lead**. That's where the word "comp" comes from. And the simplest way for the player to do this is to strum **chords**, which are combinations of notes (4 at most on the uke) that provide a blended backdrop, a tonal *matrix*, a harmonized **context**, if you will, for a melody.

So we'll start by strumming chords according to the Twelve Bar Blues format. You'll strum a Downstroke on each of the numbered counts and a weaker Upstroke on the "and" counts.



1 + 2 + 3 + 4 +

You can strum with your fingers or a pick, or a buffalo nickel, or an old chicken bone. Or a scrap of shoe leather, or the lid from an old tin can. Or maybe that little piece of your heart she snipped out when she took that midnight train to Bangor, Maine.