

The Ian Harrison guide to getting better at strumming....

I have been playing the ukulele now for about three years. I do not profess to be a teacher and anything written below is my experience and scribbling about what worked for me. Please feel free to disregard anything said below as utter rubbish if you so wish.

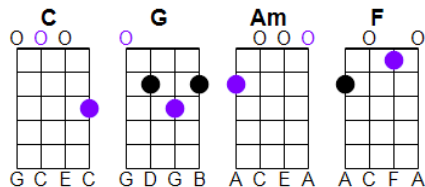
Strumming

I often hear people saying "I can't get the strum pattern" or "What is the Strum Pattern". My usual response is "Don't bother worrying". I will now explain why.

Songs vary in their pattern as they progress through the verses and the choruses. Therefore to play a song with the same strum pattern throughout the song will sound very false and clinical. My advice to anyone is to learn to strum and to practice the timing and chord changes before even thinking about strum patterns. So, in line with the title, let us get on to some simple exercises to help with the strumming. This guide has been written using four basic chords and your task is to take this exercise and to apply it to a number of other chord patterns and sequences.

Chords

The chords used in this guide are as follows:



Timing

Timing is everything and if you need to learn anything then learn timing over strum patterns. In music terms there are some basic timing to think about: 4/4 time and 3/4 time. This describes the beats in a bar of music so, 4/4 time counts 4 beats per bar and 3/4 time counts three beats to the bar. Most songs count the four beats but some, especially waltzes count 3 beats.

Start counting (don't even think about picking up your uke....). 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4. Keep it regular and keep it flowing. This is your four beats timing.

Now try counting in threes so, 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3. Keeping it regular again and keeping it flowing. This is your three beats timing.

There are some variations on this where you play twice as fast (8/4 time) and this usually counts with an “AND” in the middle of the numbers so, 1 AND 2 AND 3 AND 4 AND....

Down strokes

Now it is time to pick up your uke. Forget about strumming patterns, I want you to start with a simple “C” chord and strum down strokes only on the 1 beat only.

Remember, you still need to count.

↓ 1, 2, 3, 4, ↓ 1, 2, 3, 4, ↓ 1, 2, 3, 4.....

Practice this till you get a good rhythm going. Don't forget to keep the counting going and the timing.

Once you feel comfortable then move to a two-strum per four beats where you strum on count 1 and 3.

↓ 1, 2, ↓ 3, 4, ↓ 1, 2, ↓ 3, 4, ↓ 1, 2, ↓ 3, 4.....

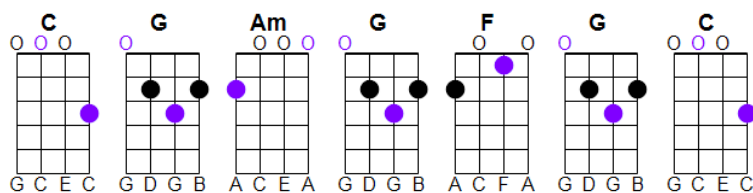
OK, comfortable? Now move to four strums for the four counts. On each count, strum.

↓ 1, ↓ 2, ↓ 3, ↓ 4, ↓ 1, ↓ 2, ↓ 3, ↓ 4, ↓ 1, ↓ 2, ↓ 3, ↓ 4.....

The key is to ensure that your timing is constant. Timing, timing, timing....

Chord changes

By now you will be quite fluent at the down stroke and your timing of the strokes should be fluent. It is now time to think about changing chords. Each time you strum on 1 then change the chords. Try this sequence:



Once you get the chord changes happening without thinking about it then try making the change on 1 and 3. This means you are strumming each chord twice for each count of four.

The "AND"

Earlier I mentioned about the "AND" in between the counts: 1 AND 2 AND 3 AND 4 AND....

The aim of this exercise is to bring in the up stroke. The up stroke will be played on the "AND". For simplicity, the AND will be noted from here on as the PLUS sign (+).

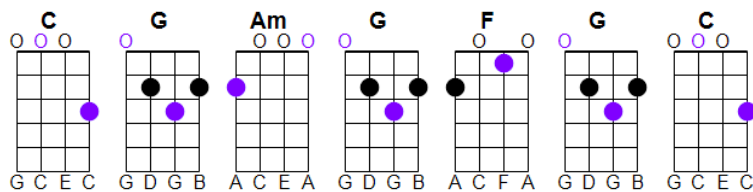
As earlier, try this exercise without changing chords. Become fluent using the "C" chord only.

↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑
1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 +

Are you getting comfortable and remembering to count? If so then your strumming should now be more fluent and in time.

Changing Chords

Using the same chord sequence as before try to change chords on count of 1 but keep the up/down pattern



↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↑
1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 +

Basics over; strum patterns

I have covered counting, strumming and chord changing. Now for my thoughts on how to make up a strum pattern....

I have discussed the number of beats in a bar of music and also the strumming of up and down strokes. Within the 4/4 time there are four beats of music with the potential for four "AND" beats as well. To make up a strumming pattern then try removing some of the up and down strokes so that you always get a count of eight for the four beats.

This could be like:

1 + _ + 3 _ 4 _ or 1 _ 2 + _ + 4 + these would be depicted as such:

↓ ↑ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↑ ↑ ↓ ↑

This is the basis for developing your strum patterns. Now that you have the basics mastered, you now have the skills to develop some quite complex strumming patterns. The real hard work is about the practice so, developing your style and rhythm can be built on the exercises shown here. As said at the beginning, songs vary as they progress through so learn to play to the music as opposed to playing a rigid pattern throughout. Think about the words, the makeup of the song, the timing etc and get the feel for the music. Let your fingers do the rest and relax. Enjoying playing will bring you on as much as any technical development.

The Carlisle Ukulele Club website has a few of songs that use only the chords above:

- Friday I'm in Love
- Fishermans Blues
- Whisky in the Jar

There are also a number of songs that have some slight variations in the chords, such as an "A", "Dm" or "Em". The secret to getting the song right is to practice the chord changes. Learn the chords and use the exercises above to move through the chords. Once comfortable then build up the patterns and rhythm as explained above.

Now, go forth, practice and come up with some innovation in your song playing.