

# Ukulele Strums

## As Performed By Cool Hand Uke

There are as many ways to strum and pick the ukulele as there are tunes to play on it. This essay may help players develop their own collections of strumming styles. No one style appeals to everyone or works with every song. Most folks can pull off some strums but not certain others. Strums are like the colors on an artist's palette. Not all artists favor the same colors. But mix them and match them—or ignore them—to your heart's content.

Besides being a source of sweet melodies, the ukulele's small body makes it a charming percussive instrument. Strumming can be improvised easily on the fly, like drum rhythms — not to the detriment of the feeling and melody of the music but to their enhancement. More important than the type of strum is whether the playing is rhythmical or not—on the beat (or off or behind it), in time, consistently. Tapping a toe and wriggling the hips help the hands to stay on the beat and in time.

**The Thumb Strum** is simple but useful for wide open, soft playing to accompany many vocal styles. Even though it's simple, accomplished players use it to set apart sections of a song and to flesh out arrangements. Rest two or three fingers on the uke to steady your hand or let it dangle in outer space. Either way, glide the thumb over the strings gently for a soft sound. Use more pressure for loudness. Glide the thumb so that no individual string is “caught” or trips the thumb. You can also graze the strings on the upward return for a different pattern.



Thumb strum on a Maccaferri Islander



Finger strum on a La Pacific banjo-uke

**The One-Finger Strum** uses only the index finger but opens the door to more energetic playing than the thumb strum. Rest the inner forearm (of the strumming hand, i.e., right hand for most players, even “southpaws”) behind the bridge and pivot your arm and wrist so there is a slight, easygoing whipping action of the



Full hand muffle

effects. This is a good one to use when first learning a tune. You can count 4/4 and 2/4 time easily with it, but you may want to do one down stroke, then two up strokes when counting 3/4 time. Some players do a down-up-down, followed by a up-down-up when playing 3/4 waltz time. It's up to you. Some of us can only do one or the other! Don't worry about it. Do what works for you.



Palming to muffle a Kamaka concert

**The Trill** is a high speed energetic, one-finger strum (usually), like a rapid fire tommy gun in eight or 16 beats or more to the bar. With this strum, allow your whole hand to relax and flop from the wrist. Concentrate on sounding the bottom string (the one with the highest note) with your index finger, especially on the up stroke. Allow your finger to hit the other three strings, but don't worry about them. Just worry about the first string. You don't need to worry your brain with the others, just yet. It will sound cleaner if that one string is bright and crisp. The other strings will fall into place on their own as you smooth out your first string awareness. The trill is



Trill of a lifetime on a Manuel Nunes ukulele

wonderful for creating a romantic mood, even though it is energetic. It is also a necessity if you want to **glissando** up or down the neck, in other words, playing while sliding an entire chord formation to a different spot on the neck (usually upwards, but you can reverse glissando, too). You might find that giving your index finger a slight inward, relaxed hook helps it to pluck that first string. A good exercise is to play



Relaxed hooked finger on Lindy Commemorative

one or two chords over and over again, and then try to bring out the sounds of individual strings one at a time, either in a sequence or randomly. It will help you get a handle on what's possible. Your finger may feel like a potato at first, but you'll get over it. Once your hand and fingers get the basic idea, you'll be able to pulse, swell and diminuendo without losing the beat. Crazy, huh?

**The All Nails Strum** uses the four fingernails together on the down stroke and the thumb nail on the up stroke. You either draw your nails

across the strings in one fell swoop, or allow each finger to trail after the previous one, keeping the fingers somewhat stiff. How you have your hand turned determines whether it will be an all-at-once strum or a sequential strum. Like any of the strums discussed here, long practice sessions, a Baby Ruth candy bar or other alternative, and

experimentation can lead to the discovery of hidden patterns that eventually seep into the player's tool box.

**The Roll Strum** is similar to the All Nails

Strum, but the fingers are fanned out one after the other in a rolling fashion on the down stroke. (With practice, you can do it on the up stroke, too!) Then the thumb whips up for the up stroke. (Or whips a down stroke, if you're rolling up.) Often, I will use the All Nails Strum on three beats and the Roll Strum on the fourth beat. The Roll Strum is also good when



All Nails on the Lindy.  
Fingers stay fairly straight.  
Thumb up 'tween rolls, too!



Roll Strum on a Wendall Hall banjo-uke



Roll and muffle on a Martin

a tune calls for one stroke per chord, in a "turnaround," for example, at the end of a musical phrase.

**The Roll and Muffle Strum** is a "funky" strum that works well with some ragtime and old blues tunes. It is really a simple down stroke with the ball of the thumb on the first beat, followed by a down stroke roll that ends with the strings being muffled with the heel of the hand on the second beat. This strum can be made to sound like a railroad locomotive and is a good one to take on a country drive.

**The Pinch Stroke** is a favorite. Rest your middle, ring and little fingers on the top of the ukulele below the sound hole, so the index finger dangles above the treble strings. I alternate

plucking the fourth and third strings with my thumb. Between each thumb pluck I stroke my index finger back and forth across the strings, down first, then up. It sounds complicated, but can be easily learned. To get an idea of the feeling for this strum, put your hand in position, pluck the third string (the "bass" string) with your thumb, pluck the second string with your index finger, pluck the fourth string with your thumb, and pluck the first string with your index finger. Practice this until you "own" it, then try to whip your index finger across several strings instead of plucking an individual string. You can also strum across all four strings with the thumb and index finger for a different effect. (When playing a melodic solo, I sometimes accentuate particular notes by pinching a single string between the thumb and index finger, so the note has a loud snap to it.)



Pinchin' on a '30's Dobro Ukulele

**The Big Combination** is the best: All of the above.

– Cool Hand Uke