

## **CARE AND FEEDING OF THE UKULELE**

**Most ukuleles are fragile.** Many have met the woodpile because they were placed on a soft couch or chair and sat upon. Or leaned against the wall where it met a foot. It's good to leave your instrument out where you can get at it in a whim's notice, but put it somewhere safe. Martin historian Mike Longworth reported that C.F. Martin, the founder of the venerable guitar and ukulele company, insisted that his luthiers lay their instruments "face down" so they would rest on the nut and saddle, thus protecting the wood. It may not look "right" to you, but it does make sense.

Never travel without a case to protect your ukulele. Preferably a hard case.

If you live or travel in a dry area, **put a humidifier in the case.** A simple damp sponge in a baggie with holes poked in it will do the job. There are several case humidifiers on the market. I know one musician who keeps a slice of apple in his case.

I hang my instruments on the wall, but I also keep the room from being too dry, too cold or too hot. When the wood stove is going, so is the tea kettle. Some folks will only hang their instruments on an inside wall to shield it from the outside elements.

**Many ukuleles are made of several woods**, each of which contract and expand at their own rates. As a result cracks happen within each wood, between the woods, and where pieces come together. Changes in humidity and temperature can be as damaging to a fine ukulele as fanny plopping. The social history of the ukulele is peppered with stories of ukuleles found in granny's attic, unused for decades, yet cracked front and back -- the ravages of heat and cold stretching and pummeling the thin, taut wood. So be careful.

**THE BEST THING FOR A UKULELE IS FOR IT TO BE PLAYED.** Besides the changes in temperature and humidity, the uke in granny's attic was damaged by disuse. Like our own voices, the uke loses its voice when it hasn't been played for a long time. They can be brought back to life by playing them. So if you want to keep your uke sounding good, play it.

Another good thing to have in your uke case in addition to a humidifier is a **soft cleaning rag.** It's a good idea to run the cloth over the top, the strings and the back of the uke after a lengthy, sweaty jam. Helps keep it ready for the next jam. And it helps keep your body fluids from seeping into the wood and dimming its sound.

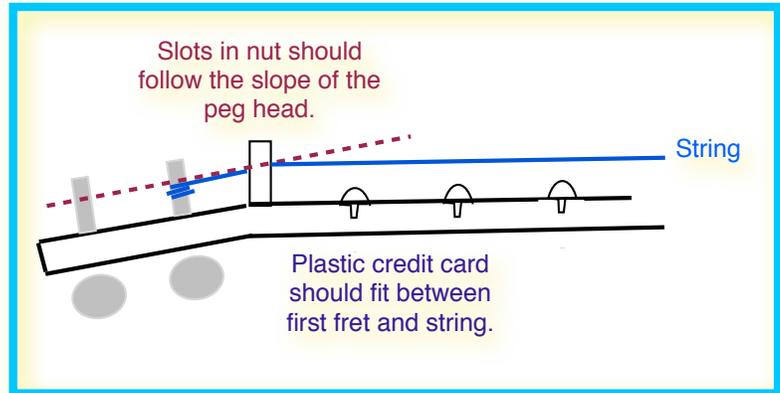
**Some folks loosen the strings on their uke when they store it.** I usually don't, but I reckon it helps to keep the neck from bowing upward, or from pulling the saddle off the top while the instrument is stored. I play mine every day, so I don't worry about it. But if I wasn't going to use it for a few months I would slack the strings.

**Replace the strings when they start sounding dull to you**, or when they feel cut, or if they buzz, or if you want to try a different brand. Sometimes when you feel bored playing, it just might be old strings. While you've got the strings off, take a moment to clean your fret board and "dress" the frets. Using very fine sand paper (like 300 grit) under your fingers, run your hand back and forth lightly over the frets, maybe two swipes along the neck from nut to the end of the fret board. You can follow this with a swipe or two of fine steel wool or a ScotchBrite pad. Sometimes I will take lemon oil furniture polish and wipe the fretboard, although some luthiers advise against it. I like the way it looks, and it feels good to my fingers. I just wipe it on and immediately wipe it off. Doesn't seem to hurt.

**Tricks for Settling Strings** New strings take time to settle down. The knot under the bridge, the winding around the tuning peg and the strings themselves stretch over time, especially when first installed. You can speed up the process by tuning up a whole step or more and playing energetically for a few minutes, then lower the tension back to standard pitch. If this doesn't do it, pull gently on each string and tug it from side to side. You may still have to wait a day or two for the strings to calm down.

**There are four common sources of string buzz:** The string itself, the nut, the frets and the bridge. Strings will buzz if they have cuts or dirt. Replace them.

**If a slot in the nut has worn down,** or a string gauge has changed so the slot is effectively lower a string can buzz or sound a sharp unwanted artifact. You can either replace the nut or build it up. To remove the nut, remove the strings and smack it on one side abruptly with



a hammer and punch to shear the glue bond. Set the new nut in its place with TiteBond glue (not household white glue) and clamp in place. You will need to file the slots to adjust the string height.



*Nut dammed on sides  
With Scotch tape*

**To build up a worn down slot** (or one you cut too low!) leave the nut on the uke and dam up both sides of the slot with the kind of Scotch tape you can write on. Fill the slot with corn starch or bicarbonate of soda, tamp it down and put a drop of SuperGlue on top of it. It will harden after a few minutes and you can refile the slot. Go slowly and test with a string brought up to proper tension. Do not hurry or you'll have to do it all over again.

As the neck wood dries, **frets can become loose**. When they do they can make the strings buzz, or worse, sit too high and render the fret before it to be ineffective, since placing a finger behind that fret will cause the string to touch the bad fret and that note will sound rather than the intended note. Sometimes the fret will have to be replaced but it often is repaired by clamping it down and applying a drop or two of SuperGlue along its edge.

**Sometimes a neck will warp** up or down or twist, throwing the frets out of proportion. Sometimes a major repair by a competent luthier is required. But there are times when the problem can be lessened a bit by dressing the frets. A radical dressing requires a flat file. Run it along the fret tops to even them equally. Then lightly sand them with a fine grade of sand paper. Clean them up with fine steel wool or a ScotchBrite pad. A chamois cloth is a good final wipe. If you are not sure of yourself, take your ukulele to a **COMPETENT** luthier. **There are hammer and chisel folks out there**, so beware. The cure for badly warped necks is to remove the frets, plane the fretboard or neck flat again, and refret the instrument. This can cost as much as a new ukulele. But if it's Granny's instrument and sounds great, then you may elect to have it fixed.

**A worn or awkwardly cut bridge** can cause an aggravating buzz or a sharp click. Usually only one string is involved. Sometimes a burr forms on the string itself, sometimes on the bridge where it meets the string. To determine if the bridge/string is the source of the buzz, hold a finger on top of the string at the bridge. If the buzz disappears then the problem is at the bridge. Inspect the string for damage as well as the bridge. If the string appears fine, take a small piece of sand paper and smooth the top of the bridge. Make sure there is only one top -- a double ridge will make a buzz. It may take a few dressings before the buzz goes away, but they usually do. Too sharp of a bridge top can cause strings to break, so make them rounded. Some bridges are notched, so make sure the sides of the notch aren't creating the extra unwanted sounds by smoothing them out with sand paper.

A few years ago I came to a sudden stop in my car and a uke in a case slid off the seat. The top cracked. Since it was **not a crack due to shrinkage of the wood**, it could be repaired with SuperGlue. I lined both sides of the crack with Scotch tape, the cloudy kind you can write on, leaving the crack exposed ever so slightly. Then I ran a bead of SuperGlue into the crack and wiped away the excess. I flexed both sides of the crack so the glue would run into it and made sure the sides of the crack aligned as it settled. When it dried the fix was pretty much invisible and the repair has lasted for a decade now.

A common failure, especially among older ukuleles, is a **loose brace on the top or bottom**. If the brace hasn't come completely off it can often be glued back in place. The first symptom of a loose brace is a rattle. Luthiers keep a variety of long "c" clamps to clamp braces when they glue them. If the instrument isn't an expensive one, or dear to your heart, you can sometimes get by with short sticks whittled to just the right length. These are then inserted to pin the brace in place. Try it dry a couple of times before you use glue. When you think you're ready, wet both the brace and the top or bottom where the brace meets it. Apply TiteBond glue with your finger, a Q-Tip or thin stick. Then add more water. You want the glue to be thin enough to get absorbed into the wood. When it has, add more glue, thicker glue, then clamp or pin the brace in place. Wipe the excess glue with a damp rag and leave the brace alone for a few hours. Over night is best. Next day remove the sticks or clamps and you're done. If you're intimidated, find a competent luthier to do it for you. Sometimes the brace is actually split. This, too, can be fixed. Inspection with a light and mirror can tell you the story. Whatever it is, go slow and chances are pretty good you'll save the instrument and better its sound.

**Pop goes the bridge!** One bright cheery morning you awake to find that the bridge has popped on your ukulele and it's dangling from the strings. Or you're reading a book on a hot summer's night when you hear a gunshot. But it's the bridge. Or you're tuning the uke as you've always done, and pop! This is not an uncommon event. And it's fixable -- but not always on the first try. It's best to have one or two long "c" clamps. There are "work-arounds" but they are quite iffy. To reset a popped bridge, first clean off all the old glue. Get back to raw wood. Wouldn't hurt to do some sanding of both surfaces with coarse sandpaper. Verify that the bridge sits in its place all around, that it has "purchase" on the ends, the middle, along the edges, etc. Make sure it's a good fit. It's a good idea to mark the outline of the bridge's location on the top with masking tape. With an Xacto or razor blade score both surfaces -- the underside of the bridge, and the marked off area of the top. Make lots of hatch marks so the glue has plenty of places to go. Dampen both surfaces with water and rub in a bit of TiteBond glue. When you're satisfied the glue has penetrated both surfaces, add a fresh layer of glue to both parts, put the bridge in place, wipe away the excess glue, clamp it securely, preferably on both ends, and again wipe away the excess glue. Let it set for a day, then take your chance and string it up. If it's going to pop again, it most likely will do it right away. Keep your face away from the instrument when you first bring the strings up to tension!

There are several options to **protect your ukulele while traveling**. The best is a hard shell case, usually wood covered with a waterproof material. These can get pricey, but they are worth it if your

instrument is. Nowadays, there are very good cases made of styrofoam, also covered with cloth or plastic. These can be much larger than the hard shell cases, but they are lighter. Gig bags are plastic or cloth bags that give some measure of protection but not against falling off a table, hit by a ball, or sat upon by a child. I buy tennis racket cases at yard sales, usually a dollar or two, that make very good gig bags and usually give more protection than cloth bags. Most are waterproof.

Try not to leave your instrument in a hot (or very cold) car. If you simply have to, wrap it in a blanket or coat to help **insulate it from the elements**.

Treat your ukulele nice and it will return the favor.