

The Ukulele Bedford guide to Chords, chord shapes and sort of cheating

There are often simpler ways of moving between chords than a glance of the chord diagrams may tell you, so this session aims to give you some of the principles behind making your chord changes easier, along with examples to practice.

I could just give you a whole heap of tips for changing between chords, but I think it will be more use if I put them into a context and then a system. This means that when you are struggling with a change on your own, you have some principles that may help. To do this we are going to start at the very beginning. Rumour has it that it's a very good place to start.

The very basics

Notes

Your ukulele has four strings, all of which have frets allowing you to play every note on each of your four strings – in the same order. They just start as the open string in different places. If you play, typically, three notes together, you have a chord. If you can comfortably reach the first five frets, you have well over 1,000 combinations of three different notes you could play at once. That's a lot of chords, but many are the same. Notes an octave apart sound different but are given the same letter. So an open A string plays the note A. But fretted on the 12th fret it also plays an A. As does the fifth fret on the E string, the ninth fret on the C string and the second fret on the G string. Do they sound the same? Broadly they do, if they are in the same octave, but the length of the string also affects the quality of the sound. But if I sing an A (and get it right!) it would sound very different from most women singing an A. Same note, different voice.

Chords, chord inversions and chord shapes or patterns

Chords are notes played together, but not in just any combination of three. The basic building block of a chord is the triad, a "stack" of three notes. Think of Do Re Mi Fa Soh La Te Do, as in The Sound of Music. Do, Mi, Soh played together make a chord, and if Do is a C note, Mi is an E and Soh is a G. We call the first note the root note, which gives the chord its name, C in this case. E is called the third and G is the fifth, simply by counting through the scale. This means that on a ukulele with four strings we can play CEG on three of them and double up to play another C, E or G on the fourth and we will have a C chord. (Note that if our root note, our Do, was a G, our third and fifth would be B and D respectively – musicians often talk numbers rather than notes because then they can be relevant to all keys. Think of the key as simply the chord that a piece of music is centred around. Most of our music is in the key of C, either originally or transposed that way to make it easier to play on ukulele).

Strum the open strings (0000 – always number from the fourth string, as you would storeys in a building) and you have the chord C6 (also called Am7, but that's for another day), which comprises four different notes G C E and A. Play a C chord (0003) and you are playing G C E and C. That's three notes and is more typical of what we play. The two different C notes in the same chord don't affect the name of the chord, but they may affect its sound. The C would sound stronger within the chord than if the G were doubled.

So: 0,0,0,3 = GCEC. But 0,0,0,10 = GCEG. And 0,0,0,12 = GCEC. And 0,0,3,7 = GCGE. And the barre chord 5433=CEGC. These variations all count as C major chords. Try them now.

They sound different, don't they? But, they all work with other C major chords. Any combination of the three notes that make a chord (the root, C, the third, E and the fifth, G) can be used in any circumstance. This is also why we can play low and high G with the same chords in the same group.

These different fingerings for the same chord can result in a different note in the triad being the lowest sounding. These variants are called **chord inversions**. However, even with the same inversion, there are lots of different finger **patterns** or chord shapes that result in the same sound because it depends on which finger you use on which fret of which string to make the note, and as we saw in the first paragraph, every string has every note. There are hundreds of ways of playing CEG on the ukulele, and all this preamble is useful, as we will see now when you want to cheat.

Using this knowledge

Let's take a chord like B7. It comprises the four notes A B D# F#. That means we can play it as a barre chord 2322 (A D# F# B). But also means 4320 (B D# F# A) works because as we strum the notes are playing together. Moving between different chord patterns and inversions to move between different named chords can make it much easier on your fingers and your brain, and they can sound better. (This is part of the basis for chord-melody playing that James Hill uses so effectively – for another day.)

Try them now as muted chords. Barre chord for a bar and then the other way for a bar. Hear how the A string rings out more with the second version. When you need a barre chord, eg for bounce, you play the first version. When you need to shift between E minor and B7 you play the second. This means that these patterns work differently because of the context of the other chords that come before and after them, leading to our next principle:

Think ahead - the system

If you just treat each chord as you find it or as it says in the chord charts, you will find it more tiring, harder and more confusing than if you know what's coming up next. Try to look a couple of chords ahead of your playing, so that you can get your fingers in the right places sooner. Moving between chords is easier if you don't have to move all your fingers at once, or if you can keep the same hand shape, or if you can slide or pivot your fingers between the chords. This is the basis of faster, more assured movements between chords and is what we are going to practice now. It's also really useful if you keep changing between different sizes of ukulele, like I do. It helps reduce all those thuds and buzzes!

To do this, you are looking for anchors (there may be a more official term). Anchors take four forms:

1. Hand anchors
2. Finger guides
3. Finger pivots
4. Finger slides

1 Hand anchors

Barre chords are the ultimate anchor system, and work by keeping your hand in the same position and moving from the elbow.

Think of the barre chords for C -> B -> Bb -> C. Most of the movement comes from the elbow, The hand is locked. We know that from last month's session.

Hand anchors tend to involve moving from the wrist rather than the elbow.

Think of how B7 (4320) -> Em (0432) -> B7 (4320) works

Versus B7 (2322) -> Em -> (0432) -> B7 (2322).

Or Em7 (0202) -> D7 (2020) -> Em7 (0202)

Versus Em7(0202) -> D7 (2223) -> Em7 (0202)

It's much easier if you employ your hand anchor to shift between the chords. And you do that by knowing the different patterns for B7 and D7 and by looking ahead to see what combination of chords is coming up.

2 Finger guides

The hardest chords to make are where you have to lift all four fingers from the fretboard at once, change their position relative to each other and plunk them down in the right place, and then do it again for the next beat.

Tricky. (This is why I don't like Am7 or C6 played 0000 – the next chord would have to involve all fingers changing. Instead, it sometimes helps to play Am7 as 2030, giving you scope to use this system.)

If you can keep at least one finger in place, and know which one it is before you need it, that will make life much easier. For example:

Try C (0003)-> Cdim (2323). Start with your ring finger on C . . . horrid. You may even find yourself bringing your thumb over the top. Very horrid.

Now, make the same chord change by starting with your little finger on the C. Leave it there and place the other fingers down for Cdim. Much nicer. Your little finger acted as a guide.

Do the same for C (0003) -> Fm (1013)->C (0003)

An even easier example G (0232)->Em (0432). This time your little finger is the only one doing anything at all. The entire G chord is your guide.

Now how about the change from A (2100)->D (2220)? The chord charts say for A use middle and fore finger, and for D use fore, middle and ring. Instead, for D use middle, ring and little, thus using your middle as a guide.

Here's another.

Go from D to E. If you play D and E as the book tells you 2220 and 4442, you'll struggle. Instead, play D 2225 and slide up to play E 4447. Much easier, and gives a reason to play D as a barre.

So, can you use this to go from C ->Em, where none of the notes is in common? Yes. Play C with your middle finger. While doing so, place your forefinger on A2 so it becomes (0,0,0,3+2). Now use this as a guide for moving to E minor (0,4,3,2). Your forefinger stays put and acted as a guide between the two chords even though it played no part in the C chord because it was placed behind the strum.

Another variation on this redundancy of a finger is moving between G (0232) -> C minor (0333) -> G (0232). Try it with middle, ring and fore fingers for the G, and a partial barre (three strings only) with the forefinger for the C minor. Now try again by sliding the barre down from C minor and adding your forefinger for the G. Easier

Now try using a full barre as a guide

B (4322)-> G (4232)-> D (2225)-> E (4447)

Or an easier one

B (4322)->Bm (4222)

Now, use the hand anchor and guide together

D7 (0202) -> G7 (0212). Start with your middle finger on G2 and ring finger on E2 using your hand anchor – ie keeping the relative positions of middle and ring fingers locked, lift and place them down again into Em7 and add your forefinger for the G7. Now, by anticipating that change, while playing your D7, just put your forefinger on E1 to act as a guide behind the strum. It comes into play when you move your hand anchor to form the full G7 chord. In other words, you play the D7 as 2,0,2+1,0. You may have a whole bar or more in which to place that guide finger on E1, ready for a fast smooth change.

3 Finger pivots

Sometimes one or more fingers need to be in the same place in subsequent chords, but the rest of the hand has to move. Again, it will be quicker and easier if you leave the finger where it needs to be and swing your hand around it. Place your middle finger on C2 and form a G (0232) chord.

Now move from G->G7 by pivoting around that finger. To move back do the same thing, with C2 as your pivot.

And now do the same from G ->E7 and back.

Now do it again, but this time, when you get to G7, put your little finger down on E3 to form the G. Then move from that G to E7 by using finger guides, not pivots. Ta da. You have just combined finger pivots with finger guides. See what fun you are having.

4 Finger slides

Say you want to go from G->B7. Slide your middle finger up to guide where to put either your barre for the B7 or the placing of your other fingers if you then want to move to E minor by using your hand anchor. You are using the small and more easily controlled movement of that slide to help place the bigger movement of your other fingers. These slides, where your finger moves over one or two frets to help direct the other fingers help because you can *feel* the movement over the fret, so you know you are in the right place.

An alternative here is to play B7 as 2320. It works, despite lacking a B in the chord (but then D7 as 2020 doesn't have a D in it. Go figure, as they say). To make that change, you can just use the hand anchor from the G shape

Now, say you want to move from B7->E7

Whichever pattern of B7 you play, your middle finger is on C3 and wants to end up on C2.

Simply slide it down to C2, but in doing so use that certainty as a sliding guide to help place your other fingers. But you'll notice that the finger pivots as well, thus combining two of our methods.

Other cheats

The dreaded thumb cheat

Thumbs are great, aren't they. What with being opposable and so separating us from cats and squirrels (mind you, a squirrel's wrist joints would be useful!). However, they are slow, so I would try to avoid bringing them in to your playing unless you really have to. I find mine creeping in when playing C+ (1003)(occasionally), F minor (1013) or Ab7 (G#7) (1323). It's probably ok occasionally, but ideally, your thumb should be supporting the back of the ukulele neck, not hooked round it waiting for these occasional chords. Your speed up and down the neck and your ability to play barre chords will be greater if you don't use your thumb.

Thinking even further ahead

A lot of songs have the same chords. C Am F G are in thousands. Look up common chord progressions online and practice them. You'll find that muscle memory develops. Your fingers will want to go in the right places, and that's a very satisfying feeling when it works. Although this session is largely about cheating to speed up. This muscle memory develops best when you work slowly and work up to speed. Think about playing Hot Tamales backwards, from fast to slow – it would be much harder.

Finally, real cheats

Occasionally, we cheat by simply playing an easier version of a chord, even when it's wrong:

For Fmajor7, instead of the book's version (3142), you can play 5500. And if that's too much, you can often get away with A minor (2000).

For E (4447 or 2444 or other variants – see this great post from <http://ukulelehunt.com/2009/04/22/e-chord-ukulele/>) you can often play E7 (1202), especially if the song is in the key of A.

For F# (3121) you can often just slide G down one fret and play either 0121 or (better and proper) X121, by simply missing out the G string from your strum. If the song only demands it occasionally, this works.

If all else fails, think and look again

And if none of these works in a particular circumstance – so you have to jump between unfamiliar chords quickly – you can still anticipate, and whereas the rest of the time you will have been looking up to aid projection of your voice and make eye contact with your audience and read your music, look down at your fretting hand and the action of looking will help you place your fingers correctly. Don't be tempted to turn your uke up towards you while you do that though because you want to lodge how the chord feels to play in

your brain, and it would feel and sound different with your uke turned towards you, unless you have a personal sound-hole in your uke. Instead, I suggest you look down to form the tricky chord, then look up again to play it, and listen well. When you get the sound lodged in your brain, you can carry on making the shift between the two chords slowly, knowing you are getting them right by what they sound like, rather than by seeing how they look. After all, we do play the ukulele to sound good, not just to look cool.

These notes support Ukulele Bedford's second learning session in November 2017, and combines my own experience and thoughts with ideas pilfered from the very splendid ukulelehunt.com and other internet and real-life sources – yes, some of you lot, perhaps - most of these have sunk into my brain anonymously over the past few years. Martin sense-checked it after the event to make sure I wasn't making too much of it up. Thank you all.



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