

# The Ukestration Manual



CREATING MUSIC-MAKING COMMUNITIES WITH  
THE UKULELE AND THE UKESTRA METHOD

Mark Jackson and Jane Jelbart

# THE UKESTRATION MANUAL

# The Ukestration Manual

CREATING MUSIC-MAKING COMMUNITIES WITH  
THE UKULELE AND THE UKESTRA METHOD

Mark Jackson and Jane Jelbart

Copyright © Mark Jackson and Jane Jelbart 2018

Published by The Sum of the Parts (music) [www.thesumoftheparts.com.au](http://www.thesumoftheparts.com.au)  
Merewether NSW 2291  
Australia

Editing: Robert Watson, Danielle Scott

Design & layout: Danielle Scott [www.daniellescott.com.au](http://www.daniellescott.com.au)

Illustrations: Gwynneth Jones [www.gwynnethjonesillustration.wordpress.com](http://www.gwynnethjonesillustration.wordpress.com)

Photographs:

*pg 9* - Originally posted on Ukulele Underground forum [October 2009](#)

*pg 11* - Jane Jelbart

*pg 14* - Mark Jackson

*pg 25* - Bob Beale

*pg 36, 38* - Audience member (using M. Jackson's camera)

*pg 54* - Groovy Banana [www.groovy-banana.com](http://www.groovy-banana.com)

*pg 63* - Penny Creighton

*pg 65* - Groovy Banana

*pg 77* - Audience member (using M. Jackson's camera)

*pg 85* - Audience member (using M. Jackson's camera)

#### THE GENUINE MESSAGE

This book has been nurtured by 8+ years of direct ukulele teaching and leadership experience; 100s of hours of cogitation, reflection, writing and editing; and many dollars spent in support, relief teachers, editing, osteopathic treatments and artwork. Please respect our right to earn a living as we help others to help others make music.

#### THE LEGALESE

All rights reserved. Except for a single printout for use of the purchaser of the pdf version, no part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any mechanical or electronic means including information storage or retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As ever, a labour of love such as this is due in no small part to the work and context of others: this is only some of them.

Thanks to:

James Hill – for his role modelling, humility, intellect, musical brilliance, business acumen, and humour. [www.jameshillmusic.com](http://www.jameshillmusic.com)

Danielle Scott – for her insightful, forthright and passionate engagement with what we believe in, and for her skills as a musician, graphic designer, teacher, leader, editor and agitator. [www.ukulelecentral.com.au](http://www.ukulelecentral.com.au)

Kevin Carroll – for his curiosity which helped us germinate the initial ideas for this book whilst cooped up in a car for 10 days on a 2013 tour of Ecotopia. [www.kevincarroll.net](http://www.kevincarroll.net)

Our staff and colleagues who have provided invaluable opportunities to reflect on the validity of the words written down.

The Ukulele Leadership Training participants who undertook the initial ULT sessions in the US, NZ and Australia. Their guinea pig roles were invaluable.

Our AUTLA compatriots. The Australian Ukulele Teachers and Leaders Association.

Our ukestrans who, week in week out, year in year out, have taught us everything that we know.

Robert Watson has greatly assisted us with our thinking and editing processes.

Gwynneth Jones, whose beautiful arty distillations litter the text.  
[www.gwynnethjonesillustration.wordpress.com](http://www.gwynnethjonesillustration.wordpress.com)

From Mark: Thanks to Jane who is my ideal partner in music, business, life and love.

From Jane: Thanks to Mark for the marvellously creative (and sometimes chaotic!) journey we are travelling.

# CONTENTS

<b>Chapter 1: Introduction .....</b>	<b>2</b>
1.1 Essentials of the Ukestra Method .....	2
1.2 Who are we?.....	3
1.3 A brief history of our ukestras.....	4
1.4 Ukestration, the Ukestra Method, and how to read this manual..	5
1.5 Some useful terminology.....	6
<b>Chapter 2: The Ukulele: A Place to Create and Nurture Community ....</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1 Why focus on community?.....	9
2.2 The ukulele as a community-building tool.....	10
2.3 A ukestra venue.....	11
2.4 Creating an ukulele community .....	12
2.5 Summary.....	13
<b>Chapter 3: Being an Effective Community Leader .....</b>	<b>16</b>
3.1 Stewardship and pastoral care: nurturing an inclusive community.....	16
3.2 Self-care: defining your own personal boundaries .....	21
3.3 Musical responsibility: be professional in guiding your ukestras.....	23
3.4 Summary.....	24
<b>Chapter 4: The Ukestra Method (how to plan a ukestra session).....</b>	<b>27</b>
4.1 The Four Column Approach (FCA).....	27
4.2 Broad Learning Areas (BLAs).....	32
4.3 Creating a ukestra session plan in a casual learning environment ..	35
4.4 An example of a ukestra session plan .....	37
4.5 Equipment required .....	40
4.6 Summary.....	41

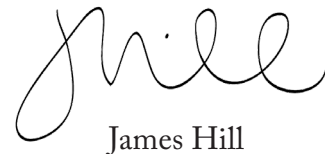
<b>Chapter 5: Ukestration: Arranging Songs for a Ukestra.....</b>	<b>43</b>
5.1 What is Ukestration? .....	43
5.2 How to ukestrate a song .....	49
5.3 How the Ukestra Method is different from other forms of ukulele teaching.....	55
5.4 Summary.....	56
<b>Chapter 6: The Teacherly Qualities useful for leading a Ukestra .....</b>	<b>58</b>
6.1 Be observant and intuitive.....	59
6.2 Be clear in your modeling.....	59
6.3 Be well resourced and anticipate teachable moments .....	60
6.4 Respect and harness what <i>you</i> offer as a player.....	61
6.5 Foster your creativity and maintain your passion .....	61
6.6 Be collaborative, yet in control .....	63
6.7 Be ready for anything .....	63
6.8 Bring your best self.....	64
6.9 Summary.....	64
<b>Chapter 7: The Musical Journey: from Beginner to Performer .....</b>	<b>67</b>
7.1 The musical journey starts: beginner to ukestran .....	67
7.2 The beginners workshop.....	68
7.3 Ukulele Entrée .....	69
7.4 The Newkestra – a ukestra for new players.....	70
7.5 Ukestra sessions .....	71
7.6 The musical journey continues: create performance opportunities	71
7.7 Moving through performance towards musicianship .....	76
7.8 Summary.....	80
<b>Chapter 8: Conclusion.....</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>Appendix 1 - Ukestra Welcome pamphlet .....</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>Appendix 2 - Beginners Workshop programme.....</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>Appendix 3 - A sample ukestration – <i>House of the Rising Sun</i> .....</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>How to Contact the Authors .....</b>	<b>100</b>

## FOREWORD

Mark Jackson and Jane Jelbart have personality to burn. For years, the dynamic pair have led ukulele groups, taught lessons, organized festivals and performed internationally. They have done all of this with charisma, humour and passion. But this book isn't about them. It's about you.

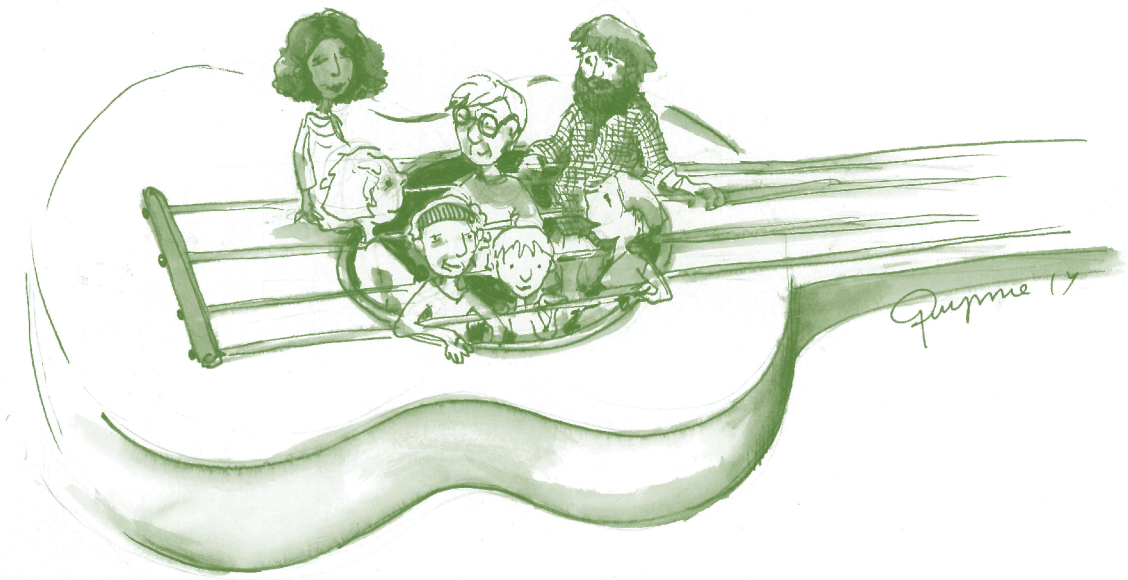
When I started reading *The Ukestration Manual* I was curious to see how much personality Mark and Jane had infused into the book. Too little personality and their words would fall flat. Too much personality and their method might seem to depend on their own combined charisma for its success. Thankfully, they got it just right. From “nurturing inclusivity” to avoiding the “cult of the book”, to the “Four Column Approach”, this manual is full of transferable ideas and strategies that Mark and Jane learned the hard way so you wouldn't have to.

It would have been easy for Mark and Jane to write a “Ukestration Memoir” chronicling their ukulele adventures and mythologizing their success. But that's not the book they have written. This book isn't a memoir, it's a manual. It's not about “look what we did” but rather “look what you can do!”

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "James Hill". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large initial 'J' and 'H'.

James Hill

# Chapter 1



# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

For eight years we have run a successful community music business in a way that, to our knowledge, is unique in the world. Whilst there are travelling ukulele heroes (think James Hill, Sarah Maisel or Jim D'Ville), being part of our local community is really important to us. Most times, it comes down to 'we like to live near the beach, we like gardening, and our parents need looking after'. These imperatives limit our travelling because for the most part, we make a living from running ukulele groups in our local community.

Many groups in the world-wide ukulele movement are focused on singing and strumming. There is an incredible number of volunteer-run ukulele groups whose dominant focus is playing good ol' songs with little to no musical instruction. Some of them may also consider that earning money from running an ukulele community is tantamount to sacrilege. However, we are musicians who need to pay our bills and who want to live in, and with, our local community.

The first motivation for writing this manual was for ourselves – to analyse and describe what we did and why. Secondly, we feel passionately that our approach is well thought out and appropriately structured, and many who have done our workshops over the years agree. We hope this manual will help others achieve something similar.

### 1.1 Essentials of the Ukestra Method

The Ukestra Method, our business and our life is based on three interrelated essentials:

**Music:** teach people the skills to make music.

**Community:** create social communities through that music.

**Sustainability:** operate within a structure that affords long-term personal and/or financial sustainability.

Whilst the ukulele is highly effective for realising these concepts, for us, it has to be about the **music**, and teaching music, not just the ukulele. We would not still be involved unless we felt we were enriching our community with music-making and learning.

We call ourselves community musicians, and without **community**, the ukestras would not have had such a widespread and tangible effect on so many lives.

*A community musician builds communities of players using a teaching approach which is as much social as it is musical.*

Finally, we have chosen to operate sustainably through a business structure; that is, we have found a way to have fulfilling, financially-supported careers as locally-based community musicians. **Sustainability** is a critical issue, whether it refers to money or operational issues – preventing other teachers and leaders ‘burn out’ was an additional motivation for writing the book. Our model, therefore, offers a long-term and sustainable strategy for re-invigorating community music-making.

## 1.2 Who are we?

### Mark Jackson

Mark has an honours degree in social geography and began postgraduate studies, on two separate occasions, focusing on community inclusion and community currencies. Although not completing these studies, he did swagloads of academic work for both before being derailed by (unsurprisingly) ... music. He has been a performing musician since 1978 and is also fortunate to have worked in the mental health sector, which helped him develop understanding and compassion for a wide spectrum of behaviours.

### Jane Jelbart Ph.D

Jane has a doctorate in marine ecology (go figure!) and was a university researcher and science tutor. She has worked in adult education most of her life. However, Jane also has a rich recreational life in music – primarily singing and playing various instruments including piano, guitar and percussion. After meeting Mark, (and more importantly the ukulele), she has seen the light, and changed direction in her professional and recreational life. She still swims in the ocean most days.

### 1.3 A brief history of our ukestras

Inspired by various community musicians in Victoria, the Melbourne Ukulele Kollektive, and with the help of an Australian Government small business grant (called NEIS), in 2009 Mark began teaching ukulele to groups of people in Newcastle, NSW. Luckily for him no other ukulele groups were operating in the city at the time.

From a single local ABC Radio interview, local postering and the occasional festival or market gig, the weekly Tuesday night group just kept growing. A daytime ukestra was started in the suburbs, swiftly followed by the establishment of two regional ukestras, one hour out of the city. After seven months, Mark was running four ukestras per week, at four different locations. A year later, Jane began running her own weekly ukestra, and soon thereafter a choir, whilst still holding down full-time work.

A number of ukestrans suggested they would like to see ukulele classes for their grandchildren in different schools in the region, and after various trials and errors, in 2011 Mark started teaching ukulele in a couple of schools. At this point, he had established enough work to provide for one sustainable income.

In December 2011 there was a lucky break when the local newspaper ran a feature article on Newcastle's ukulele community, centred on the ukestras. From this, student numbers grew enormously, and by mid-2012 an additional two adult ukestras were started (Jane was now working part-time at her 'day job').

In July 2012, Mark and Jane officially entered a business partnership and a year later Jane quit her job as a marine ecologist and became a full-time community musician. Significant publicity followed, both through normal media interactions as well as via involvement in events such as a major ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation – the Australian Government-funded public broadcaster) concert to 2000 people, a talk and performance at TEDxNewy, an audition and brief appearance in the promotion for *Australia's Got Talent*, and numerous local festivals.

Since 2013 we have had enough revenue to support two modest incomes and have been able to travel both nationally and internationally sharing our teaching format.



We have had moderate business growth, mostly limited by how busy we don't want to be! At present we run nine ukestras and two choirs per week, and each month run a singing event (One Song Sing) and two beginners workshops. Although we no longer teach in schools, children are always welcome to our ukestras and they come along occasionally.

We currently employ one teacher, three teaching assistants, a book keeper and an administration assistant, who all work casually (three to six hours per week). We perform and teach at festivals around Australia and overseas as *Jack n Jel* and have our own creative life as performers, but most of our income is derived from the ukestras and choirs.

## **1.4 Ukestration, the Ukestra Method, and how to read this manual**

It is assumed that you, the reader, are already a competent ukulele musician, or can easily acquire that competence, particularly if you play guitar. Consequently, there is no attempt in this book to teach music theory or technique.

This manual covers all aspects of building and running group classes, and woven into that is how a sense of community is created and nurtured. Our aim is to provide sufficient information and reflections to help you start one amateur group of about 20 players. We'll take you through chapters on our motivations from a community perspective; the attributes of effective community leaders and teachers; class planning; the performance and skill development journey; and the centrepiece of our the Ukestra Method – Ukestration – which is how we approach song selection and arrangements.

Some readers may also be interested in our companion manual, *The Business of being a Community Musician*. It is a guidebook rather than a formula, and so readers are encouraged to apply the knowledge and experience we've gained as they see fit, to their own situation.

We also recommend reading Joshua Waldman's 2017 publication *How to Start and Grow an Ukulele Group*. This well-written and easy-to-understand book covers many of the how-tos of running an ukulele group from the voluntary perspective. Joshua knows why it is good for him and for the community, and we have referenced parts of his text that address particular details.

## 1.5 Some useful terminology

Communities are bound together by language and there are a number of terms which have gained common usage amongst our ukulele community. Four in particular are used throughout this book.

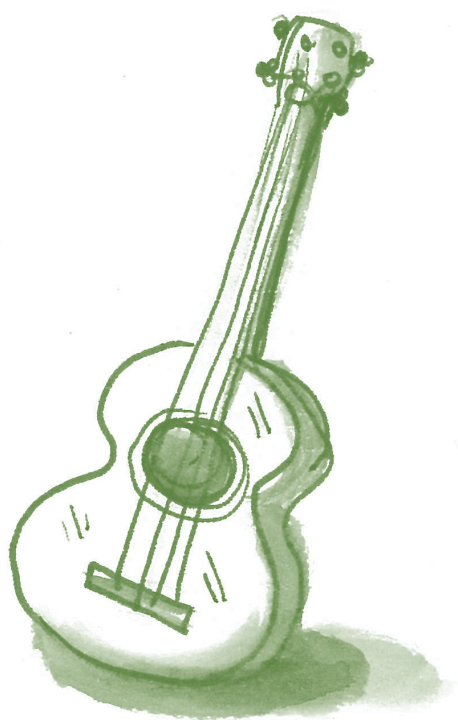
**Ukestra** (yoo-kess-trah): a group of people who learn, practise and play the ukulele together – an ukulele orchestra.

**Ukestran** (yoo-kess-trun): an individual member of a ukestra.

**Ukestration** (yoo-kess-tray-shun): a way of arranging songs into different parts for the ukulele (and vocals) that are suitable for different skill levels.

**The Ukestra Method:** our approach to creating and fostering music-making communities using the ukulele.

# Chapter 2



## Chapter 2

### THE UKULELE: A PLACE TO CREATE AND NURTURE COMMUNITY

This chapter lays out our commitment to community, the foundation upon which our work with the ukulele is built. This book is not about the ukulele. Rather, our musical focus is on the ability of healthy communities to create richer and healthier lives for individuals, and the ukulele is the number one tool to achieve this.

The ukulele is easy to play, affordable and not too loud or overbearing for playing in groups. This, in turn, helps create a social place that is outside of home and work, somewhere that is accepting and nurturing in ways that are different to work and home. Around the world, ukulele clubs are creating these places in church halls, clubs, pubs and quiet cafés.

Our business is called The Sum of the Parts (music) because we want to help people sum up their musical parts, to make a greater whole, to make music together. We call ourselves community musicians because we want our music to bring people together, to challenge the social isolation so prevalent in modern society.

In our community we aim to:

- Reintroduce music-making to people's everyday lives.
- Revive people's ability to express themselves with music.
- Encourage them, in turn, to contribute music-making back into their communities, to build a richer, more expressive and sharing society.

## 2.1 Why focus on community?

The African concept of ubuntu – *I am what I am because of who we all are* – poetically captures how community is good for humanity and how it shapes us. That’s one important reason we pursue this as an end for our music. Loneliness and disconnectedness is one of the great epidemics of our increasingly virtually-connected society. We have Facebook friends, but do we really have friends?

Sociological research shows that people are healthier if they are more active in their communities. Robert Putnam sums it up like this:

*Your chances of dying over the course of the next year are cut in half by joining one community group.*

(Putnam 2000, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*)

Healthy communities are those which are actively created by us and by our activities, and are characterised by people with a diversity of backgrounds, ages and interests. That diversity is brought together by a commonality – perhaps it is the need for the apocryphal cup of sugar borrowed from the neighbour, a tangible place such as a community garden ... **or maybe it is an ukulele!**

The boldness of this billboard’s message is testament to the fact that even health corporations recognise the benefits! This photograph of the billboard in California went viral amongst online ukulele communities after it was first posted in 2013. The message was part of a campaign by Kaiser Permanente, a healthcare consortium, and it even inspired employees of Kaiser Permanente to form ukulele groups in their own workplace. Read about it [here](#).



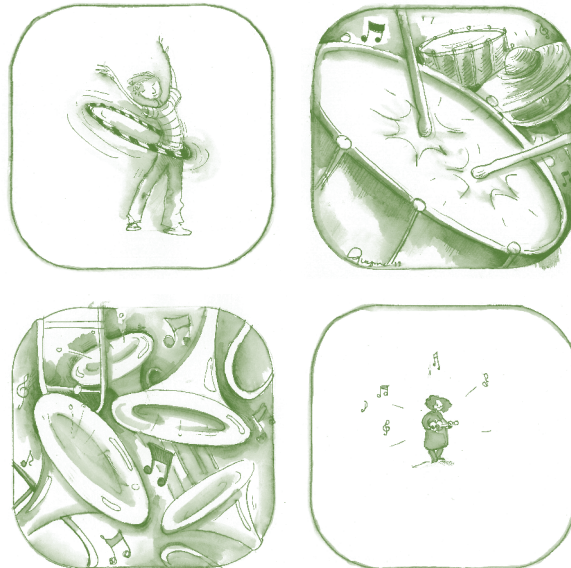
## 2.2 The ukulele as a community-building tool

### Ukulele, hula hoop, guitar or trombone?

Why ukulele? Why not the guitar, or the brass band? In different times, and other places, the piano or the trumpet have been the thing. Today the ukulele has stepped in to help many people have richer musical and social lives.

Acoustically the ukulele is pretty unimposing; it is soft and forgiving, born of laid back Hawai'ian traditions. A two-chord song can be easily learned in less than 15 minutes, so in today's world of 'time poor' people, the ukulele is an instant musical success. No need for hours of practise to get a good tone or a clear note. And most importantly, the uke allows the player to play and sing.

The accessibility, relaxed history, and almost instant fun makes the ukulele an ideal instrument for reviving community music in these fast times. A community musician can have a box of ukuleles on hand to loan to new players and encourage people to give it a go. When we've taught in schools or areas of disadvantage, there has been no requirement for students to already own an ukulele because we can provide one. It is cheap to buy, easy to transport and fits in small places. This last claim is no small one! Compare the space required for teaching or leading a ukestra with that required for a brass band, a hula hoop class or African drumming session. Smallness and quietness has its advantages!



## Creating a ‘Third Place’

We all have two main places in our lives. The first is home, the second is work. These two places are very specific in their roles, and in what they expose us to. The rules of engagement are relatively well defined and the expectations of opinions and behaviours are equally regulated.

Third places are different. In his 1989 book *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, Ray Oldenburg describes third places as essential to a vital community life. These are places and venues where social equality is promoted and informal supports are provided to the individuals and communities that form there. Unfortunately modern society has lost many third places – churches, community halls and clubs, for example – places that were once the heart of a community’s social vitality.

Third places need two principal features to work well – a physical venue and social interaction. The venue is important for the comfort and familiarity it provides. However, a catalyst, activity, ritual or habit is essential to ‘activate’ a space.

Therefore, if a weekly ukulele session can be the catalyst for coming together, this is a positive legacy of the work of a community musician. But we still need a tangible space for this ukulele-focused third place.

*Mark being ‘activated’ by Rotorua’s Third Place Café*



## 2.3 A ukestra venue

Lawn bowling clubs were once the centre of many Australian communities, but a great number have now closed and others are in decline. However, the last decade has seen more being used by ukulele clubs to provide a venue for their music-making. We see this as a great moral antidote to the scourge of poker (slot) machines that now so dominate many entertainment venues, and have utilised many local bowling clubs for our ukestras. When seeking out suitable venues to home a new ukulele community, it is prudent to tick a few boxes.



### Checklist for finding a successful ukestra venue

- Central location to the community
- Easy parking and accessibility
- Safe neighbourhood
- Chairs, tables and space
- Low or no background noise
- Toilets
- Friendly staff
- Cheap and reliable
- Food and drink available (if that's what your students want)

So once a venue is selected, who is going to come?

### 2.4 Creating an ukulele community

Establishing and maintaining a relevant ukestra – in terms of repertoire, location, time of day and venue – really requires us to remain vigilant about demographics (e.g. income, education, and age) of the people in our area. Questions such as *Who are the people you will be teaching and what are their needs?* continually shape our perception of what we should be doing. For instance we often experience a downturn in winter as grey nomads head north for the winter. The more we know about our community, the better we can shape our response to their needs.

#### Baby Boomers

We live and work in a coastal region of about 500,000 people, all within about 45 minutes drive of our home. From the outset, it was obvious that people over 60 years of age were the dominant demographic group attending our ukestras. The 'baby boomers' (people born between roughly 1945 and 1960) have lived through times of great prosperity and a significant number have accumulated substantial nest eggs for their retirement. The first half of this cohort has now entered full-time leisuredom and this has structured so much of what we do –



the songs selected, the towns and suburbs where we have located ukestras and the times of day they are held. This generation still dominates our ukestras, but over time the demographic has broadened, particularly as we've experimented with different venues.

One ukestran – a serial wag – made the quip:

*I've just turned 65, I'm the first of the baby boomers to do so; there are hundreds of thousands following. What are you going to do to manage the demand? (and ... adding rather presciently) ... just how many ukestras can you manage in one week?*

Wise words! This is an age group that fundamentally shapes our marketing, repertoire selection, payment options and venue choices. Ours is not a school; theirs is not a school term. Their desire is for a reliable social venue that also provides an opportunity to learn and enjoy playing music. One outcome of this market character is how we structure our payment method, which can be followed up in our companion manual (*The Business of Being a Community Musician*).

### **Non-Baby Boomers**

Certainly, what has just been discussed contains assumptions and generalisations, and whilst the baby boomers are currently our major market, it is not the only market. A quick perusal of ukulele groups on YouTube will find an assortment of ages. In our travels, for instance in Vancouver and Singapore, we find that many of these ukulele aficionados are younger, inner city workers or childless couples. More recently we have been holding ukestras at a new funky restaurant/bar. Our aim is to attract younger ukestrans from the regular patrons of this venue and it seems to be working! The rule is – do your research and adapt your plan to marry your skills and desires with those of your community.

## **2.5 Summary**

The ukestra is an opportunity to create a vibrant third place in our community, a place of acceptance, non-judgement and social interaction. As community musicians we need to be musically competent and have good interpersonal skills, but beyond this, we also need to know our community and its desires, and understand what we can offer them.

Thorough knowledge and research of the community uncovers appropriate and sympathetic venues. Price and ukestra scheduling are also set through thorough research and community engagement. Ask and listen!

Getting the right venue and the right people together with music-making has helped to ensure that the sense of community that we have created is real and sustaining. Our role is to continually reflect upon the who, what and where of our community, and of our role in facilitating more music-making in it.

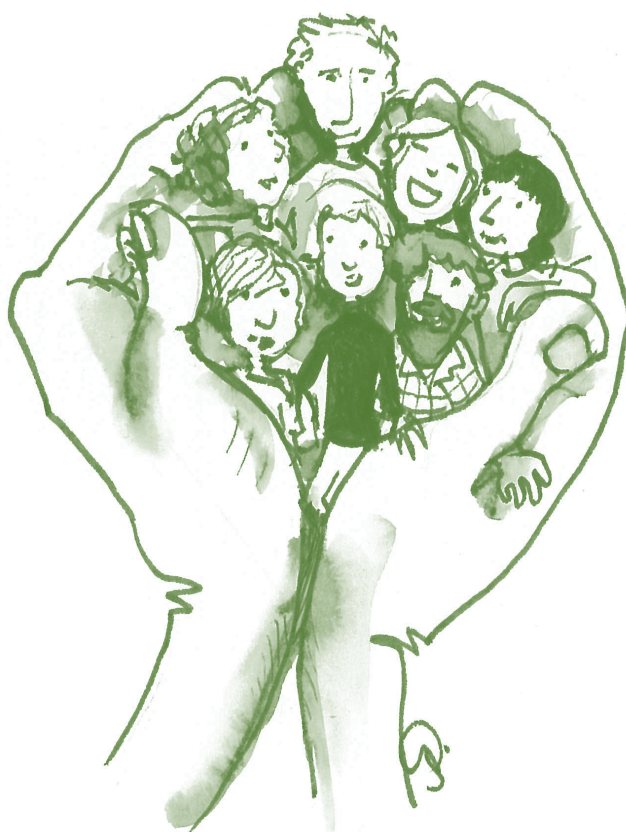
## ACTIONS

1. List the main groups of people in your community, their ages, life stage and mobility.
2. Compile a list of suitable venues with contact phone numbers.
3. Decide which group of people and which venues will work for you.
4. Estimate the preferred time and seasonality your community will want lessons.
5. List the sorts of music that will appeal to your community.
6. Consider how much you can charge your community and how much the venue will cost.
7. Consider how you will advertise these classes and reach your target audience (e.g. website, social media, posters and print media).
8. Start to accumulate extra ukuleles (good but cheap) for spares.



*A pleasant, well-maintained space (with enough chairs to be used as music stands if needed!) and friendly staff help make a suitable ukestra venue.*

# Chapter 3



# Chapter 3

## BEING AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY LEADER – CARE, CURATE, OBSERVE

As Community Musicians, we feel we must embody attributes which go beyond being good musicians and teachers. Effective teachers AND leaders must be caring and observant, but they are also responsible for the curation of the program. Care, curation and observation underpin so much of what a good teacher AND community leader embodies.

We examine how these fundamentals apply to community musicianship in terms of:

1. Stewardship and pastoral care: nurturing an inclusive community, and creating a safe, creative space for people;
2. Self-care: how we define our personal boundaries; and
3. Taking musical responsibility.



### 3.1 Stewardship and pastoral care: nurturing an inclusive community

Inclusion refers to the long-term ability of a community to include a rich variety of people. A community musician creates a ukestra that is a welcoming place, where people feel safe to experience and enjoy making music together. Successfully achieving this requires careful, caring and continual observation to know the individuals, the dynamics of the group, and how to nurture these ingredients to create a comfortable musical and social space. It is a juggle, balancing the needs and expectations of the experienced musician with those of the beginner player. But this tricky juggle is something to which we aspire.

In a ukestra session we aim to facilitate:

- The music to flow
- Everyone to feel included in the music and to be participating
- A sense that the session is passing quickly and enjoyably



- Lots of chatting in the break
- Everyone feeling relaxed and no one feeling excluded
- Most people to feel they have learned something and had an opportunity to express their musicality in even just a small way

An ideal ukestra session has all these hallmarks. Successfully leading a good session is the outcome of good stewardship, as is ensuring that basic things such as the venue and seating arrangements, are also serving these aims.

### Some examples of good stewardship

- Remembering everyone's first name
- Maintaining a friendly, optimistic and inclusive demeanour
- Adjusting the start/finish time to match local circumstances (e.g. bus/train timetables)
- Asking the club/hall management to fix a trip hazard in the carpark
- Ensuring that a player with a hearing difficulty has a reserved seat at the front
- Treating people equally with respect and kindness
- Resolving conflict or tensions before they become disruptive
- Watching for bullying and other forms of poor behaviour, and taking action
- Encouraging shy people to sing and play
- Refraining from judging others for their ability (or lack of ability)
- Encouraging the formation of social groups and friendships
- Pairing up a beginner with someone who can assist them during the class
- Ensuring that no one gets isolated in the group



As a steward of the community we do not need to *create* the friendships, chat or social groups. Rather it is our successful stewardship which will help such things happen of their own accord. If we are caring and observant, and set a tone of good will, humour and friendliness, others will follow.



### **Pastoral care: creating a safe space for people**

We are acutely aware that a significant role for us is a type of pastoral care, attending to the needs of individuals within the ukestra community. Primarily this is in the context of the ukestra experience, but may (very occasionally) extend to broader welfare concerns. Within ukestras this typically includes following up with new individuals after their first ukestra session, in a *how was it for you?* fashion. Such enquiries need to take place in a private and genuine way so that people can respond forthrightly.

Pastoral care can involve checking in with regular players that haven't attended for a while, usually by phone call, email or Facebook message. Singing, in particular, can be a vulnerable exercise, so we feel obliged to create an environment that feels safe and accepting. Feeling safe and comfortable can take time for newbies and that time should be respected.

Pastoral care may also involve moving people into different areas of the room according to their ability or social group. We are very overt about this at our Newukestras (see Chapter 7), where rank beginners are asked to sit in one section of the room where they can be seen and fostered by specifically allocated teachers. More experienced players are asked to sit in a different section. Similarly we may choose to seat younger people in their own section. Mostly this happens naturally anyway, but as group leaders we need to balance people's social desires with their educational needs and those of the group.

### **Observing student behaviour**

As ukulele teachers, one important observation we make is the placement of fingers. But as leaders of the community we observe moods, body language and the degree of social interaction occurring between ukestrans. Watching how well a new person is included is one short-term and tangible expression of good stewardship. Sometimes we will suggest seating arrangements to provide a more supportive environment for new people; for example, putting them near a player that is helpful and friendly, yet not overbearing. In any ukestra we have regular players who have poor rhythm or who play too loudly. We try to keep new people away from those players initially, at least until they find their feet, their fingers and their confidence.



Mid-session breaks allow people to get to know each other socially. During the session we encourage friendly chat, questions, interjections and group discussions to help foster a stronger sense of collaboration and group belonging. A powerful indicator of a socially successful group is that it is difficult to get them to come back to playing music after the break! Even the most experienced community musician cannot directly engineer friendships, but can provide the space and stage-manage the environment to maximise the chances of success.

We try to keep the following questions in mind when assessing the ongoing success of our pastoral care:

- Do people feel invited, welcome and not pressured when they first come?
- Are the players comfortable, relaxed and participating?
- Are new players being spoken to by others?
- Are new players being assisted in learning ukulele? (Or are they being assisted too much?)
- Is any one individual playing too loudly for others or being inappropriate?
- Are all players joining in with most activities? If not, why not? (There may well be a valid reason, but it is good to know what that reason is. Ask!)

There are times when individuals can appear upset, irritable, vulnerable or isolated. When we notice this, we try to follow up with that person in private (usually after the session or during the break) to uncover reasons for their discomfort, to do what we can to diminish their concerns, and to reinforce our role in making them welcome.

### **Challenging individuals**

Ukulele teachers frequently comment that they feel that uke groups get more than their fair share of 'challenging' individuals. We take this as a compliment, and a testament to the inclusive nature of group ukulele culture. It is certainly apparent to us here in Newcastle. Accepting community diversity means that we come across a wide range of behaviours which, if you think about it, is no different to what 'normal' families and neighbourhoods experience.



Even well-meaning people may have their annoying traits, and some students will be experiencing mental health issues. Often the most useful technique is to keep a focus upon the music rather than personalities.

Invariably we encounter disagreements about expectations, and in any human dealings it is worthwhile recalling some basic tenets of effective communication, especially with vulnerable people:

- Use active listening
- Give complainants private space and time to be heard (but not too much time – our skills are in community leadership and musicianship, not in counselling!)
- Make clear how you can and cannot assist
- Give them options to follow through on their issues in ways that don't necessarily involve you

### **Ukestra Welcome pamphlet**

Over the years we have had our share of challenges managing different characters and behaviours. We wrote the *Ukestra Welcome* pamphlet (see Appendix 1) to make clear what participants can expect of us, what our purpose is, and to reduce the possibility of conflicts and misunderstandings. This document also outlines our expectations of ukestrans, including a commitment to treat each other with respect and to musically challenge themselves as much as they are comfortable. *Ukestra Welcome* is distributed to all new players. It addresses the underlying philosophy of the ukestra, how it is a community which is inclusive, and it overtly states that each ukestra will have players at all levels from beginners to accomplished musicians.

### **Communication as the lifeblood of our community – a regular newsletter**

Communication is critical to creating a successful third place, and in maintaining a strong sense of community. We are all communicating musically; our body language is communicating our moods, strengths and vulnerabilities; we are providing instruction through language; and conversations are the measure and lifeblood of our successful community.



As leaders of our community, a key communication strategy is the regular sending out of formal newsletters via email and/or social media. The information and calls-to-action in the newsletters draw people together in joint activities, help them understand their potential role in these activities, and makes clear that they are always welcome. The activities are things like new classes, festivals, upcoming performance opportunities (including set list, rehearsal time and venue details), notifications of our next gigs as performers, and advice about opportunities to see relevant visiting performers. Our aim is to give a sense that we are all part of a musical community, either as students, audience members, or performers.

### **Privacy and confidentiality**

Given the broad cross-section of the community we attract, it is prudent (and we are legally obliged) to ensure that personal details are not shared unwittingly. Business standards of privacy and confidentiality reflect professionalism and help reinforce the idea that we do have personal boundaries. We endeavour to always keep telephone numbers, addresses, suburbs, email addresses or anything about the private lives of ukestrans private. The most likely time to stuff up is when emailing everyone in the ukestra. To minimise those privacy stuff-ups, we use an email marketing platform (MailChimp) or blind carbon copy (BCC).

We also encourage people to swap numbers and get together for informal jams outside of the ukestra as it is good for them to practise, play and perform without us! The hope (and usual outcome) is that people form their own groups that play privately, or perform in public, for instance, in nursing homes.

When faced with a request for someone's contact details, we suggest that they ask the person at the next class, or we tell the requester that we'll pass on their details to the person being requested. Privacy – it is just standard practice these days, everywhere and every time.

### **3.2 Self-care: defining your own personal boundaries**

A key challenge for us, as community musicians, is knowing and defining our personal boundaries within the community network we have established. We know that our work will be seriously compromised if we are burnt out, so maintaining our balance is critical to sustainability.

Since it is social, community music work can be very personal. However, it is important to recognise that just because we are creating fun social situations, we should not necessarily be expected to automatically be a “friend” of everyone in the ukestra. Unfortunately, some participants assume that we want to be friends when, like anyone else, we wish to be selective of our friendships.

Establishing and maintaining a professional distance from the ukestrans does not demand that we are unfriendly – to the contrary! But we do have to define our limits. The ways we achieve this include:

- The *Ukestra Welcome* pamphlet makes it clear that we are professionals whose role is to set up and run ukestras, and to organise certain other musical opportunities (see Appendix 1).
- As the person in front of the class and interacting with ukestrans, we each need to be prudent about the aspects of our personal life that we choose to share. Social workers call it ‘self disclosure’. Used judiciously it is useful for creating empathy and camaraderie, but does have its limits. We are also due the respect of privacy when requested.
- We make sure that people know when we are performing at gigs or festivals as a duo. This reinforces our musical credentials, and lets people know clearly that we have a musical life beyond ukestras.

One of the great advantages of charging people for community music services is that it provides a clear definition of roles. We want people to see us as professionals, and that our service does not necessarily involve us playing music for free in settings not of our choosing. This helps people understand that our role is to help them to be amateur musicians, but that we also have a separate, professional musical life. Maintaining a line of “this is what I do for a living” ensures that our musical endeavours have a better chance of being respected, and that receiving money from gigs is seen as appropriate and justified.



Professional boundaries are also supported by resources where we and our work can be recognised and we can share our experiences with peers. These include in-person or online forums such as:

- Community music associations such as Folk Alliance, Community Music Victoria or AUTLA (Australian Ukulele Teachers and Leaders Association)
- Local networks or informal get-togethers with other community musicians, choir leaders, and band conductors

### 3.3 Musical responsibility: be professional in guiding your ukestras

We select the music for our group, we explain it, break it into parts, and select the lead singer. One ukestran called this –

*“The benevolent dictatorship model ... I hand over me ten bucks, and youse take care of the rest!”*



He was extolling the benefits of leadership for him, as an ukulele player. When people pass over their money they hand us the responsibility for tempo, for providing musical tuition, for keeping the evening flowing, for providing some form of entertainment and for handling any difficult interpersonal politics. We are the ones who are nominated as having the competence and confidence in these things, and this is how respect as a leader is earned.

There are also many subtle ways we earn respect. For instance, letting students know what is interesting about a particular piece of music, and what sort of musical repertoire, techniques and knowledge are useful for improving skills.

Leadership also means providing opportunities for performances, often associated with other musical events. Attending ukulele or music festivals as a group is a great way for people to bond, and provides performance goals. Commonly this starts with school fetes, church fund raisers and street fairs.

As part of that, we feel it is our musical responsibility to link ukulele aficionados into a broader musical context, and for us, that is ‘folk’. The ukulele boom is a folk movement, bringing people together to play music together. But we also believe



that the folk movement can benefit from new ukulele blood being introduced as performers and audiences. Folk culture is a direct action against the dominant contemporary music culture which fosters passive consumption and admiration for others playing music.

Part of the 'folk education' is to train new musicians about the importance of listening and being an audience. Good musicians go to other musicians' gigs. Good community musicians are a source of all sorts of relevant musical information, so it pays to be well informed about what is out there for people, from concerts to other musical offerings and opportunities. In our newsletters we advertise other people's gigs and musical events (where we think they are relevant to our musical community) in addition to our own.

### 3.4 Summary

Community musicians care, curate and observe to facilitate musical and social relationships – we are stewards for the social benefits which come from playing music together. Ukestras are where people must feel safe not only to be involved, but also to 'give it a go'. Unlike so many competitive activities, a ukestra is specifically designed to be an accepting and cooperative environment.

Our musical responsibilities in relation to community leadership include a curatorial role. This might mean selecting songs which can help 'lift the vibe' of a session (a role beyond selecting songs merely for teaching goals) and choosing suitable performance opportunities.

Two documents formally help us foster our community. One is the *Ukestra Welcome* pamphlet, the other is our regular newsletter.

Ukestrans benefit from our pastoral care, where we ensure individuals are feeling comfortable and are enjoying themselves. We continually observe people's interactions with the social and learning environment that we have created and which is under our control. Seating arrangements and taking breaks during sessions are just two of the strategies that help foster greater social cohesion.

It is also important to maintain our own energy levels and value ourselves as professional musicians. Playing with other musicians of equivalent or better skills, and networking with musical associations help feed our creative drive and our sense of place with our peers.

## ACTIONS

1. Create your own Ukestra Welcome document using the example in Appendix 1.
2. Find opportunities for your ukestra to perform, when they are (eventually) ready.
3. Decide which musical community and events you would like to encourage your ukulele community to be part of, and form allegiances with this community.
4. Have your own creative projects.
5. Produce and distribute a regular newsletter which not only promotes your classes and ukestras, but also promotes the work and performances of the above musical community.



*We have a biannual event which gives each of our ukestras a chance to showcase their individual skills.*



# Chapter 4





# Chapter 4

## THE UKESTRA METHOD (HOW TO PLAN A UKESTRA SESSION)

Ukestration is what we call our approach to selecting and arranging songs and is detailed in Chapter 5. It forms our core ukulele-music philosophy. The Ukestra Method is how we've organised our thinking and our sessions to effectively deliver that philosophy. It is curation in action.

Two tools help us structure and plan ukestra sessions:

1. The Four Column Approach (FCA) – for selection of relevant repertoire
2. Broad Learning Areas (BLAs) – to identify the skills being targeted in a ukestra session

The FCA provides a framework for teaching BLAs and when used together they can guide your ukestra session plans, whether for a one-off session or for a period of weeks or months.

### 4.1 The Four Column Approach (FCA)



Within the Ukestra Method, most songs fall into one of four categories.

- a) Relaxing songs: those that are easy enough for a novice to play with comfort.
- b) Technique songs: those which require a specific technical skill on the ukulele, such as a particular strumming pattern, a complex chord structure, melody line or challenging riff.
- c) Theory songs: ones that teach some musical theory such as scales, or key changes or a particular genre of music.
- d) Ukestrated songs: those which have been arranged into several parts for a ukestra, and are often used as important performance pieces.



Of course most songs don't just sit in one category – a technique song could also be a theory song. Ideally, a ukestrated song will also be useful for demonstrating theory and technique, and perhaps with some practice, people will find it relaxing. But more than simply categorising the songs, this structures our approach to using repertoire as the pedagogical focus. Table 4.1 is an example of an FCA list which also shows how some songs can fall into all categories.

### a) Relaxing Songs

We all need something to ease our way into a ukestra session. Relaxing songs are primarily played for fun and enjoyment, have two, three or four chords and don't generally include complex riffs or arrangements. They may have simple riffs or melody lines but the focus is on ease and relaxation. A majority of people usually know and can sing these songs when they play them for the first time: feel-good/easy sing along songs such as *Jambalaya*, *Rhiannon*, *You Are My Sunshine*, *Four Strong Winds* and *Runaround Sue*. They are gentle on the voice, fingers and brain, with a generally repetitive chord progression. They may be rousing, or calming, but will be popular, either through memory or practice.

Relaxing songs should be interspersed throughout a ukestra session to give new players a sense of accomplishment and inclusion, and to provide breaks from periods of intense concentration and learning. Such songs are also pleasant closing numbers, leaving ukestrans on a high.

### b) Technique Songs

Technique songs are those that can improve a player's strumming or fretting hand action on the ukulele. Numerous songs can be used to demonstrate more complex strumming patterns such as the Bo Diddley strum (e.g. George Michael's *Faith*), or a Bossa Nova strum (*Girl From Ipanema*). Then there are songs that focus on techniques for the fretting hand such as the sitar riff in *Norwegian Wood*, or the blues riff in Cream's *Sunshine of Your Love*. More complex songs like *Fly Me to the Moon* provide the opportunity to teach detailed chord transition techniques, and to explain efficiency and economy of movement. Songs such as *Do You Know the Way to San Jose* provide an opportunity to teach a descending C scale in thirds. Most technique songs can also be classified as theory songs, however, the teaching emphasis is on the physical technique that is being learned rather than the musical theory.





**Table 4.1 A brief selection of songs categorised into the Four Column Approach**

Name of song	Column 1 - Relaxing	Column 2 - Musical Technique	Column 3 - Music Theory	Column 4 - Ukestrated
Ain't Misbehavin'		Jazz chords	Jazz chords	
Billie Jean		Riff playing and timing		✓
Catch My Disease		Riff playing and timing		✓
Do You Know the Way to San Jose		Uncommon chords, playing the riff quickly	Major 7th chords C scale in thirds	✓
Faith (George Michael)		Bo Diddley strum		
Four Strong Winds	✓		Diatonic song	
Hawaii Aloha	✓		Hawaiian cultural song	
Hound Dog		12 bar blues I IV V7 Improvisation on Blues scale	12 bar blues I IV V7 Improvisation on Blues scale	
I Walk The Line	✓		Diatonic song	
Isa Lei	✓ (only in terms of chords!)		Fijian cultural song	
Jamaican Farewell	✓		Diatonic song	
My Girl		Major pentatonic scales Fast riff playing	Major pentatonic scales	✓
Over the Rainbow	✓ (only for singing!)	Jazz chords		
Purcell's Canon		Musical notation & tab reading	C scale	
Sloop John B	✓		Diatonic song	
Somebody That I Used to Know		Riff playing		✓
Spanish Harlem	✓	Riff playing	Harmonised C scale	✓
Sunshine of Your Love		Riff playing	Blues scale (in D & G)	✓
Sway	✓	Latin strum pattern	Chord twins	✓
These Boots Are Made for Walkin'	✓	Easy Riff		
Wagon Wheel	✓			
You Shook Me All Night Long		Fast chord changes		



### c) Theory Songs

Some songs are ideal for teaching music theory. Obviously, technique will come into such teaching as well, but the focus here is to get a theoretical point across. For example, *My Girl* (Robinson and White) is excellent for teaching the pentatonic scale which is the main recognisable riff. For us, theory also means musical history and cultural diversity. The rich and complex songs of Tin Pan Alley, or the Brill Building era later in the twentieth century, are great categories of musical history and contain an abundance of opportunities to highlight the historical evolution of music and song-writing. A song such as *Runaround Sue* (DiMucci and Maresca) progresses through the I, vi, IV, V chord sequence, demonstrating an incredibly common musical progression amongst pop (or Doo-wop) songs.

Explaining the Circle of Fifths is made easier when using songs to illustrate your point. *Autumn Leaves* (Kosma, Prevert and Mercer) transits through the Circle of Fifths. So too does *I Will Survive* (Gloria Gaynor), whilst *Five Foot Two* (Lewis, Young and Henderson) does it in a different way. Compare these chord progressions to something like *Runaround Sue* and then a whole world of discussion points opens up – for example, the difference between diatonic chord progressions and songs based on secondary dominant relationships.

These are all theoretical and cultural points that we can explore with the students courtesy of the ukulele. A diverse repertoire contains rich treasure troves of knowledge to be uncovered, dissected and shared.

### d) Ukestrated Songs

Finally, ukestrated songs are those that have been purposefully arranged to include parts for nearly all levels of ability, from beginner to skilled players. (See Appendix 3 – *House of the Rising Sun* – as an example). A much more detailed investigation of Ukestration is explained in Chapter 5.

For the most part, ukestrated songs will have been arranged into parts (such as chords, melodies, ostinatos or other riffs) suitable for different levels of players. For example, a beginner player might play a very simple ostinato riff (such as a series of crotchets or quarter beats), others might do single chord thumb strums, whilst intermediate players might play a more complex musical phrase. Really skilled players might be asked to improvise or do solos.



## SEGUES AND GATEWAYS

Gateway songs are those which introduce a new theory or technique. Gateways are entry points to new teaching topics. For example, investigating different “list songs” such as *Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover* (Paul Simon), *What a Wonderful World* (Thiele and Weiss), or *Come Together* (Lennon - McCartney).

On the other hand, segues are songs that are already known, and can ease the way into a new theoretical or technical concept, or a new song. An effective segue is a teaching progression that goes along a familiar pathway into new territory and will ideally prompt the student to ask an obvious question. For example, *Sway* (Demetrio and Ruiz) is a segue into *O Mary Don't You Weep* (traditional) which uses a similar chord progression. Alternatively, playing the pentatonic scale in *My Girl* (Robinson and White) might be a segue to improvising using the pentatonic scale in another song.

Both Segues and Gateways are useful concepts to litter throughout a teaching plan.

### **Making good use of song suggestions**

There are always songs that ukestrans will suggest. The FCA can help us judge the suitability of a suggested song. Whether the suggestion is taken up depends on our teaching goals and ukestra plan, and whether the song has worthwhile learning elements, or perhaps a potential for ukestration. Given that we teach eleven different sessions every week, we get many suggestions from all of these culturally different ukestras and choirs, and we find this is a great source of new knowledge and diversity.



## 4.2 Broad Learning Areas (BLAs)

All of the skill development we undertake in ukestras happens through repertoire. *Broad Learning Areas* are the underlying drivers of skill development and cover three broad categories within the Ukestra Method:

1. Uke-specific skills (for the fingers and ears): chording, strumming, plucking, melody and scales
2. Non uke-specific: singing, musicianship, listening, appreciation and body
3. Non-music benefits: fun and social

Whilst the last two may not seem like skills, they are themes which are integral to the spirit and success of ukestras. Effective ukestra plans cover all of the twelve BLAs in a session.

### **BLA1 Fun**

Community musicians foster an environment where social enjoyment, fun and laughter are valued. This is fundamental to music-making for ukestras and requires: an uplifting attitude from us; the inclusion of songs that each ukestra finds enjoyable (relaxing songs); finding relevant news or stories and encouraging ukestrans to share the same; and acknowledging birthdays and other events. It can also involve structure such as setting aside time for small group or solo performances by ukestrans, and drink breaks.

### **BLA2 Social**

Social interaction is a vital indicator of good stewardship. The friendships people make help create a sustainable future for the ukestra. Hence it is really important to establish a fun, social and relaxed environment where friendliness dominates. Encourage students to help and support each other. Make sure enough space is left, both in the break, and during the session (between songs), for people to chat and get to know each other.



### **BLA3 Body**

“Feeling the groove” of music involves the *whole body*, not just the voice and those parts that are contacting the ukulele. Once players are past the beginner stage, it is appropriate to help them to relax, to loosen up the body and warm up the voice at the start of each session, and then maintain a watchful eye on breathing and posture (shoulders, elbows, arms, hands and fingers). Correct it where necessary. Maintaining this vigilance assists players to be comfortable and to reduce the risk of strains and injury. We also must be aware and respectful of age or disability-related conditions such as arthritis or even concentration skills.

### **BLA4 Fretting**

Teaching fretting is the first step to helping people play ukulele, and as the teacher you should never cease observing and assisting in the proper placement of fingers for playing chords or melody. This includes the chord shapes themselves, but more importantly how the fingers ‘flow’ between chords and/or the notes. The ‘finger to fret rule’, and ‘chord construction theory’ (the different places chords can be played on the fretboard) are relevant here.

### **BLA5 Strumming**

Many students struggle to strum in time and with precision. It is important to teach how different rhythms are constructed, emphasising specific beats, and utilising different strum techniques and patterns. Start with clapping a rhythm, zedding (no tones) the rhythm on an ukulele, before bringing in the chords. It’s up to us to build the confidence to bring out the inner child that can keep time!

### **BLA6 Plucking**

Plucking the strings (instead of strumming) allows the students to add greater finesse and subtlety to their playing. Techniques such as arpeggios and ostinatos, or plucking a melody or riff can add more depth to the music.

### **BLA7 Melody**

It is important to emphasise melody just as much as chords and strumming. Teach well-known melody lines of songs using musical notation, tab and by ear. Start with the C scale and then progress to simpler well-known melodies before moving into other keys.



### **BLA8 Singing**

Many people who sign up to ukestra seem to assume that it is only about learning the ukulele. However, singing is a very important component of the ukestra. Some would argue that it is the main reason that ukulele is so popular! The key elements of singing include breathing, articulation, pitch, harmony, phrasing, control, listening and singing sensitively. Most people enjoy singing and will generally join in if the whole class sings. However, singing out the front is definitely a challenge for many who have convinced themselves (or been convinced by a heartless teacher!) that they cannot sing. Creating a safe space for people to undertake lead vocals and building people's confidence to sing, takes time and persistence.

### **BLA9 Musicianship**

Beginners tend to have a limited repertoire of musical communication abilities, so one of the development areas for ukestrans is to be exposed to various styles of musical communication. Specific skills include reading musical notation, tablature, chord and lyric sheets; accepting and using the vast variety of useful yet cobbled-together written musical styles available on the internet; as well as recognising signals from the conductor. However, reading the subtle musical signals of fellow musicians perhaps demonstrates the highest level of musicianship.

### **BLA10 Scales**

Scales build finger dexterity, coordinate muscle and ear memory, build repertoire knowledge, and facilitate the ability to riff and improvise. The full suite of scales is quite large and diverse, from major, minor, pentatonic, to chromatic and culturally-influenced scales. We start with the C major scale for all students, followed by the pentatonic scale (C, D, F and G) and then the Blues scales (in C and D).

### **BLA11 Listening**

To put it very simply, teaching ukulele is about training three parts of the body: the left hand, the right hand and the ears. Listening is perhaps the greatest and most nuanced skill of the good musician. Training for listening involves memory learning, playing by ear and playing as a group. Successfully making music with others is about being sensitive to what others are doing and how one fits in with what others are playing. Of course, good listening skills ultimately reflect a key attribute of effective human beings!





## BLA12 Appreciation

Song selection (curation) is the basis of what we community musicians do. It leaves plenty of scope for education about song roots, styles, histories, genres, cultural context, composers, lyricists, memories of times with songs, parodies, loving or loathing songs, and on it goes.

### 4.3 Creating a ukestra session plan in a casual learning environment

*“The chief attribute of a good teacher is one who is prepared for anything.”*

*James Hill*

A ukestra session is a fine balance between having the structure and objectives familiar to formal education environments, and the relaxed and fuzzy aims of social activities. It is an environment where things are *experienced*, rather than somewhere where things are *taught*. However, we *are* conscious of our teaching role, and we are always called upon to answer questions about ‘how to do such ‘n’ such’. But these questions are the result of natural curiosity not curriculum. Leveraging this natural curiosity is all about teachable moments, something we talk about in Chapter 5.

A key ukestra characteristic that fundamentally shapes our planning and resourcing is the *absence of obligation to attend*. Individuals can and do attend as frequently or infrequently as they desire to achieve their personal goals, and those goals can be as diverse as having a beverage with friends or improving musical skills as fast as possible. Therefore, a session plan needs to be extremely flexible.

The ukestra session plan outlined in Table 4.2 can be used in two very different ways. It can provide a tight template for leaders who are more comfortable with a structured approach to teaching, or alternatively, for those who prefer to work without such formality, a useful guide to achieving less definite goals.

Either way, it provides each session with an outline and objectives to fill two hours in a way which is educationally, socially and musically positive. Broadly, sessions start with easy songs, progress to more difficult repertoire and finish with easy repertoire. And so, each session should have an arc that goes from general, to specific and back to general again.





Planning in 13-week cycles is useful as it allows for four cycles (or seasons) per year. Naturally the length of the plan will be adapted to fit into the selected time period or 'term' length. Each session should try to touch on all BLAs, however there may be a focus on some more than others, depending upon the session, the mood, and who shows up. Of course, given the non-obligatory nature of attendance, lesson plans sometimes have to be thrown out the window if there isn't a match between the plan and the ukestrans who have shown up!



*This photo and the next are from a panorama of a rehearsal which brought together people from various ukestras to prepare for a festival performance.*



## 4.4 An example of a ukestra session plan

*(read in conjunction with Table 4.2)*

- **Warm ups** of hands, fingers, shoulders and voice.
- Two or three easy **relaxing songs** that all can sing and play.
- **A 3-week project.** This is a song that demonstrates a technique or theory and needs some focused time over weeks for players to learn. It is often usually a skill related to a ukestrated song. Keep this to under 10 minutes as interest or focus may get lost.
- One or two easy relaxing songs.
- **A 4- or 8-week ukestrated project.** This is a ukestrated song which contains numerous parts and would be a little complex or technical so requires focused time over weeks to achieve success. The first week is becoming familiar with the song. The next three (or seven) weeks is occupied by learning all the parts, honing them, and moving the group's playing toward a performance standard. No more than 10 minutes per session.
- One or two easy **relaxing** songs.
- **BREAK!** Cuppa (cup of tea), coffee, beer, wine, chats.
- After the break you may wish to start with **a few warm up songs** to bring the group back together. Or perhaps provide a brief opportunity for an individual or small group to perform a song in front of a respectful and friendly audience.
- A **memory song** is one that you've requested they learn by memory over a number of weeks. Usually very simple with only 3 or 4 chords.
- **Revise a previous project** (3-, 4- or 8-week project). Spend no more than 5 - 10 minutes to refresh their memory of previous learning.
- One or two easy **relaxing** songs.
- **Revise a previous project** (3-, 4- or 8-week project). Spend no more than 5 - 10 minutes to refresh their memory of previous learning.
- One or two easy **relaxing** songs.
- **Finish on a favourite song** (perhaps a request) that all can sing and play. This is the ear worm for the night (the song that everyone sings in their head as they leave), so choose this song wisely!



Note that in Table 4.2, week 13 is open to whatever you and your group would like to do. One of our ukestras enjoys lunch after the session on this week. Another group likes to dedicate it to playing the blues and improvising.

The decision to create, stick to, or dump a class plan is best left flexible. *But if you do not have a class plan, then you do not have something to change.* Conversely, perhaps you will use the 13-week method as a guide, but be aware that there are many days that a prepared lesson plan cannot be delivered as anticipated.

Moral of the story? Be flexible and well resourced.



*The right hand side of the panorama from page 34. This is from 4–5 years ago, and it is amazing to see the familiarity of still frequent Ukestras, and the passing of some onto other hobbies, towns, or from life.*



**Table 4.2 The 13-week generic ukestra plan**

Timeline (mins)	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9	Week 10	Week 11	Week 12	Week 13
0 - 3	Warm ups	Warm ups	Warm ups	Warm ups	Warm ups	Warm ups	Warm ups	Warm ups	Warm ups	Warm ups	Warm ups	Warm ups	
3 - 15	Relaxing songs (column 1)	Relaxing songs (column 1)	Relaxing songs (column 1)	Relaxing songs (column 1)	Relaxing songs (column 1)	Relaxing songs (column 1)	Relaxing songs (column 1)	Relaxing songs (column 1)	Relaxing songs (column 1)	Relaxing songs (column 1)	Relaxing songs (column 1)	Relaxing songs (column 1)	
15 - 25	3-week project 1 (column 3 & 4)		3-week project 2 (column 3 & 4)		3-week project 3 (column 3 & 4)		3-week project 3 (column 3 & 4)		3-week project 4 (column 3 & 4)		3-week project 4 (column 3 & 4)		
25 - 30	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	
30 - 45	4-week project 1 (column 2)		4-week project 2 (column 2)		4-week project 2 (column 2)		4-week project 2 (column 2)		4-week project 3 (column 2)		4-week project 3 (column 2)		
45 - 55	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	
55 - 70	<b>BREAK</b>												
70 - 80	Memory song and/or relaxing songs	Memory song and/or relaxing songs	Memory song and/or relaxing songs	Memory song and/or relaxing songs	Memory song and/or relaxing songs	Memory song and/or relaxing songs	Memory song and/or relaxing songs	Memory song and/or relaxing songs	Memory song and/or relaxing songs	Memory song and/or relaxing songs	Memory song and/or relaxing songs	Memory song and/or relaxing songs	Memory song and/or relaxing songs
80 - 90	Revise previous project	Revise previous project	Revise previous project	Revise previous project	Revise previous project	Revise previous project	Revise previous project	Revise previous project	Revise previous project	Revise previous project	Revise previous project	Revise previous project	Revise previous project
90 - 100	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs	Relaxing songs
100 - 110	Revise previous ukestrated song	Revise previous ukestrated song	Revise previous ukestrated song	Revise previous ukestrated song	Revise previous ukestrated song	Revise previous ukestrated song	Revise previous ukestrated song	Revise previous ukestrated song	Revise previous ukestrated song	Revise previous ukestrated song	Revise previous ukestrated song	Revise previous ukestrated song	Revise previous ukestrated song
110 - 115	Relaxing song	Relaxing song	Relaxing song	Relaxing song	Relaxing song	Relaxing song	Relaxing song	Relaxing song	Relaxing song	Relaxing song	Relaxing song	Relaxing song	Relaxing song
115 - 120	Favourite song to finish	Favourite song to finish	Favourite song to finish	Favourite song to finish	Favourite song to finish	Favourite song to finish	Favourite song to finish	Favourite song to finish	Favourite song to finish	Favourite song to finish	Favourite song to finish	Favourite song to finish	Favourite song to finish

Party, performances, revising favourites



## 4.5 Equipment required

The minimum required equipment to run ukestra sessions is your own ukulele, a few spare ukes, the music for the session and maybe a music stand. Many groups use a prescribed published and bound book, or a projector type set-up for projecting lyrics and chords. We do not advocate either of these approaches for ukestras, for a couple of reasons.

Firstly, given our focus upon teacher as curator of a diverse array of resources, we do not like to be limited to published volumes of 'ukulele' song books. Rather, we like to draw from a much wider array of resources that are generally available on a myriad of ukulele and musical websites. Of course we also draw upon the music we write up ourselves.

Secondly, we do not like the focus being upon 'the book' or 'the screen'. We rather that the attention is focused upon the teacher/leader, the other participants and the experience of the music. This includes the group sound, the individual's place within that sound, adhering to timing, and the performance of the lead singer. In the end our goal is not about reading: it is about feeling and listening.

The larger the group, the more you may want to supplement the minimum requirements to include a small PA for vocalists or solos including speakers, amplifier, microphones, microphone stands and leads. If a PA is used then access to power will need to be considered (either that or have a battery powered system). Other accessories may include a few music stands and perhaps a phone and access to the internet to demonstrate songs.

A bass is also often a part of the tools of trade. Although not essential, we find that it is a useful tool to maintain tempo and to give a stronger sense of being in a band. We strongly advocate that a competent and experienced person plays the bass, especially if there is a sufficient group culture (with technical and personal skills). In many cases we play the bass ourselves. Don't try to train anyone up or bring in a poor bass player as they can have quite a deleterious effect on the resulting sound.





## 4.6 Summary

We recommend using the Four Column Approach, where songs are allocated into four categories: easy and relaxing, technique songs, music theory songs and ukestrated songs. Some songs will belong in more than one category.

Ukestra sessions contain a blend of songs from all four categories with a heavy reliance on relaxing songs to give breaks from the focused learning parts of the session. The pace of the session will vary from easy to more focused, and back to easy again.

There are 12 Broad Learning Areas that help target the skills to be taught. Ukulele-specific skills include chording, strumming, plucking, melody and scales. There are non ukulele-specific skills such as singing, musicianship, listening, appreciation and body awareness. Finally the most important but potentially the most difficult BLAs to attain are fun and social times whilst achieving all of the above!

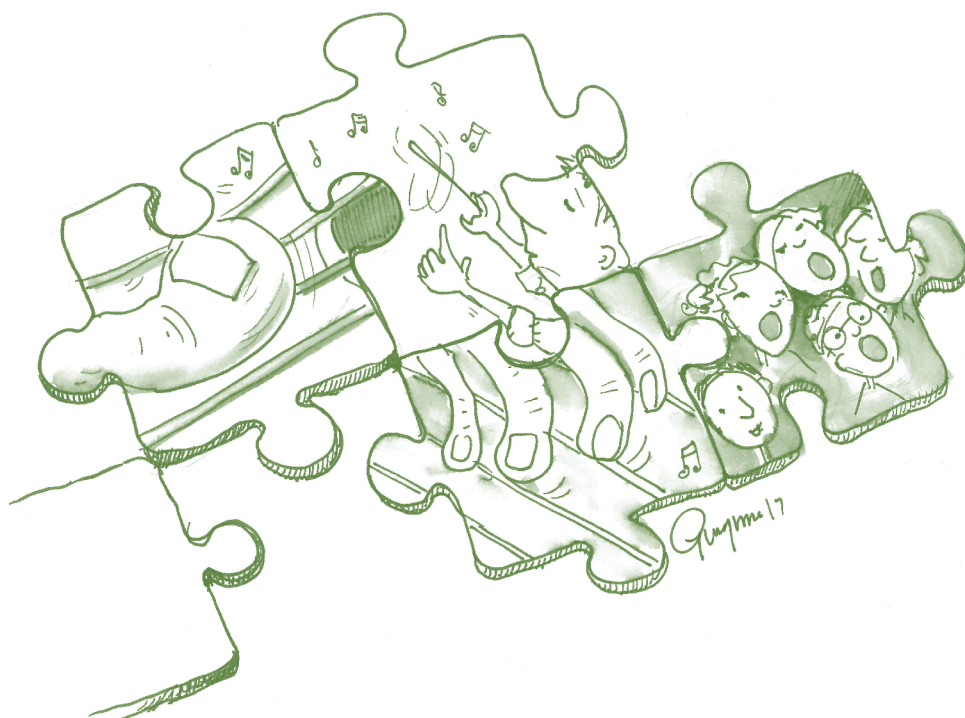
A general lesson plan (or guide) is required, even for the casual learning environment of the ukestra. However a good teacher must be prepared to be flexible and ready for anything during a session. This could include dropping or changing the class plan depending on the needs of the students.

## ACTIONS

1. Organise songs into the four columns and think about how to vary the ukestra session between focused activity and relaxed playing.
2. By reviewing the Broad Learning Areas, create a list of songs for the session that acknowledges each one, but not necessarily of equal focus.
3. Create a class plan according to Table 4.1. Try it out on a ukestra or small practice group and modify what didn't work for you at the time.
4. Be aware of the time you spend on any one activity or category, and ensure that no song or skill requires more than 10-15 minutes of work or focus.
5. Continue to modify the class plan and be ready to change your objective or focus depending on the needs of the students that turn up that day.



# Chapter 5





# Chapter 5

## UKESTRATION: ARRANGING SONGS FOR A UKESTRA

A well-ukestrated song will offer multiple opportunities for relaxed playing, as well as for teaching theory and technique.

### 5.1 What is Ukestration?

Ukestration is a way of arranging songs into different parts for the ukulele (or vocals) that are suitable for different skill levels.

There are five components to Ukestration:

- a) **A repertoire-based approach**, where well-known popular songs are used to teach music theory and musical techniques.
- b) **Creating parts for all skill levels**. Ideally there is an ukulele part that nearly every level of player can accomplish, whether they are beginner, intermediate or skilled.
- c) **Differentiated instruction**, which involves providing students with different avenues to learning in the same session.
- d) **Creating and harnessing ‘teachable moments’**. These are the moments in class when curiosity can be tapped and, when combined with the leader’s resources, lead to greater learning opportunities beyond the current class plan.
- e) **Teaching progressions** that lead the ukestra through a series of related repertoire to demonstrate a musical theory or technique.



### a) Repertoire-based approach

Most people who play music do it because they enjoy it. That's a given. But in Western society the teaching, learning and performance of music seems to be heavily influenced by one of three things:

- admiration of virtuosity (and the innate beauty of music);
- the pursuit of fame; or
- nostalgia.

The Ukestra Method is certainly not about offering people a shot at fame or virtuosity so these 'learning catalysts' are next to useless for structuring our sessions. That leaves nostalgia as the key hook to motivate a player's learning. The relevance of this approach is constantly affirmed for us when we hear ukestrans make comments such as "I always wanted to play that song, or learn that riff, or sing that part".

Whilst it is perfectly reasonable for nostalgia to be a key driver for repertoire requests, we feel it gives much more depth (and attractiveness) to our sessions when we balance people's nostalgic desires with education. Through nostalgia we are able to bring people into the eternally invigorating act of learning. Therefore, a dominant responsibility for the teacher/leader becomes one of *curation* – selecting songs that have educational relevance as well as being popular.

We have found the following songs – which are popular with many people, particularly baby boomers – to be enormously valuable when teaching people about musical theory and technique. By learning the riffs, the student is learning particular theories and techniques which are applicable in situations beyond the song, and even beyond the instrument.

- *My Girl* (Robinson and White, 1964). The iconic guitar riff is a series of pure major pentatonic scales. The act of teaching the *My Girl* riff (with proper technique) introduces people to a set of scales useful for improvisation.



- *Sunshine of Your Love* (Cream, 1967). Again, another iconic and well-remembered riff which is a mild variation of the blues scale. Here we have the building blocks of blues improvisation.
- *Joy to the World* or *Purcell's Canon*. The popular Christmas Carol and the lesser known canon both contain a pure descending major scale. On the ukulele this is usually the C scale.
- *Do You Know the Way to San Jose* (Bacharach and David, 1968). The familiar riff in this song (sung by Dionne Warwick) is the descending C scale, but can easily be extended to include a harmony line. Harmonised scales make great ingredients for soloing.

Selecting songs that ukestrans love is easy. The challenge is to choose songs which contain theoretical, technical or practical musical points that pique student curiosity and engage them in their own learning. This is where a good Ukestration comes into its own, with all the parts presenting multiple opportunities for learning.

## **b) Creating parts for all skill levels**

The pedagogical challenge for a ukestra leader is how to maintain inclusiveness. How do we allow beginners to be part of the music, whilst still offering challenges for the intermediate and skilled members? This is always a balance, both within a song, and over the duration of a session, and there are times when one group has to be catered for more exclusively. Ukestra sessions must be a balance of easy, intermediate and more difficult songs, and include (most of the time) easier parts for beginner players and more complex parts for skilled players. See Appendix 3 for an example of a ukestrated song, where there is an easy riff and a more difficult riff for players

With Ukestration, all skills levels are included and improved. For example, with an easy 3-chord song (think *Down on the Corner* by Creedence Clearwater Revival), beginners can focus upon getting the chord changes, while intermediate players are given a repetitive riff, and advanced players are given a chance to solo. Vocal challenges might involve two or three people singing harmonies. In this way, the simple song can become interesting to all players of different abilities, and the playing of the song becomes a cooperative learning experience where all players can be involved.



### **c) Differentiated instruction**

We learned about ‘differentiated instruction’ in our James Hill Ukulele Initiative (JHUI) teacher training where James describes it as *several different learning/teaching levels and styles* being used *in parallel*.

Differentiated instruction is where we offer different avenues to learning. A variety of teaching material and methods gives all players the opportunity to access music, regardless of their ability. In the Ukestration context, this may involve handing out lyric/chord song sheets for everyone; musical notation for those that can read music; musical tablature for those that read tab ; possibly online recordings of parts and demonstrating a piece in class for those that like to learn by ear. Some students may need to see up-close how the hands and fingers are moving.

The difficulty and the paradox is that we are mostly using visual teaching aids for what is an auditory art form or medium. So always utilise numerous pathways and modalities to support your teaching, but particularly encourage people to listen, both to your playing and to their own.

### **d) Teachable moments**

In 2009, an African American Harvard Professor was arrested whilst trying to break into his own home. In the aftermath, President Obama expressed a hope that this case of mistaken identity would be a ‘teachable moment’ for the American public; a moment they could learn something about racial prejudice from the situation in which a man was mistaken for a thief simply because of his race.

All of which is to exemplify the teachable moment – an opportunity for us to offer insights to our students when their curiosity and engagement are at a peak. We’ve already spoken of the educational usefulness of *My Girl* – following are examples of questions that are often prompted by teaching the pentatonic scale for that song.

## TEACHABLE MOMENT EXAMPLE

**Student:** *Why does it sound like Chinese music?*

**Teacher:** *Because the pentatonic scale is used by music from cultures all over the world, including Asian music. It is the basic building block of much of the world's music.*

**Student:** *But how can we use it in other songs?*

**Teacher:** *You can use the C pentatonic scale for any (diatonic) song that stays in the key of C. So let's look at a simple song in the key of C and use the pentatonic scale to improvise.*

**Student:** *But why does that work?*

**Teacher:** *Because it takes out the notes that potentially create disharmony (4th and 7th).*

A sequence of such questions can go on and on, becoming increasingly more complex as the rabbit warren of teachable moments opens up before the aware and well-resourced teacher, and the engaged and curious student.

A judiciously selected song presents a whole range of teachable moments in a ukestra. This in turn implies that we should 'always be ready for anything', and have sufficient personal knowledge and physical resources on hand to take best advantage of these opportunities.

### e) Teaching progressions

The logical extension of the focus upon teachable moments is to keep linking these moments together through a session plan or teaching progression. Following one song (and point) up with another song that reinforces the same musical point makes sense and is good teaching practice. Ultimately, this approach leads to a teaching progression of songs that illustrate the point being made.

To create a teaching progression, look for songs that share the same music theory or technique, and reinforce the same teaching point or teachable moment.



Here are some examples of teaching progressions that we regularly use, moving from easiest to more complex.

### 1. Common chord progressions

“Doo-wop” songs share similar chord progressions (I, vi, IV, V). *Runaround Sue*, *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life*, *Blue Moon* and *Stand By Me*.

For beginners keep this lesson in the key of C (C, Am, F, G7).

### 2. The C scale

Use *Purcell's Canon*, the riff from *Rhiannon*, or *Spanish Harlem* or *Do You Know the Way to San Jose* to demonstrate the C scale.

### 3. What is a diatonic song?

Teach the chords of a major scale; e.g. major, minor, minor, major, major, minor, half diminished (minor 7th flat 5). In the key of C that is: C, Dm, Em, F, G (or G7), Am and Bm7b5.

Play some songs that stay within key and don't use chords from other keys. These are called diatonic songs. Now go to the songs that use chords from other keys (called secondary dominants), commonly found in jazz. Compare the chords of these two types of songs (e.g. *Five Foot Two* vs. *Four Strong Winds*).

### 4. The Circle of Fifths and how this chord progression gives extended 'musical resolutions'.

Songs such as *Fly Me to The Moon*, *Autumn Leaves* and *I Will Survive* demonstrate this well. The diagram prepared by [Mammoth Gardens](#) is a useful tool for demonstrating this theoretically.

Don't let all this talk of theory and structure give you the wrong idea! Our ukestra sessions are not all meticulously mapped to extract the last bit of teachable moment juice out of a teaching progression. As we have been at pains to emphasise, one of our primary goals is to provide a fun environment. We want people to learn, but within a relaxed, informal and sometimes unstructured learning environment. But this theoretical context demonstrates how much 'meat' can be in amongst all the 'sugar' – and make for a well-balanced meal. (And with that, the food-music-theory metaphor has been taken just a little too far!)

## 5.2 How to ukestrate a song

Just as our sessions are not constituted solely of mapped teaching progressions, neither are all songs ukestrated. Some are just for strumalong fun. But having ukestrated songs on hand to teach are key to our approach, and for performances that audiences can enjoy.

There are three fundamental components of a ukestrated song, along with two additional supportive ones. The three components assist the goal of providing a differentiated learning environment. These are:

- the importance of the single chord thumb strum (SCTS),
- the arrangement of musical parts (riffs) that drive the song, and
- the arrangement of vocal parts.

The first supportive component is the addition of bass, preferably an ukulele bass (ubass). It is worth addressing this briefly prior to the fundamental components. A well-played bass anchors a song, and provides a pivot around which it is so much easier for ukulele players and singers to perform their parts. Audiences also benefit from it, and having a ubass (as opposed to a standard scale bass guitar) is all the more useful because of its ease, for the look of it being a *bona fide* ukulele, and for its novelty value – *it looks like an ukulele, but what is that thing?* If you or any of your group is keen to learn ubass, [UBASSics](#) is an inexpensive and popular resource available at Ukulele Central.

The second supportive component is considering the role of ‘conducting’, which is discussed further on.

### The importance of the Single Chord Thumb Strum (SCTS)

Imagine for a moment, a band, with five different instruments. Drums, keyboards, bass, rhythm guitar and lead guitar. Everyone is a vocalist. The drums and bass – the ‘rhythm section’ – have well-defined roles, but the keyboard and two guitarists could easily get in each others way musically. Of course in a good band this does not happen. Quite often the keyboard player, or one of the guitars will do long chords, like a chordal wash underneath the song, whilst the other lead/rhythm instruments are doing riffs or providing more earnest rhythmic backing. This is standard procedure.





A well executed Single Chord Thumb Strum (SCTS) on a bunch of ukuleles is like that keyboard ‘chordal wash’. There is nothing more integral and useful to a unified sound than the SCTS. The name says it all:

- One strum for each chord (which often equates to one strum per bar)
- It is executed with the pad of the thumb as this provides more control and richness than the scrape of a nail

Mechanically, it allows beginners to start to understand the concepts of musical discipline, playing with others, context and musical timing. It is also extraordinarily useful to help beginners focus upon the ‘first skill’ – fretting – without getting too caught up with the ‘second skill’ – strumming.

The SCTS then provides the underpinning musical base, and space for more advanced players to play more complex arranged parts. It is like a frame for musical beauty, and creates the opportunity for far more pleasant listening, and ultimately, performing.

### Driving the song with musical parts (riffs)

Most popular commercial songs are not driven by a wall of strumming. Instead various instruments take a role in driving the song in different ways. Perhaps it is a beautiful chord phrase delicately framing the melody (think *Michelle* by The Beatles), or an insistent repetitive riff (*Sunshine of Your Love* by Cream, *The Final Countdown* by Europe). When strumming does dominate (for example, Oasis songs, or *Under the Milky Way* by The Church), it is generally one instrument. So the massed ukulele group presents a particular challenge for the arranger.

This is the basis of Ukestration, finding musical phrases, motifs, melodies and riffs that can be played together to make a greater whole, and ideally *drive the song in place of the wall of strum*.



A riff is a short repeated phrase in popular music and jazz, frequently played over changing chords or harmonies or used as a background to a solo improvisation. Most songs will have identifiable riffs that can be translated to the ukulele, whether they are adapted from bass, keyboard, guitar, vocal or brass lines.

Our ears are constantly on the lookout for songs that are suitable for ukestration, and over the last eight years we have successfully (and not so successfully) ukestrated many. They include identifiable riffs and melodies that we have adapted for the ukulele. These riffs include parts for beginners through to advanced players in songs such as:

- *Somebody That I Used to Know* (Gotye)
- *Catch My Disease* (Ben Lee)
- *We Are Done* (Madden Brothers)
- *Norwegian Wood* (Beatles)
- *My Island Home* (Neil Murray)
- *Spanish Harlem* (Leiber and Spector)
- *Happy* (Pharrell Williams)
- *Exes and Obs* (King and Bassett)
- *Libertango* (Astor Piazzolla and Grace Jones)

Sometimes we have created extra parts. Some songs, whilst attractive, may have insufficient musical phrases or riffs that drive the song, yet with a bit of imagination, new, ukulele-suitable ones can be written into the song. Arranging parts is a creative process, which will be determined by the song, your own improvisations, and the abilities of the ukestrans with whom you are working. Some of the songs to which we have added extra parts include:

- *Royals* (Lorde)
- *Buzzcut Season* (Lorde)
- *All I Want is You* (U2)
- *Spooky* (The Atlanta Rhythm Section)
- *Price Tag* (Jesse J)

A rather enjoyable part of our work is this creative process, which can be triggered by listening to songs online or on the radio, with an ear for Ukestration. Students also make suggestions about preferred songs. However, when considering potential songs as Ukestration candidates, we ask the following questions:

- Does the song already have distinct musical parts?
- Can the pre-existing parts in the song be adapted to ukulele?
- Is there scope to create new musical lines and chords to make the song more interesting?
- What is the educational aspect of this song, what musical theory or technique can the song help demonstrate or highlight?

Finding new songs to ukestrate helps keep the interest of both ourselves and our students. The best song candidates for Ukestration are those that already have distinct parts. Big production numbers by the likes of Celine Dion, Rhianna and Mariah Carey rarely offer themselves up to be broken down into agreeable ukestrated parts, being generally dominated by heavy studio production and a focus on vocals. Similarly, songs that are all rhythm, with very little melodic variation, are not easily adapted to the ukulele.

The ready availability of YouTube and other video forums makes them very accessible and useful tools. We have found Walk Off the Earth videos to be a great source of ideas. Their breakthrough video of *Somebody That I Used to Know* shows five people playing the one guitar. The sparse nature of the song-writing and the arrangement is brought out beautifully in the quirky and funny video. Most importantly for us, the simple parts easily lend themselves to Ukestration. Their versions of *Royals* and *Happy* were also great candidates for Ukestration.

### **The arrangement of vocal parts**

People enjoy playing the ukulele because it gives them a chance to play and sing. It is important not to overlook the importance of singing during a ukestra session. As with the ukulele, vocal parts sometimes need to be arranged. For example, it is really good practice to have a lead singer for most songs, perhaps a harmony singer as well, but make sure all get to sing during the chorus. It is invigorating (and addictive!) to have a rousing chorus full of voices.

Selecting people who are competent, entertaining or even accomplished singers is an easy and attractive option, but this should not always be the main criteria for selection. We have watched self-professed ‘non-singers’ blossom into enthusiastic performers. So give those who want to sing lead vocal a chance to do so, you never know their potential. Remind people that some of the most successful singers have untrained voices: Bob Dylan, Mark Knopfler, Rod Stewart, and Tom Waits being favourite examples. For each song, we consider the vocals as another section that can be arranged using harmonies, volume and tone to create a more interesting musical experience.

### HARMONY SINGING

A really useful way to teach harmony singing is called Singing the Strings, which we learned from the James Hill Ukulele Initiative (JHUI) teacher training. In this method, a singer will select a string to sing during a song according to their range: soprano the A string, alto the E string, tenor the C string and bass the low G string. Then they play the chords of a song but sing that note which is played on their allocated string. For example, during a C chord, the soprano will sing a C note (on the A string), then when the chord changes to an F, the singer sings an A note, during a G chord they sing a B note, and so on. This way, untrained people can have an accessible way of finding harmonies for any song. It is best to still have a melody singer during this exercise too.

### The lead singer is not the teacher

This is a vital point for the integrity of a community music approach – *the leader/teacher is rarely the lead singer*. The community musician is the lead singer only in the first instance, i.e. demonstrating an unknown song; or as a last resort, taking the reins in performance crisis. Even if you have someone who is not your ideal singer, encourage them to take the lead role.



## Conducting the ukestra

The final supportive component to consider during Ukestration are the acts of arranging the song and then conducting the ukestra.

Our first task is to *teach* the parts that we want to have played. Once this is achieved then the song is played through several times (sometimes over a period of weeks) until familiarity and competence is achieved with a sufficient number of students.

Once players have achieved the relevant skill level, we can start to *arrange* the song, putting parts together (both ukulele and vocal), leaving out certain parts in certain sections, and generally experimenting with what sounds good and what sort of dynamic best fits the feel of the song. This (fairly experimental) task is generally done on the spot, during sessions.

If the song is selected for a major performance, we find the arrangements are really cemented during rehearsals specific to that performance.

The ideal goal is to achieve a level of coherence so that the ukestra becomes ‘an instrument that is played’ by the conductor during performances, bringing in parts when required, and encouraging ukestrans to achieve dynamic in their performance. This is not an egotistical exercise to show the prowess of the conductor, but is designed to help participants feel part of a larger musical experience: to ‘contain’ them so all can feel included, to set and maintain the tempo, and to provide the most entertaining and musical performance possible. This ‘playing of the ukestra’ happens primarily at major performances, but is important (in a relaxed way) during normal ukestra sessions, and then more stridently at rehearsals for performances until the culmination in the expected and prepared-for performance.

*Screenshot from our first professional ukestra video*



## 5.3 How the Ukestra Method is different from other forms of ukulele teaching

We are different from other methods of ukulele teaching in that we teach music using Ukestration, and foster musical appreciation, whilst actively creating community. It just so happens that the ukulele is the best instrument to achieve these things simultaneously.

### NOT the ukulele song book format

Those reading this manual should be familiar with the popular uke club or uke-jam format, where no one leads, and everyone plays from the song book e.g. Jim Beloff's books in North America, or the *Ukulele Club Songbook* (the 'grey' book) in Australia. There is also the 'ukulele sing-along' show, where an individual or band gets up and leads the uke-wielding audience in a swift series of songs read from a screen. There may be as many as 20 songs each hour, and whilst this can be enjoyable for participants, it does not inherently help them improve their technique or musical appreciation. This approach, prescribed by what is available 'in the book' limits the ability of the teacher/leader to 'curate' the repertoire according to their musical and pedagogical goals.



### Not the classroom format

The antithesis of the 'uke-jam format' is the 'classroom format', much like very common educational formats for many musical instruments. These are situations where the ukulele is used in formal class situations, or where the emphasis is on skill attainment and home practice. This model does not so easily foster community building and inclusiveness. It is a successful model for other teachers but it is not the path we have taken in eight years of successful community building and music-making.

### Ukestration – a halfway point

Ukestration sits somewhere in the curatorial middle of these two approaches, drawing from both traditions (songbook strumalong and classroom), combining the community inclusiveness aspects of the first model and the educational aspects of the latter. We are not just a band leader/conductor, nor just a teacher: rather we recognise our roles as community leaders, and as such we take this privileged position very seriously. It is a role of responsibility. And it is good business, for (in our experience), people return again and again. They come back for the goals that we seek to establish for a ukestra – making music together as a group, the associated learning, and a fun, social and inclusive atmosphere.



## 5.4 Summary

Ukestration involves an approach to teaching ukulele which is inclusive, features differentiated instruction, is based on repertoire, and maintains a strong awareness of the possibility of the teachable moment. The repertoire and their inherent teachable moments can be linked into extended teaching progressions that take the student on a musical journey.

Ukestration can also be understood as a way of arranging and performing songs with an ukulele orchestra, emphasising Single Chord Thumb Strums, the arrangement of ukulele and vocal parts, the incorporation of bass and a role for lead singers, and the importance of the conductor/leader to hold it together.

This approach differs markedly from traditional forms of ukulele music-making, either in the classroom format, or in the strumalong ukulele club format so popular around the world. We see ourselves as incorporating the best elements of both worlds into a format which appeals to those who wish to learn, but also those who wish to socialise.

## ACTIONS

1. Look at our version of *House of the Rising Sun*, get some friends together, and see how it feels and fits together.
2. Listen to popular songs and pick out the riffs and melodies that might transfer well to the ukulele.
3. When arranging songs for the ukestra, find really easy parts for new students, and more complex parts for more skilled players.
4. Use many modalities and resources when teaching, such as music notation, tablature, visual aids and recordings. Most of all encourage students to develop their “ear”, to listen to your playing, their own and others.
5. Encourage people to try lead vocals, and also ensure that everyone has an opportunity to sing. Take the lead vocalist role only when absolutely appropriate and necessary. Vocal parts can also be arranged.
6. Have a competent bass player.
7. Arrange, conduct and control the dynamics of your ukestra.



# Chapter 6



# Chapter 6

## THE TEACHERLY QUALITIES USEFUL FOR LEADING A UKESTRA

Just as this is not straight community work, neither is it entirely music teacher work. Continue to care, curate and observe – we need skills and qualities that are relevant to both vocations. Hence we need an openness to developing:

- the patience, understanding, compassion and ethical commitment typical of an effective community worker; and
- the artistic, passionate, observant, intuitive, knowledgeable and dedicated countenance common among good music teachers.

Chapter 3 discussed the personal qualities and challenges typical in community work, and those skills which are relevant to being a community musician. But we also need what we loosely call ‘teacherly qualities’, and we recognise these as being key factors in our own success.

### Seven ‘teacherly’ qualities which help to effectively lead a ukestra

Educationally, community musicians have a great responsibility and privilege – exposing people to the wonders of music, its theoretical intricacies, cultural nuances and broader competencies. This is all while catering for the entertainment and nostalgic musical needs that are so popular within the ukulele community. This duality between educational and entertainment may, at times, seem at odds. However, there are a number of teaching qualities and skills that are relevant to successfully delivering an effective ukestra experience:

1. Be observant and intuitive
2. Be clear in your modeling
3. Be well resourced and anticipate teachable moments
4. Respect and harness what you offer as a player
5. Foster your creativity and maintain your passion
6. Be collaborative yet in control
7. Be ready for anything.





## 6.1 Be observant and intuitive

Observant teachers keep an eye on multiple aspects of session dynamics, from the micro (e.g. finger placement used by individual students, mood, behaviour, body language), to the macro (e.g. which globally famous musician died this week and could be honoured and remembered in song). Ideally, we need to be fully engaged, and let the small moments of observation influence and guide our teaching and session plan. This allows us to better engage with our students and where they are at.

As elusive as the term may be, *intuition* coupled with observation provides an even more powerful way of engaging, both with people's personal skill levels and our own creativity. Observation and intuition are the keys to linking the teacher's skills and knowledge with the learning needs of the ukestran. Unexpected questions (or expected questions!) provide moments where we can take an unexpected turn to explore related topics such as a musical genre, an interesting chord sequence or another chord inversion.

However, we are always careful not to be drawn too much into the needs of one or two specific people. Ideally, we are observant about where individuals are at and use this to decide on the best approach. *Our chief role is to balance the needs of the group and those of the individual*, using observation, intuition and knowledge of our students.

## 6.2 Be clear in your modeling

If we are even vaguely observant, we will notice that people watch us for the example of how to do something. This is not to say that fellow students do not also provide good tutoring. But we are out the front of the group, as leader, coach, and chief motivator. Our speech and pace need to be clear, and our actions visible to all. Keeping an eye on people in the session who are watching us intently, and where they are looking to, is the best guide as to *what* to model. Usually it is the fretting hand, so moving closer to them helps to better display finger and hand position. It is important to not go off in our own little solo world or use complex chord inversions when we should be focused upon assisting people to play things that are more basic. Stay with them.



People also watch us for tempo, for rhythm and for strumming patterns, and so being exaggerated and animated in body movements is useful for keeping people in time. We often articulate strumming patterns vocally as well.

### 6.3 Be well resourced and anticipate teachable moments

The good teacher needs to be well resourced, both internally and externally. We need a suite of relevant materials to hand out – songs, theory sheets, technical explanations – but we also need to have internalised this information so it can be *applied* when we observe that it is *needed*. In other words, we are able to jump in with the relevant knowledge when an unplanned teachable moment appears.

Being resourceful does not mean that we have to create all of the music and information ourselves. The quantity of ukulele-specific information on the internet is enormous, and this connectedness has been central to the popularity of the current ukulele boom. We draw upon this amazing and growing network of resources to reduce our workload, and in turn we encourage students to become more self-reliant and use the internet when searching for their favourite songs.

That being said, there are times when we step out of the ordinary repertoire of ukuleledom, to present a song that is not anywhere to be found on the ukenet. When we identify a new song that we think would be good for a ukestra, chords and lyrics are usually somewhere on the internet, usually written out for guitar. After copying and pasting the lyrics we then format it to ensure that chord shapes (even C major) are on the sheet. Thus even beginners can be aware of how things are supposed to go. Take care to mark your sheets “For Educational Use Only – Not for Sale”.

#### **THIS IS PROBABLY A STUPID QUESTION, BUT ...**

Stupid questions are great markers of teachable moments. Acknowledging them as valid questions is also respectful of the diverse nature of your students’ learning styles. When one person asks a question about something that you assumed they understood or knew, there is bound to be another person with the same question who remained silent. So take the opportunity to think about the answer and address it to the whole group. Private question? Public answer!



## 6.4 Respect and harness what *you* offer as a player

In some cases we feel only just ahead of some of our students' knowledge or skill, or even behind them in certain areas. This can be used to advantage, especially in terms of engaging our passion to teach beginners, and remaining engaged as a teacher generally.

Like many musicians, we experience a sinking feeling when we see performances by incredibly skilled musicians. Instead of surrendering to that feeling, we think it is important to accept our own musical goals and abilities, just as we encourage our students to do.

So when you get that destructive urge to bin your uke, recall where your students are at, and how your own vulnerabilities, deficiencies and needs may be just the thing that inspires them to continue learning.

There are some brilliant musicians who are very poor teachers, probably because they can't remember their own beginner years. So if your own levels of knowledge and skill are not as virtuosic as you would like, a healthy level of empathy may mean you're a good teacher anyway. Perhaps with just a little more playing and practising you could achieve *your* next personal milestone.

But whatever our personal goals as musicians, we need to be very cautious about projecting these onto our students. Many ukestrans want to play music socially so they do not necessarily want to dedicate too much time to practise; they just want to play and have fun now. This common aversion to personal practice is one of the reasons for the success of ukestras – people want to play and socialise with others, but they do not necessarily want to practise by themselves. They come to enjoy, and to learn in a relaxed, low pressure environment. In some ways, this attitude may well be the source of many attendances!

And do not forget the dominant skill of the community musician is the ability to successfully combine musicianship, effective teaching, and community leadership. Be at peace if you are able to achieve this trifecta.

## 6.5 Foster your creativity and maintain your passion

Harnessing our passion and fascination with music helps us to maintain enthusiasm and engagement with our ukestras. Humans need creative endeavours to live fully enriched lives, and it is something that is sadly missing for many



people in contemporary society. Musicians are one step ahead, for they have the tools to be instantly creative, at any moment, yet as a teacher we may feel a little stifled in our creativity. Considering the following aspects helps us to sustain our creative energy and commitment when teaching in a ukestra context.

- **Value the creativity inherent in leading a ukestra.** Think of new ways to ukestrate songs that can accommodate a variety of skill levels. Done well this contributes significantly to our sense of creative expression.
- **Choose repertoire that excites you and keeps you learning and playing.** Success relies on us retaining our own longevity, commitment and vibrancy through connecting in some way with the songs being taught.
- **Keep learning!** They who teach, learn twice. Don't abandon your own hopes and aspirations as a musician. Acknowledge and harness your own learning opportunities within the ukestra context.
- **Have an external creative project and be clear about your boundaries.** As musicians, it is important to have external creative projects in which we can perform and be musically creative with musicians of equivalent or better skills. There can be a lot of interweaving and cross-fertilisation between our ukestra and non-ukestra life. Keep performing, keep writing if this is something you already do.

Our experience in these environments feeds back into the musical knowledge and experience we can offer our ukestras. One clear benefit of this is that we don't feel tempted to hog the microphone at ukestra sessions and performances; rather we seek to foster the performance and microphone skills of our ukestrans, based on the experience and confidence we have built in our non-ukestra lives.

- Finally, there is **immense joy to be had from seeing others learning and growing musically**, and from the social interaction that they are experiencing. We revel in that.

Don't be afraid that your ukestra teaching will stifle your creative spirit – engage it. It is vital.





## OUR CREATIVE PROJECTS [www.jacknjel.com](http://www.jacknjel.com)

Our creative life has evolved over our years of doing ukestras, and certainly preceded it. A 'blurgrass' band – The Do Riders – was our first major creative project together, inspiring Jane on the banjo and keeping Mark gainfully engaged on the guitar and trumpet as well as ukulele. For six years The Do Riders helped us keep our creative mojo sparking with another two ukulele teachers who also played bass, mandolin and guitar. We performed regularly, recorded an EP and album, and wrote original songs. It was great fun, but eventually we parted.

More recently we have focused our creative pursuits upon our duo – Jack n Jel. We travel as a duo, but hire additional musicians when we need a bigger sound at festivals, and also enjoy collaborating with these musicians.

In 2016 we released an [album](#) comprising our own original songs and new interpretations of covers.



### 6.6 Be collaborative, yet in control

The collaborative spirit is an aspect of creativity that we aim to foster with our ukestras. We are in charge, but suggestions for songs and ideas for arrangements are valuable inputs. We like to be collaborative (to an extent) in how we work, whilst ensuring that this spirit is across the group. Our stewardship is a combination of facilitator and leader, so we aim not to focus on one or two talented people. Be careful with it, and walk that fine line.

### 6.7 “Be ready for anything” (*James Hill*)

A good teacher is ready for anything and can be flexible enough to follow the unexpected direction or opportunity that might present itself. Resolving to be rigid about a well-prepared plan hinders teaching during unexpected circumstances. The nature of ukestra teaching and leadership is to expect the unexpected.





## 6.8 Bring your best self

Bringing humour, empathy, patience and compassion to your sessions, as well as your other teaching and leading skills, sets the best example and helps avoid hubris and arrogance.

## 6.9 Summary

The qualities of a good teacher are the qualities of a good ukestra leader. They include being caring, aware, attentive, observant and intuitive. These skills help us engage powerfully, not only with students, but also with our own creativity. Be a good role model, both for playing and teaching, and use your body to convey good posture, timing, strumming patterns and rhythm.

A good teacher is well-resourced both externally (paper/electronic resources/ knowing where stuff is on the net) and internally (knowledge and skills). Tap into the vast amount of instruction, music, lyrics and knowledge out there on the ukenet. A good teacher will make effective use of this by ensuring they are skilled enough to know when to take advantage of teachable moments as they arise.

Accept and respect your own musical goals and abilities, without sliding into complacency, despair or hubris, and your students may well adopt such an attitude to music and the world as well.

Harness your own creativity and passion in music as it will help maintain your engagement with your ukestra. However, you may need to have your own separate creative project that allows you to 'do your thing'.

Be the boss but open to collaboration, other ideas, musical suggestions and even assistance. However, you have the role of benevolent dictator, and the buck stops with your choices and decisions.

Be ready for anything.

Be a good human!



## ACTIONS

1. Keep a record of your teaching. Carefully watch students as you teach. For a time write down your success and failures in a ukestra diary to reflect on your teaching.
2. Identify students in the ukestra who can give you honest feedback about your teaching style.
3. Watch your own playing in a mirror to detect your posture, and to see if you have any technical issues.
4. Be open to so called “stupid questions”. Respond to them respectfully and publicly.
5. Ensure you are sufficiently resourced during sessions and generally as a community musician.
6. Ensure your musical knowledge is relevant to your group.
7. Foster your creativity both within the ukestra and outside of the ukestra and know the difference between the two.



# Chapter 7



# Chapter 7

## THE MUSICAL JOURNEY: FROM BEGINNER TO PERFORMER

We see the role of teachers and leaders of ukestras as helping people on a musical journey, one in which many people start out as complete novices, but may end up being accomplished musical performers. Presumably many teachers and leaders have already completed much of this journey themselves. We are guiding custodians for some of this journey, and a mere companion on other parts as students create and meet their own challenges, often at our behest or suggestion.

In this chapter we describe the pathway to musicianship that we have designed, from beginners workshop to Newkestra (or ukulele entrée), ukestra and beyond. Then we address opportunities that can be created for people to perform and improve their musicianship. The third section reflects on various attributes, skills and benefits that we feel people address when they travel this pathway to being a consummate musician. Thus in some ways we see the progression as being of one from ...

*Ukulele Player ... to ... Performer ... to ... Musician.*

### 7.1 The musical journey starts: beginner to ukestran

Playing in a ukestra is a musical journey for the ukestran, courtesy of the ukulele and singing. That journey is one of learning, developing and expressing a new language – the language of music. There are some structured steps along the way, but the primary means of expressing the musical language is performance. Thus as community leaders we provide performance goals and opportunities that develop musicianship. However, most players need to start with a beginner session before they can get onto the stage.

## 7.2 The beginners workshop

The two-hour beginner workshop is an introduction to the ukulele which is designed to convey the fun of learning and playing music together whilst teaching up to six chords in four to five songs. The pace of our beginners class is relaxed yet methodical, endeavours to take all players along the journey, and conveys right from the start that the ukulele is about fun, collaborative learning and socialising. In general, we find around 25-50% of participants continue on their ukestra journey with us if the initial workshop is kept fairly simple. Our beginners workshop plan can be found in Appendix 2.

After eight years, our beginners workshop is like a scripted show, with elements of spontaneity and personalised interaction with students. We have a certain selection and sequence of songs that we know works, and points that we know we need to convey in order to get people's fingers working, their brain understanding finger placement, chord transition efficiency and strumming patterns. These points generally flow easily, with students asking questions at just the right time, and teachable moments naturally occur as the session progresses.

Since this is the first interaction between uke-curious people and ourselves, our enthusiasm and helpfulness needs to be exemplary. Sometimes friends will attend together, but some may have been coerced. Remain aware of the dynamics and moods of individuals and the class. But overall, if the participants feel comfortable with us, and there is some laughter, two hours (with a break) will fly by.

### FAST-TRACKING FOR GUITARISTS

Experienced guitarists usually don't need a beginners session and can be fast-tracked by a free 90-second ukulele lesson. This involves pointing out that guitar chord shapes are actually the same as those on the ukulele. The key difference is that the ukulele is built like a guitar with only its four top strings and a capo on the 5th fret. That being understood, guitarists are then welcome to join a ukestra session as their fingers already know what they are doing, albeit with a bit of guitar brain which mixes up chord names. However, guitarists who haven't played in some years usually find the beginners workshop instructive and useful to cement ukulele-specific knowledge.

At the end of the beginners workshop we try to present the next step as being easy, enjoyable and to their learning advantage. We emphasise that music is meant to be played together, and if they wait until they have practised sufficiently or ‘caught up’ then it is rare that they will continue playing at all.

We have tried a couple of options for this next step, one being a 6-week ‘ukulele entrée course’ with a fixed curriculum, fixed term and fixed price, unlike our uketen (ten prepaid sessions can be taken at any time throughout a year). This worked well for us for many years. However, at present we offer a weekly ‘Newkestra’ that caters for the needs of novices rather well. The Newkestra is a ukestra designed exclusively for beginners. Which model you adopt depends on your students’ needs and your availability.

### 7.3 Ukulele Entrée

Comprised of six 105-minute obligatory sessions, Ukulele Entrée was held over consecutive weeks. You may vary the length of class and the number of weeks, but we found this length of time worked well for us and our students. It was designed to be an incremental journey of ukulele skills.

Each week included songs that develop strumming, finger placement and singing abilities. The second week introduced the C scale (in the home position) and even included a guide to reading musical notation. We introduced simple parts (e.g a simple ostinato) for songs. By the third week we introduced the dreaded Bb chord (in the key of F) and in the fourth week, a classical piece (*Purcell’s Canon*). At all times the emphasis was on enjoyment and moving at a pace participants would find comfortable and not confronting. Our aim was to lift student confidence to a level where they could more easily move into a ukestra.

To facilitate this shift we offered one free ukestra session in the week that they attend the ukulele entrée course. We found that at the end of entrée around 30-50% of participants continued into a ukestra.

Some people felt, however, that entrée was too short and consistently requested that the easy pace of learning continue before they entered a ukestra. When we did extend the duration of entrée (to create ukulele entrée 2) the class size kept reducing in size and it quickly became financially unviable. And so Newkestra – the perpetually easy ukestra – was born.

## 7.4 The Newkestra – a ukestra for new players

Newkestra is a ukestra session which, theoretically, stays in a permanent limbo-land of beginner or novice instruction. We say ‘theoretically’ because, as time goes on, and the culture and community of the group grows, it becomes very difficult not to cater for the continuing curiosity and desire to take the group beyond the skill level of the novice. The pace is easy, slow, and accessible, with a high amount of instruction and a high teacher-to-student ratio. The Saturday morning Newkestra is now our most popular session with 35-50 students consistently, and has been running at capacity for almost two years.

It is generally staffed with two leaders who each take half of the session and play bass for the other half. We ask beginners to sit in one particular section of the session (‘stage right’) with an assistant teacher allocated to that section, helping with fretting and questions, and calling out the chord changes. There is often an additional assistant who helps the more experienced students. We provide a PA as well, and unlike other ukestras, teach from a stage, much like a concert or performance. Students are always asked to take lead vocals on microphone.

We think the Newkestra model is more successful than the entrée course for a few reasons. Ukulele entrée had a very ‘classroom instruction’ feel about it, with a specific curriculum to progress through during the session. It was more expensive (than a ukestra) in order to keep the class size small. With the Newkestra we have instantly given people access to the relaxed and social method of teaching in a ukestra style, with the same casual attendance and cheaper pricing structure of a 2-hour ukestra. This bodes well for recruitment into the other ukestras, which despite our best efforts, are still perceived as ‘audition-only’ or ‘too difficult for me’.

We consistently encourage people who have been attending for six months or more to consider migrating to another ukestra. However, what we find (ironically) is that although they may attend another ukestra, the Newkestra becomes their second ukestra in a week. It seems to be the case that many skilled players love its slow pace and social environment.

As teachers, this is our most challenging ukestra because of the different levels of players attending – from absolute novice to skilled. The challenge is to maintain our own interest, to keep finding new repertoire at the novice level, and to accommodate skilled players (perhaps by asking them to improvise)



amongst a group of novice players. However, the focus and attention at Newkestra is always on the new player and the repertoire always remains easy.

## 7.5 Ukestra sessions

The structure and content of a ukestra session has already been discussed in Chapter 4. The standard ukestra is designed to accommodate all levels of players, from novice to skilled, however most new players are reluctant to join in until they have attained a certain level of confidence and ability. We are constantly reassuring new players that they are welcome in any ukestra, and that we'll always attempt to include them in as many songs as possible.

Generally in a ukestra, regular attendees have well-established places to sit. When new players come along, we try to pair them up with a more experienced player who is open to being helpful, but not overbearing. This assists us from having to focus too much on the new person. Influxes of newbies also reminds us to keep returning to simple songs within the session plan so that the new player does not get too frustrated or left behind. We find that the old hands generally enjoy relaxing into these songs, or reviewing specific techniques within the context of an old standard.

## 7.6 The musical journey continues: create performance opportunities

We create opportunities and build expectations for a variety of performance situations in order to help students improve their skills. We broadly define 'performing' to include the presentation of skills to oneself as well as to others. Performance is integral to the development of musicianship, for as the elder statesman of Canadian ukulele education, Chalmers Doane reputedly said:

*'If music is a language then performing is speaking that language.'*

Doane's goal has been to build the musical literacy of children in classroom education settings, but his principles can also be applied to the adult ukestra. We feel it very important to provide numerous and varied performance opportunities for the ukestra and for individuals. We've identified nine types of performance opportunity that can help enhance skills, maximise enjoyment and focus learning, grouped in order of perceived difficulty.

### **Easiest**

- a) Singing or playing lead ukulele on microphone at a ukestra session
- b) Recording a ukestra session and putting this on social media (e.g. Facebook or Soundcloud)
- c) Low-key ukestra performances in the community (i.e. performing with a large group of people)

### **Medium**

- a) Solo or small group performances at ukestra sessions
- b) Ukestra performances at festivals and ticketed events
- c) Open mic events for individuals, at festivals

### **Hardest**

- a) Playing at family rituals and gatherings
- b) Developing and leading a group
- c) Solo performance at a ticketed concert

Each opportunity has its own merits. The first two are the easiest to organise and the least confronting for the player, because they happen inside a regular ukestra session. However, others require us to find performance opportunities for the ukestra or, at the most challenging level, for ukestrans to initiate and organise performances for themselves (and their colleagues).

The aim of the ukestra is to *speak the language of music*, rather than focus upon individual excellence or perfection. Mere participation in a musical environment may be sufficient for some as a performance opportunity. The whole basis of the Ukestra Method is to help people to better enjoy their own music-making, improve their participation with others, and contribute to the musical richness of their community. Virtuosity and precision will most probably not be their primary goal!

### **a) Singing lead or playing lead ukulele on microphone at a ukestra session**

We use a small PA at our ukestras, and encourage all individuals to have a go at singing lead on a song, or for those more shy, singing in a duet. This experience needs to be shared around. Unless there are extenuating circumstances, no one person should have more than one to two lead vocal opportunities at any one session, for even the most inexperienced singers are given the opportunity to sing lead on microphone. We are gentle and kind about this, and give people positive feedback on how they went. We also encourage people to play riffs or to play lead breaks on mic. For some people such a 'performance' will be an enormous personal achievement – do not underestimate the personal importance of 'the first time I ever sang or played on microphone'.

### **b) Recording the group sound at a ukestra session**

There is no better way to focus the attention of a particular ukestra session than to record a performance of a particular piece with the overt mission of sharing on the internet. Soundcloud is one useful resource we have used, but the landscape is constantly changing as YouTube and Facebook become more 'live feed friendly'. Some people place an inordinate importance on 'going on the internet'. Once published, the links can then be distributed via social media or email. We suspect that the success of our own recent initiative, the One Song Sing, is primarily built upon our filming and distributing the end product on YouTube. People love seeing or hearing themselves on the net, and similar initiatives in Canada (Choir! Choir! Choir!) and Brisbane (Pub Choir) are likewise testament to the power of video.

### **c) Low-key community performances by the ukestra**

From time to time, our ukestra is invited to perform at local community events, e.g. cruise ship welcomes, school or church fetes, markets, nursing homes, and gallery openings. Sometimes we chase up such gigs without waiting for an invitation. Such performances are casual affairs, with the main message being that we are here to enjoy ourselves, a message reinforced by colourful and individual dressing rather than a formal uniform. We aim to attract a diversity of players to attend by avoiding complex and difficult songs. But however much we may treat (and promote) these as relaxed affairs, for some players this opportunity is seen as a giant leap and challenge. We reassure everyone that there is safety in numbers, and that they can hide towards the back if they get stage fright.

As the director, we will usually ask event organisers for a professional payment since we are the drivers of a dynamic and attractive performance. They may not always be forthcoming, but it is worth asking. It is important for us to value ourselves in this way, and to consider what other value there may be in participating. We always hear new students saying Oh! I saw you at such 'n' such public performance and it just looked like so much fun that I wanted to be a part of it! ... public relations accomplished!

#### **d) Solo performances at a ukestra session**

During ukestra sessions we often allocate five minutes (perhaps during the break) to any ukestran who wants to develop their personal performance skills. This means just one song only (per ukestra session) and only occasionally. No one person should consistently take advantage of this opportunity. In these situations we will often provide some constructive feedback to the performer, but we frame it in such a way that others can also benefit from the comments. On our part, this can require judicious moderation of the performance so as not to bore the other ukestrans. We do not want to take too much away from the primary purpose that people expect from a ukestra session – to play music together.

#### **e) Ukestra performances at festivals and ticketed events**

Ukestra performances at festivals and special concerts are the pinnacle of performance achievement that we aim for as group leaders. These sorts of events are very effective for focusing players' skills and for bringing people together. We select songs that (in the main) are ukestrated, to ensure wide participation and an entertaining performance. We ensure that people are committed to attending and rehearsing, and to playing their chosen parts, whether they are beginner parts or more skilled parts. We select a lead singer (and a backup) but we are conscious that the buck stops with us if the skill level is not there. Only rarely have we resorted to having ourselves as lead singers. The last time was in 2011!

We also run dedicated rehearsals for these gigs which are separate from normal ukestra sessions. We charge a separate rehearsal fee because there is inevitably a considerable amount of work associated with rehearsals and related organisational tasks.

### **f) Open mic events at festivals**

We actively encourage our ukestrans to attend and perform at community and festival open mic events. We advertise these opportunities to our students so they can perform in relatively low-key situations.

### **g) Playing at a family ritual and/or gathering**

Playing for family and friends is important for some ukestrans, and can be one of the most challenging and rewarding 'performance' opportunities. This step is probably much more related to a person's sense of self-worth and pride, so it is important to foster that in the ukestra context. As community musicians we see this as one of the most important aspects of our work, essentially helping to foster the return of family music-making.

We encourage people to perform just a few songs at family gatherings, where it is appropriate, and to keep it short and suitable for the audience. Naturally we also encourage them to know the songs well enough to play by heart. *Happy Birthday* is the obvious starting point (!), but people may eventually aim for a meaningful song at a special event such as a funeral, baptism, marriage or naming day.

### **h) Developing and leading their own ukulele group**

Successful music-making in the community requires leadership. If we are committed to this principle, then we also need to be comfortable with fostering leadership amongst our ukestrans so that they too can play and perform *without us*. If we are honest, this is a challenging aspect of what we do, especially as we are a business. Skilling people up to potentially leave and form their own groups is rather counter-intuitive to what we might otherwise regard as commercial success! But ethically, this is the correct attitude, and if we are confident with what we have to offer and will continue to offer, then all should be well.

We have had numerous groups form and split off from our own endeavours, and sometimes these have taken a significant amount of business away from our ukestras. These are predominantly large hum'n'strum groups that seek to perform in nursing homes and local community events. These groups cost very little or nothing to attend, and usually involve relatively little teaching. Alternatively some people have formed small amateur groups. Often members of both these types of groups still participate in a ukestra, seeking skill advancement and expert tuition that is seldom found within volunteer ukulele groups.

To be clear, the establishment of such groups is a *key measure of success*. We are proud that people decide to get out there and perform without us, and that they lead and organise musical get-togethers beyond our influence and direction. This is truly what community music is all about.

### **i) Solo or band performance at a ticketed concert**

This is the ultimate goal for many a musician – to be paid for your music, and attain semi-professional status. Some of our students have reached this level but many keep returning to ukestra for their continued learning and friendships. It is this community that will be the core of their audience and public support, at least initially.

We encourage aspiring soloists and professionals to film themselves for self-assessment, and to promote themselves via platforms like YouTube and Facebook. Utilised well and respectfully, such videos can also be good testimonials for our work and the broader value of the Ukestra Method of learning.

## **7.7 Moving through performance towards musicianship**

We provide milestones on the journey to musical performance, as well as encouragement, guidance and knowledge regardless of where students are on that journey. However, the final goal is much more nuanced than performance goals reflect, for it is ultimately about inculcating competent and respectful musicianship. Developing qualities such as musical precision, a listening ear, dynamics and tone, will all help facilitate a richer and more meaningful musical journey. The following are reflections on what seeking better musicianship means for us, and in turn, for our guidance of ukestrans.

### **Listening – to yourself, to other players**

The ability and choice to listen, and the sensitivity and taste to respond appropriately, is the most critical musicianship skill. Unfortunately this quality is even quite rare amongst many accomplished musicians. The best musicians listen, and respond appropriately – to themselves, to their instrument, to their fellow musicians, and to their audience. Responding beautifully is only achieved through listening well at these various levels.



## WHERE WILL YOU GO?

We have organised our ukestras to play at music and ukulele festivals regionally, interstate and overseas (Hawai'i and Aotearoa/New Zealand). People's motivations for participation vary enormously. The Hawai'i Ukulele Festival is perhaps the most intriguing, with our main performance being only 10 minutes. It costs each participant several thousand dollars, kilometres and hours for that 10 minutes of performance time! People are clearly in it for the experience, and they use the festival as a catalyst for a holiday and a chance to hang out with fellow ukulele players. For many this makes the fear of travel easier. We do not arrange flights, accommodation or transfers but we do give people a really good purpose to go to a place, whether it is Melbourne, Canberra, Brisbane, Waikiki or Opotiki. We write the festival applications, and provide the music, arrangements, rehearsals and festival details. We make it happen.



*Combined ukestras of Newcastle and other parts of Australia, or 'Ukestralia', with Hawai'i Ukulele Festival director Roy Sakuma*



Encourage people to listen to themselves. They may have the nostalgic memory of the song but they also need to listen to how it actually sounds when they play: for which chord change is expected next, the beat, and the sensitivity of strumming; for how well the chords are being produced and the sound coming out of the instrument; and for melodies, phrasing, tonality, pitch and the potential for harmonies in singing.

Listening to other players is also one of the most important things we can teach. We can only play well with others if we listen to what we are all playing. Discuss and consider with your ukestra all of the qualities mentioned in the paragraph above, particularly in relation to tempo (playing in time with each other), dynamics (which parts need to be softer/louder) and vocal harmonies.

Listening to the audience is more than giving the audience what they want, although it is that too. Perhaps here we are talking more about respecting the audience so that we can give them more than *we* want. Providing a good show involves selecting appropriate repertoire, providing variety and diversity in what is presented, and being aware when the audience have had enough of what we are doing. 'Always think of your audience' is a good maxim for anyone, but especially musicians.

### **Focus on dynamics, volume, tone, pitch and feel**

Focusing on dynamics, volume, tone, pitch and feel compels players to listen to themselves and others. Make group decisions (though the buck stops with the boss) about how a riff should be played: staccato, softly, legato, building in volume. These (and many others) are all terms with which aspiring musicians should be familiar, if not with the language, then with the intent. Use this language when describing vocal arrangements too. Overall we are trying to get them to *feel* the music and express it!

### **Soloing**

Soloing is the ultimate expression and combination of the skill of listening, the mastery of the technique of an instrument and music theory. We often need to remind ukestrans that solos are different to instrumentals, and if they are accompanying (with chords), that they should not stop playing chords, but rather, play more quietly.

### Memory – use it or lose it!

In different contexts we encourage ukestrans to play without their music and music stands, particularly for major performances. It is imperative (at least occasionally) to wrestle the written music out of their grasp if we are to help develop the “ear” and to grow musicianship. Relying on written-out music every time means that memory is not being engaged as much as possible, either physiologically or intellectually. Physiologically, exercising memory is shown to work against the onset of the symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease. Intellectually, using memory helps to retain and recall information such as the order of common chord sequences, how to fret a difficult chord, or how a scale or riff is played.

We want to be teaching people musicianship; we do not want them just to be reading lyrics and chords. But whilst we endeavour to promote high expectations for our students, we also need to retain a realistic attitude about what can be attained and achieved, and how they want to enjoy music. It’s a delicate balance!

### Avoid the cult of ‘The Book’

In the general ukulele community, there is a dominant practice that works against developing higher levels of musicianship – the cult of *The Book*. “Turn to page 54”, someone yells, a weak sort of count-in may occur, and then everyone is singing and strumming that song. Whilst this can bring people joy, it represents a significant impediment to improving musicianship and skills.

It is not *The Book* per se that is the culprit, but rather the *cult* of *The Book*. Teaching good musicianship in a ukestra style requires much more than ‘eyes on the book’ (or more recently, ‘all eyes on the screen’). It also requires much more than the perpetual beginners’ struggle with the replication of chords and their transitions.

Of course such ‘book’ sessions provide practice hours, but their key objective seems primarily to replicate a feeling of reverie, rather than to advance musicianship. A song is played through once, as written, and then the next is selected. Occasionally someone will say, “Oh let’s play it again so we get it a little better”, however, that is a rare moment.



Without the curation and direction of a community musician, the cult of The Book works against good learning. In particular, it seems to work against good listening, soloing, arranging, learning and practising good technique, developing memory skills, and understanding musical theory. There is a whole suite of musicianship skills and attributes that are avoided or ignored.

## 7.8 Summary

We structure the ukestran's journey through incremental learning, starting with the beginners workshop, through Newkestra, and into regular ukestras. A student is welcome to select their own level of learning.

The aim of the Ukestra Method is to carry students on a *journey to better musicianship*, not on a journey that is solely about learning how to play songs. Having said that, because this is a repertoire-focused approach, the journey to better musicianship is inherently one in which repertoire is learned. We see this as an incredibly positive outcome.

We also create performance opportunities for our students, within the ukestra, and at festivals and events. We also encourage ukestrans to find their own audience, both in the home and elsewhere.

We gently guide our ukestrans to understand the nuances of music, including listening to others, focusing on dynamics (including tempo), volume, tone, pitch and feel, and the importance of memorising songs for a performance.

## ACTIONS

1. Design a graphic for a beginners workshop that can be used on a poster and in social media. Advertise up to a month in advance. Depending on demand, we have one every month or fortnight.
2. Explain to your students their options after a beginners workshop, whether you decide to use an Entrée course or Newkestra style type learning. Hand out pamphlets to the session so they know the dates, times and venue of future sessions. Send follow-up emails detailing options, and give the website links for details.

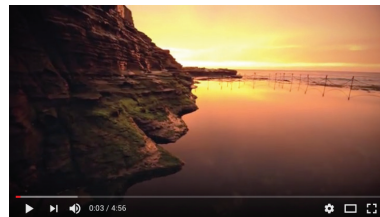
3. Create performance events for ukestrans, within the ukestra session and without. Find community events at which the ukestra can perform. Be inventive about this; charity functions, community radio, markets, festivals and gallery openings are just a few ideas. Train up the ukestra to a realistic performance goal for the event.
4. You will need various levels of performance opportunities during the year for the ukestra, from easy and relaxed events where people can sit and use their music stands, to ticketed concerts where people are required to stand in ensemble formation and know their music by heart.
5. Avoid the 'cult of the book' in your sessions. Curate! Ask ukestrans to know some songs by heart, to listen to themselves and others as they play, to experiment with dynamics, volume and tone. But most importantly to feel the song and think about the expression and delivery required to make it sound great!



These four videos show the diversity of performance opportunities we have provided for the Ukestrans over the years.



*Our first ever festival performance – [Catch My Disease](#) with Danielle Scott (editor of this manual) on lead vocals at the 2011 Melbourne Ukulele Festival.*



*[Royals](#) – a professionally produced video by Groovy Banana from 2014. Financed through an online crowd funding initiative.*

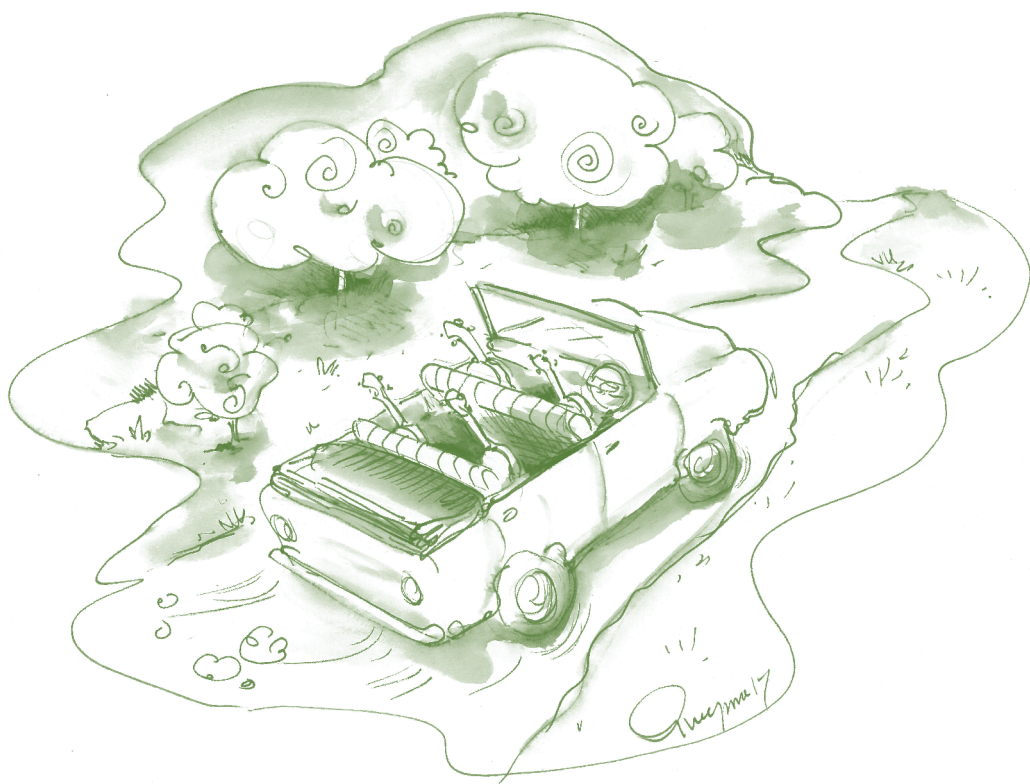


*[Somebody that I used to know](#) – featuring junior ukestrans. From the 2015 National Lions Convention in Newcastle's beautiful Civic Theatre.*



*[Kiss](#) – an entertaining lead singer and a tight strumming pattern.*

# Chapter 8



# Chapter 8

## CONCLUSION

This book has been written because people asked ‘how do you do that?’, and because our experience is that the Ukestra Method of teaching and facilitating music-making communities actually works. Ukestration is at the core of this method, but so too are the elements of community leadership, effective teaching practice and the musical journey that we describe.

A ukestra is an opportunity to create much needed and vibrant ‘third places’ in our communities, places of acceptance, non-judgement and social interaction. Over the last eight years we have experienced this viscerally, where we have helped to re-energise empty venues by using the ukulele as a community lynch pin. But to make this happen, a community leader is required. A leader who can be a good steward, administer pastoral care, look after themselves, *and* take musical responsibility.

We recommend you try the Four Column Approach, if only to be clear in your own mind what songs work, when, and in what way. Perhaps you will even improve on this or modify it in some way that works better for you. A Ukestra Method session will contain a blend of songs from all four categories with a heavy reliance on relaxing songs to give breaks from the focused learning. The pace of the session will vary from easy to more focused, and back to easy again.

A general lesson plan is useful, even for the casual learning environment of the ukestra. However, a good teacher must be acutely observant, prepared to be flexible and ready for anything during a session. This could include dropping or changing the class plan depending on the needs of the students.

Try ukestrating your own songs – arrange and perform songs for a ukestra, providing parts for all levels of players. Listen to a song, identify the driving riffs and have a go at creating a sound that is much more than hum ‘n’ strum. Most of all, avoid the ‘cult of the book’. Your role is to curate the songs into a learning experience. Move the ukestrans off the page (and their visual sense) and into their musical ears.





Finally, get them onto a stage. Performance is the expression of learning music. When we have 20-70 people performing together on a stage at festival, we know we've done our work well. But getting to that stage required many steps. We first had to provide people with a welcome front door, a path into a musical community. We then, usually, taught them their first musical steps. Along the musical journey there is so much to learn (and we are eternally learning ourselves) but in the end the main skill we want people to know is how to *listen*.

And after you have encouraged your ukestrans to be part of the music-making community that you presided over, be prepared to let them go as they hopefully move onto other projects, instruments, and sessions. Some will create their own ukulele groups, others will join a band and some will finally take the plunge to take up another instrument that they have always wanted to play. This is the natural outcome of good teaching and community leadership. It is so much better than the alternative, where they abandon their musical desires or give up because it's too hard!

To finish this book (and as a lead-in to the next) we return to the three essentials of the Ukestra Method:

**Music:** teach people the skills to make music.

**Community:** create social communities through that music.

**Sustainability:** operate within a structure that affords long-term personal and/or financial sustainability.

For us, sustainability is our community music business, The Sum of the Parts (music). Some 'purists' (who have good jobs) initially scoffed at our desire to make this a business. We know that what we do is fairly unusual, if not unique, in this uke-world. If you know others who have achieved similar successes with a similar business model, we'd love to be connected with them.

Our sustainability is built upon the fact that we *need* to make a living from this, and the prospect that perhaps one day we can hand on a viable business to our successors. We have built business systems that put community, music and sustainability on an equal footing. Some would call this a 'social enterprise', but we just call it good business, and something that comes from a commitment to social and cultural responsibility.



If you are interested in the financial and systems aspects of how we have built this business, please read our companion manual *The Business of being a Community Musician*.

At the very least we hope that *The Ukestration Manual* has inspired you to:

1. Take the plunge into running your own ukestra/s and consider how to start an ukulele community.
2. Reflect on how you are teaching and leading your ukulele community, and how you might be able to do it better.
3. Inform how you may do other types of community music-making, by reflecting upon our ukulele musings.

If you are already a musician, we hope the book has helped you reflect on the possible role you could play in helping others to make music.

Go on, be a Community Musician. The world needs more of us.



## REFERENCES

pg 5

Waldman, J. (2017). *How to Start and Grow an Ukulele Group: An Easy Plan for Spreading Aloha in Your Town*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

Putnam, Robert D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

pg 9

Kaiser Permanente. (2017). *Uke Can Do It: Musical Groups Help Colleagues Thrive*. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://share.kaiserpermanente.org/article/uke-can-musical-groups-help-colleagues-thrive/>

pg 11

Oldenburg, R. (1989). *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*. Boston: Da Capo Press.

pg 48

Mammoth Gardens. (2017). *Ukulele Circle of Fifths*. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.mammothgardens.com/uke/UkuleleCircleOfFifths.pdf>

pg 54

YouTube. (2017). *Price Tag - Ukastle Ukestra (Jessie J cover)*. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysR8ohSFZkU&feature=youtu.be>

pg 63

Bandcamp. 2017. *Jack n Jel album release*. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://jacknjel.bandcamp.com/releases>



## Advice for those performing

1. Follow instructions from the performance director at rehearsals and performances.
2. During a performance watch the director and hear your fellow performers. Be aware of the audience and interact – with your eyes, with your smile, with the music you are playing.
3. At the earliest rehearsals, try to do parts that you find challenging and that advance your skills. Practise these at home, but approaching performance, decide which part (refer to #4 below) you are successfully contributing to the group sound and STICK to it.
4. Acknowledge your limitations in a performance situation and play a part that you can successfully deliver.
5. Feel free to discuss your options, limitations and aspirations with the performance director.
6. There are heavenly rewards for those who successfully play complex parts ... however, the single chord thumb strum is not only a vital component of a ukestra performance, but a noble and important thing!
7. Aim to perform without a music stand. If you need to see music or lyrics consider options such as a condensed version taped to the back of a very cooperative and considerate person in front of you, or a uke-borne music holder.
8. If you learn your part and the arrangement, it allows you to engage better with your fellow musicians and the audience. It is also excellent memory practice – your mental fitness is like your physical fitness, use it or lose it!
9. Join the Folk Club to cover your legal obligations and to be part of a broader musical community.
10. Sing!

## CONTACTS

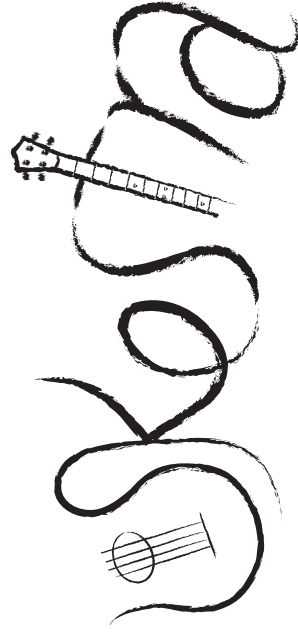
[www.thesumoftheparts.com.au](http://www.thesumoftheparts.com.au)

**Mark Jackson**  
(founder and ukestra leader)  
[mark@ukestra.com](mailto:mark@ukestra.com)

**Jane Jelbart**  
(co-founder ukestra  
and choir leader)  
[jane@ukestra.com](mailto:jane@ukestra.com)



*making music part of your life!*



WELCOME!



*making music part of your life!*

# What is a Ukestra?

A ukestra is a ukulele orchestra.

Our ukestras are fun, low stress and entertaining places to learn music together. Teachers from The Sum of the Parts (music) are experienced musicians who encourage you to find your own level of achievement.

Making music together is the perfect antidote to the feeling that you will never be able to play music. You can.

What's more, you'll enjoy the company of others.

Talk to us about the various options that exist for performing. It will push you that little bit further (if that's what you want).

Read on for what you can expect from us and what we expect from you.

## What you can expect from a Ukestra

- Tuition in ukulele techniques, music theory, singing and performance skills.
- A session which is diverse and tries to meet the needs of different skill levels from beginner to advanced players.
- A low stress environment – you come here to relax and learn. So do we!
- A ukestra leader who actively assesses the needs of individual students and flexibly endeavours to tailor the program to those needs.
- Reasonably expert knowledge – yes, we know a lot, but sometimes we make mistakes. In some instances the best teachers can be your fellow students!
- If we don't know the answer to your question, we will attempt to supply a more informed response the next week.
- A lesson plan that is subject to change (depending upon who attends and what their needs are on the day).
- We provide performance opportunities locally, interstate and yes, we've been to Hawaii!
- Time for socialising with an engaged and informed ukulele community.
- We encourage you to connect with others outside of ukestra sessions. However, it's up to you to share your contact details and we will not share that information with other members without your consent.

## What we expect from you

- Your active participation.
- To play (and sing) nicely with others – *sensitively* enough so that you blend with the group sound, but *strongly* enough so that you and we can hear. We can then be better equipped to help you improve.
- Respect – for others' level of skill and ability, and for them as human beings. There are people here from all walks of life, lifestyles and political persuasions.
- To listen – to the ukestra leader and to each other.
- Observe group etiquette and follow instructions (e.g. don't play when the ukestra leader is talking)
- To help others where they welcome that assistance. However, have sensitivity when they do not want help.
- When you are soloing, go for it! Make mistakes. Improve. Don't repeat the same mistake twice (unless it sounds good!).
- To leave your cares at the door and enjoy yourself. Music is great therapy but ukestra leaders are not therapists.
- To tell us when you think you've had enough and won't be coming back. This is perfectly understandable in so many ways – you may have learned/gained all that you were seeking, have health issues, be moving away or going on extended holidays – we just like to know because we care and wonder!

*continued overleaf*

## APPENDIX 2

### Beginners Workshop programme (2-hour session)

This is a typical lesson plan we use for our Beginners Workshop. It incorporates the Ukestra Method and also covers the basics of “how to play a ukulele”. We offer it as a template that can be used and modified for your own beginners workshop.

First things first. Make sure all ukuleles are in tune and playable, especially those of people who say ‘mine is already tuned’.

#### Introduction

The following points set the scene and give participants important background knowledge prior to playing:

- The historical and cultural context of the ukulele. This includes the Madeiran immigrants, the Hawaiian people, and more recently, the instrument’s global popularity.
- The ukulele’s enormous worldwide resurgence is due to its playability, accessibility and usefulness as a tool for bringing people together.
- The parts of the instrument – the body, neck, bridge, nut, frets, and fret wires. Ask participants to count the frets on their instrument.
- Describe how to hold the ukulele, the position of the strumming arm and fretting hand while plucking the strings.

#### Teaching the strings (notes)

- Explain re-entrant tuning and go through the string (note) names, G C E A, using an entertaining mnemonic such as Goats Can Eat Anything, or George Clooney Eats Apples.
- Ask participants to name each string as they play them individually with their thumb; then explain the difference between notes and chords.



## SKILL 1 – Fretting the chords C, Am and F

- After playing the strings, move onto one-finger chords – C and Am – and explain how to read a chord diagram.
- Ensure that the C chord is played with the 3rd finger, while the Am is played with the middle finger (2nd), establishing the importance of sequencing fingers, and the “finger-to-fret rule” – the first (index) finger belongs on the first fret, the second on the second fret, and so on.

The benefit of this is made apparent by playing an Am followed by an F chord. When the Am is played with the second finger, changing to the F chord simply requires adding the first finger to the first fret of the E string (and leaving the second finger where it is).

- The postcode system of describing chord fretboard shapes can be introduced here (i.e. C chord is 0003, F chord is 2010, Am is 2000). This system works well for some people, but not all!

**Strumming is not explained at this stage, as it is a skill that can be explored after the first song is learnt. We reckon that successfully engaging people in music-making relies upon teaching them sufficient skills to sing and play a song within fifteen minutes.**

## SONG 1 – *Deep in the Heart of Texas*

This a quintessential beginners’ song.

- It has only two chords and each verse has fun “clap clap clap clap” sections followed by no strumming. This gives players plenty of time to change chords whilst singing *‘Deep in the heart of’*. *‘Texas’* is the signal to begin strumming the next chord.
- The song is repetitive and holds each chord for a significant amount of time, very quickly establishing muscle memory.
- It is initially played in the key of F, which involves the F and C chords.

The Sum of the Parts (music) version has a modulation to G. Ignore this the first time through and focus on getting participants to move their fingers effectively between F and C.

**Having established the idea of muscle memory in the fretting hand, the next question people often have is, “*how do I strum properly?*”**

## SKILL 2 – The strumming hand

### *The Ukulele Players' Pledge*

The 'Pledge' invokes the social nature of the instrument and fosters respect for others. It also helps teach initial strumming technique.

- Ask participants to hold their strumming hand up like a stop sign.
- Then, ask them to point only their index finger forward. The other fingers are still extended to the sky.
- Request them to repeat after you:

**I Will. Play Nice. With Others.**

- Plus the optional:

**And I say this in the People's Key of C.**

- With the finger positions still intact, ask participants to tilt their hand over, until the index finger points to themselves, and the other fingers are pointing to the ground.
- A downstrum is then executed (on a C chord), illustrating that it is the **nail** which makes contact with the strings.

Of course, this hand position will, with time, become more relaxed, but the exercise emphasises that the head of the nail takes the main impact of the downstrum, not the side of the finger or the cuticle.

- Next demonstrate the upstrum being played with the pad of the finger. Metaphors such as *'pretend there is a drop of oil on the end of your index finger that you are trying to shake off'* can help people further visualise the necessary strumming action across the strings.





## SONG 2 - *Jambalaya* (or any other easy two-chord song)

*Jambalaya* is a two-chord song that moves quickly (every two bars) between the D and A chords. The swiftness of the chord changes is entirely different to the extended break within *Deep in the Heart of Texas*.

Because of this rapid change, using a D6 chord instead of a D chord can be much easier for beginners. We refer to it as the 'Cheats' D'.

- The A chord is executed with the first and second fingers gently curved onto the fretboard
- The D (D6) chord is executed by simply laying the second finger across all the strings at the second fret. There is no need to remove the first (index) finger from the first fret.
- If anyone asks '*but won't it make it sound bad if I leave it there?*' you've been gifted with a question which can be the opening for a teachable moment!
- There is also an opportunity to emphasise how similar (in terms of chord shape) the F & A chords are, and that they should not be mixed up.

Precision is not so important at this stage. Rather, the aim is for people to begin playing (and singing along), in a group, as quickly as possible, and for them to experience the joy associated with this achievement.

## SONG 3 - *Rhiannon*

Fleetwood Mac's *Rhiannon* has just 3 chords (Am, F and C) and is therefore very accessible to beginners.

The Sum of the Parts (music) arrangement includes a tab of the well-known riff, which gives an opportunity to explain the ukestration approach, and that a single song can provide learning and performance opportunities for all levels. However, the riff itself is not taught during a Beginners' Workshop.

## Sizes and types of ukuleles

Around an hour into the workshop, participants are given a break from playing and are shown the three standard sizes of ukuleles (soprano, concert and tenor). Participants will often bring a range of ukuleles to the workshop themselves.

It is also a chance to demonstrate a wider diversity of instruments such as 8-string, banjolele, baritone and soprano ukuleles if you have them available and it gives people a chance to relax and listen.



## Short break

After the first hour, there is a break for around 10 mins which is both a relief from intense learning, and a chance to chat to each other.

## FIRST STRUMMING EXERCISE - Single Chord Thumb Strum (SCTS)

Briefly revisit one of the previous songs to introduce the SCTS – i.e. a single strum using the flesh of the thumb, on the first beat of the bar.

It takes the focus away from strumming and allows for precision in fretting, fingering and intonation.

## Introduce the G chord

Introducing the G chord often prompts complaints about fingers not fitting and mumbles of “*how am I expected to do this?*” Perseverance and encouragement will see most people come to terms with their difficulties.

Using the G chord for the following strumming exercise is one way to help people become more familiar with it.

## SECOND STRUMMING EXERCISE - Strumming Patterns

Until now, songs have been used to demonstrate new techniques.

- We use an exercise by Mike Da Silva of the [Berkeley Ukulele Club](#) to illustrate a range of strum patterns. These include the: on-beat, off-beat, ‘Latin strum’, and others.
- The aim is to help people build rhythmic muscle memory by using: the discipline of Mike’s exercise; playing with others; and exploring different types of strums.

It is often a difficult skill to teach, partly because effective rhythm is so much about feel, but also because it is additional to learning chords, changing chords (at the right time) and singing.

## Using the G chord in a song

Return to *Deep in the Heart of Texas* to include the modulation which requires playing G and D.

Modulating from F to G also introduces the idea of key changes, and their ability to build excitement in a song.



## FINAL SONG - *Runaround Sue* (or any easy Doo Wop song)

*Runaround Sue* is an easy I, vi, IV, V song, useful for demonstrating finger efficiency in chord transitions.

- Emphasise that it is chord transitions, not chord shapes as such, which are important for creating music and playing well. The importance of adhering to the finger-to-fret rule is illustrated by this song.
- The transitions between the chords can be described as:

**C chord** - use the third finger on the third fret of the A string (starting position),

**Am chord** - the middle finger reaches (scout) over the strings to the second fret of the G string (stretch),

**F chord** - keep the middle finger anchored in place (where it was already playing the Am) and add the first (index) finger on the E string (anchor and add),

**G7 chord** - pivot on the first (index) finger to transition to the G7 (pivot),

**Back to C chord** - slide the third finger up to the third fret (slide).

- Identifying finger transitions is the key learning point from this, with 'scout', 'stretch', 'add', 'pivot' and 'slide' all being useful words to describe the transitions between chords.

## Finish by playing all four songs again

If there is time at the end of the session, take the opportunity to play all four songs again.

- Participants will now be familiar with the string names, have an idea of how to hold the uke, know a few chords and how to strum.
- At the end of the session discuss where to buy a new ukulele and what classes and opportunities are available.
- It is important to have follow-on information for workshop participants after this session, for example a weekly newkestra or ukestra that they can attend. Capitalise on people's initial enthusiasm so that they keep playing!



## Checklist of items to take to the Beginners Workshop

- List of people who have registered for the workshop
- Sufficient ukuleles for those who have said they need to borrow one, plus extras including left-handed ukes
- A tuner for yourself, plus tuners to sell (easily bought in bulk from China – via Alibaba or Ali Express)
- Song sheets for each person
- If your venue doesn't have tables, you'll need a music stand for each person
- A handout detailing where and when local ukulele group/s meet during the week
- Any relevant stock that you might want to sell e.g. books, ukuleles, music stands
- James Hill has an excellent beginner book called *Booster Ukulele, Beyond Beginner in 10 Lessons* that can be a useful resource for participants



## APPENDIX 3

### A sample ukestration – *House of the Rising Sun*

In this Appendix we show what a ukestration looks like, using the folk song *House of the Rising Sun*.

There are two repeating riffs that can be played during the song. Riff one is for experienced players that can sustain an arpeggio. Riff two is for the more intermediate players who can read tab' but require a simpler part. The beginner players in the group can manage a single chord thumb strum of each chord change during the song.

To create a more interesting song we suggest that the strumming pattern is not introduced till about verse 3 or 4. This will build tension and create more texture in the song.

We would recommend using a lead singer for this song. However we also suggest using some vocal accompaniment, such as 'oohs' in verse 4, then all singing perhaps the last or second last verse.



# The House of the Rising Sun

Traditional folk song

6/8 rhythm

Strum pattern D dudu D dudu

## Verse 1

Am C D F  
There is a house in New Orleans  
Am C E7  
They call the Risin' Sun  
Am C D F  
And it's been the ruin of many a poor boy/girl.  
Am E7 Am E7  
And God, I know I'm one.

## Verse 2

Am C D F  
My mother was a tailor.  
Am C E7  
She sewed my new blue jeans.  
Am C D F  
My father was a gamblin' man  
Am E7 Am E7  
Down in New Or-leans.

## Verse 3

Am C D F  
Now, the only thing a gambler needs  
Am C E7  
Is a suitcase and a trunk  
Am C D F  
And the only time that he's satis-fied  
Am E7 Am E7  
Is when he's on a drunk

## Verse 4

Am C D F  
Oh, Mother, tell your children  
Am C E7  
Not to do what I have done.  
Am C D F  
Spend your lives in sin and misery  
Am E7 Am E7  
In the house of the risin' sun.

## Verse 5

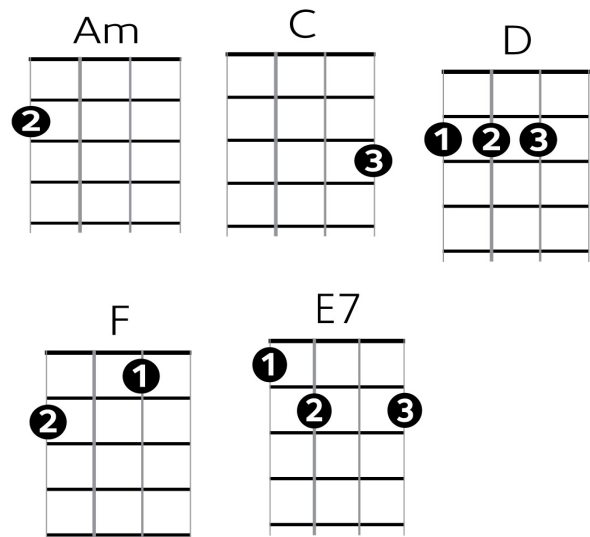
Am C D F  
Well, I've got one foot on the platform.  
Am C E7  
the other foot on the train.  
Am C D F  
I'm goin' back to New Orleans  
Am E7 Am E7  
To wear that ball and chain.

## Verse 1

Am C D F  
Well, there is a house in New Orleans  
Am C E7  
They call the Risin' Sun  
Am C D F  
And it's been the ruin of many a poor boy.  
Am E7 Am E7  
And God, I know I'm one.

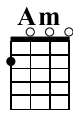
## Outro:

Am C D F Am E7  
Am D Am D Am D Am



# House of the Rising Sun

Traditional folk song



Uke 1

1. Am C

*mf*

TAB: 2 2 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 3 0 0

D F

TAB: 2 2 2 2 0 2 | 2 2 0 1 0 1 0

1. Am C

TAB: 2 2 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 3 0 0

E7 E7

TAB: 1 1 2 0 2 0 | 1 1 2 0 2 0

2. Am E7

TAB: 2 2 0 0 0 0 | 1 1 2 0 2 0

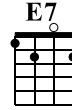
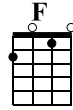
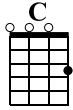
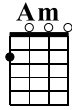
Am E7

TAB: 2 2 0 0 0 0 | 1 1 2 0 2 0



# House of the Rising Sun

Traditional folk song



Uke 2

1. Am C

*mf*

TAB: 0 0 | 3 0

3. D F

TAB: 0 2 | 1 0

1. Am C

5.

TAB: 0 0 | 0 3

7. E7 E7

TAB: 0 2 | 0 2

2. Am E7

9.

TAB: 0 0 | 2 0

Am E7

11.

TAB: 0 0 | 2 0

## HOW TO CONTACT THE AUTHORS

Mark and Jane are available for consulting to help others establish ukulele groups or revitalise existing groups. This can be done in-person or via skype.

They are also competent and entertaining speakers, and can be booked for festivals and corporate events.

Email: (unique email address)

