

Improvising on the ‘Ukulele

Improvisation, in its truest form, is spontaneous composition—melodies and rhythms inspired by music we hear and how we feel flow effortlessly from our minds, through our hands, to our instrument. It almost seems as if a level of musical enlightenment must first be attained before one can engage in this creative activity. This might be true, but that doesn’t mean we can’t have fun with it! The ‘ukulele is ideal for improvising because it has only four strings and a higher melodic register. Outlined below is a methodic approach to get you started. In no time at all, you’ll be taking solos at your weekly ‘ukulele club gatherings!

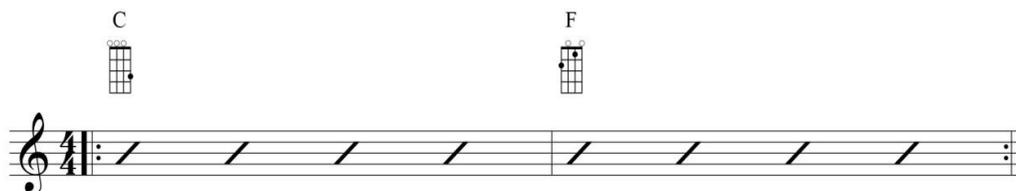
Two skills are essential in the art of improvisation:

1. The ability to instantaneously play whatever you “hear” in your head on your ‘ukulele.
2. An understanding of basic compositional principals: diatonic transposition, extension, augmentation, diminution, and inversion. This will help you develop a simple musical idea into an entire solo.

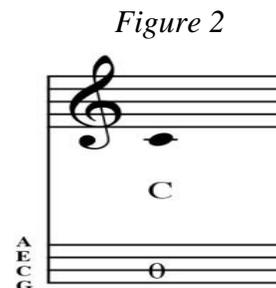
In this lesson, we will focus on the first skill: developing an intuitive connection with your ‘ukulele. You might be wondering, “How can I play what I hear in my head when I don’t know where the notes are on the instrument?” We’ll start by focusing on just one note, C, and improvising only its rhythm. This way, you’ll become familiar with the sound of the note and can concentrate on coming up with interesting rhythms.

Before we proceed, we’ll need some music to which we can improvise. Ask a friend to strum the following chords to any rhythmic feel he or she desires.

Figure 1

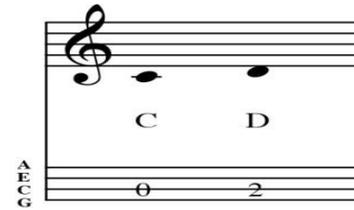


If your best friend happens to be your smart phone, better yet. It won’t ask you to buy drinks after you’re done practicing! Record a few minutes of strumming and you can play it back *ad nauseum*. Over this chord progression, improvise a rhythm with the note C.



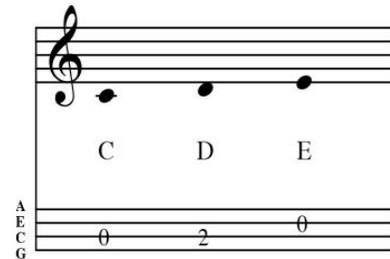
Next, use two notes, C and D. You can alternate between C and D or repeat the same notes. Just play whatever you hear melodically and rhythmically over the chords. When you can predict what the notes C and D will sound like *before* you actually play them on the ‘ukulele, you’re ready to add the next note, E.

Figure 3



Once again, the goal is to play what you hear in your head, not respond to the notes coming from your ‘ukulele. Practice improvising with C, D, and E until you feel comfortable, then add the fourth note, G.

Figure 4



When you are ready, add the note A. These five notes make up the C major pentatonic scale, which is a C major scale without its leading tones, F and B. The major pentatonic scale is a great way to build confidence when improvising because all the notes basically sound good. This scale may sound familiar to you because it is widely used in blues, pop, and traditional Asian music.

Figure 5

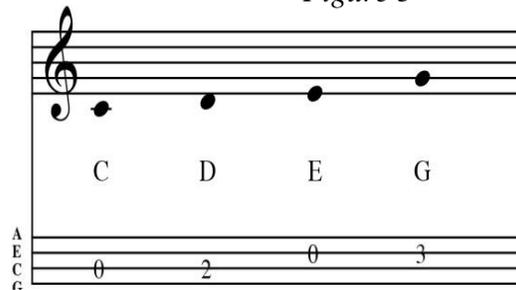


Figure 6

Finally, improvise with all the notes in the C major scale – C, D, E, F, G, A, B, and the last C, which is an octave above the first C. Be a little careful with the notes F and B because they don’t always work on every chord. Just let your ear be the judge.

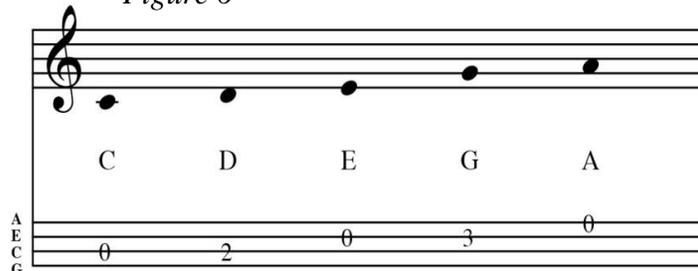
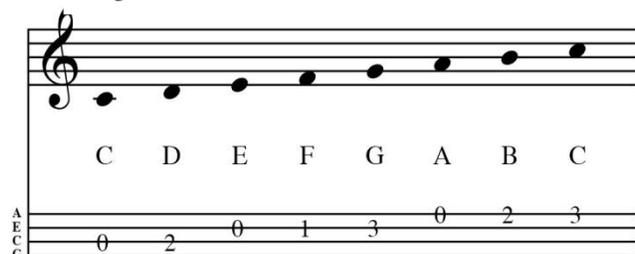


Figure 7



The more time you spend working on these exercises, the deeper a connection you will form with your instrument. Ultimately, anything you imagine can immediately be realized on your ‘ukulele. As you get better at improvising, you’ll find that it is exciting and inspiring. You never know what you’ll next come up with and some of the melodies you create

may even evolve into ideas for new songs. In our next lesson, we’ll study compositional techniques that will help you develop melodic phrases into interesting and thematic solos.