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UKULELE ON FIRE

Introduction to the Art of

CLAWHAMMER

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CLAWHAMMER UKULELE BASICS¹

What exactly is „Clawhammer“?

„Clawhammer“ is a playing technique with origins in Banjo playing. It is most common in folk music from the American South-East. Clawhammer style is often used in the songs and Fiddle-tunes in Appalachian Music. It is a form of song accompaniment that picks up certain elements of the lead voice and combines them with a rhythmic pattern. If played well, it can develop a unique and irresistible groove. To get a first impression of the Clawhammer sound, the songs of Banjo players Mike Seeger and Dirk Powell are a great starting point. Artists like Aaron Keim or Richard Hefner demonstrate what Ukulele players can do with the Clawhammer technique.

What do the Uke and the Banjo have in common?

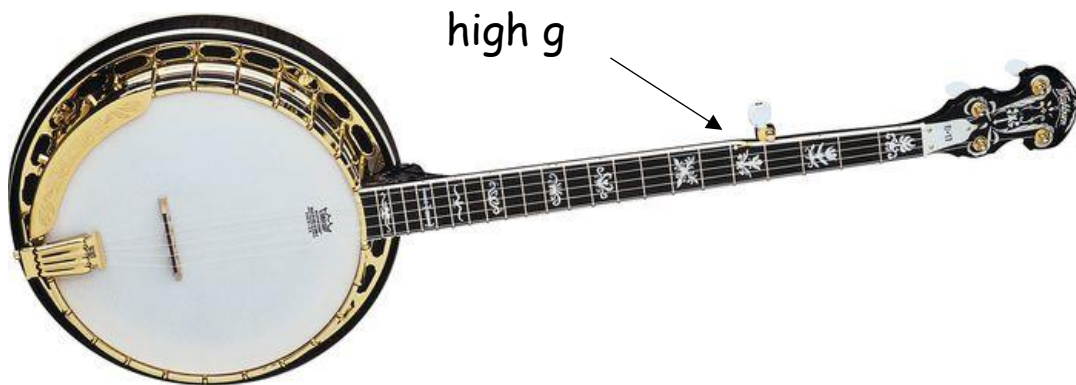
In a nutshell: Both instruments are tuned in a strange way (at least to European ears). In order to understand why, we should first take a look at a conventionally tuned guitar. Strummed from top down, the strings start with the lowest tone and end with the highest - makes sense, right?



¹ You can find the video for this chapter on <http://www.tinyurl.com/ukefire1>.

Looking at the ukulele and the banjo, things are a bit different. At the top, you start with a high *G*, followed by the lower strings:

Banjo:



Ukulele:



This way of tuning string instruments is called „reentrant“. Its origins lie in physical circumstances. Early ukulele and banjo builders depended on natural strings made from sheep or cow intestines and often it was impossible to manufacture those in a shape that was thick enough to make a low *G* string. Therefore, they simply used a thinner string and tuned it an octave higher, to a high *G*. And that's when it happened: Many musicians used this „make-shift solution“ and developed special playing techniques to coax sounds out of their instruments that are impossible to produce on a conventional instrument. We have finally arrived at Clawhammer! This technique requires the right thumb to play the magical high *G* string very often and very rhythmically - and thus creates the unique Clawhammer sound.



Clawhammer is only possible on a ukulele with a high *G* string. You can also play it on one with a low one, it just doesn't sound good.

What is Clawhammer used for?

Clawhammer is essentially a slightly more sophisticated way of accompanying songs that can enhance a ukulele player's strumming stock with an unusual and very rhythmic color. If desired, this comp can be expanded with the help of melodic elements so that now and then a verse can be presented instrumentally. This changes up things and makes the song more fun.

I demonstrate this based on the song „You are my sunshine“ in this video:

<http://www.tinyurl.com/ukefire1>

Check it out and then come back here: Let's get started!