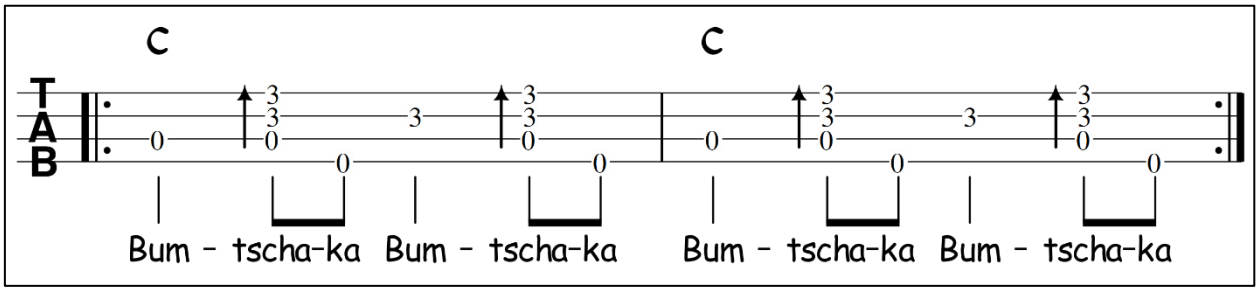
ON OUR WAY TO OUR FIRST CLAWHAMMER COMP

What exactly is „Bum-tcha-ka"?[1]

Every Clawhammer piece is based on the same basic structure: the „Bum-tcha-ka". In the US it is often referred to as „bum-ditty". You will know this groove from many Johnny Cash songs. On the first beat of a bar, the bass plays the „Bum" (a quarter note), drums take the second beat and divide it in two eighths, the „tcha-ka". Same with third and fourth beat. This goes on and on and the song rolls on groovily. If you want to understand exactly what I mean, I recommend Johnny Cash's „Folsom Prison Blues". All clear?

In Clawhammer, this basic groove is transferred to the various strings of the ukulele. Over the next few chapters we will start by taking a closer look at the three individual syllables „Bum", „tcha" and „ka" and practicing them intensively. After that we will piece them together and voila: The Clawhammer groove will magically appear[2]:



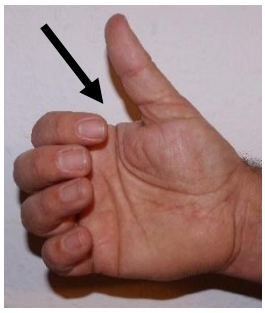
Don't try playing this pattern yet, it won't work. I just put it here to show you where we want to get to.

Ready? Let's go!

[1] You can find the video for this chapter on http://www.tinyurl.com/ukefire2

[2] You can find a tab reading tutorial here: www.tinyurl.com/ukelimit-grundlagen10

Step 1: the „Bum"



The „Bum" is principally played with the index finger (footnote: In tabs, you'll find the index finger marked with an "i".) However, it is not picked conventionally. The string is rather struck from the top and is hit with the side of the fingernail. Here you can see the right spot:

It's important to hit only that string, neatly and fully. For that it is necessary to completely pull through and that the index finger stops at the string below the one that's been struck. The hand stays in a position similar to the way you would hold it to thumb a ride throughout all this.

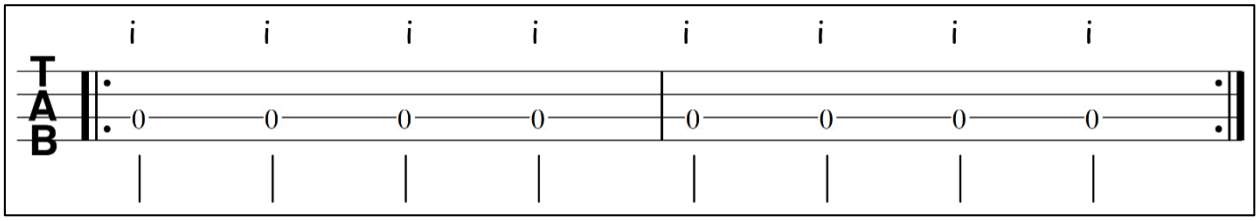
The name „Clawhammer" comes from this position of the hand. It looks similar to a claw and should never be changed while playing. The fingers largely stay in their position and under no circumstances should be stretched out in any phase. The movement comes from the forearm and wrist, not the fingers (think of, well - hammering!).

You should absolutely watch the video to understand what exactly happens here.

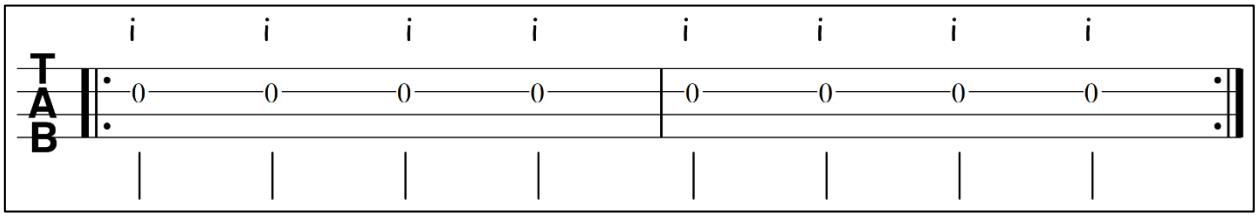
Here are several exercises that will help you to get used to this unconventional picking technique. We only use the C, E and A string, because in clawhammer, the high G string is played strictly by the thumb.

Please start as slowly as possible! Start increasing your tempo only when your movements are really neat. Always practice with a metronome. Before you continue with exercise 11, you should be able to comfortably play exercises 1-10 with 80 bpm. Okay? Let's go!

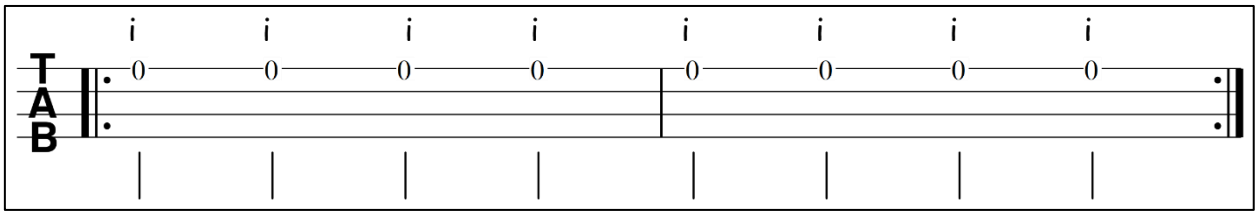
Exercise 1:



Exercise 2:



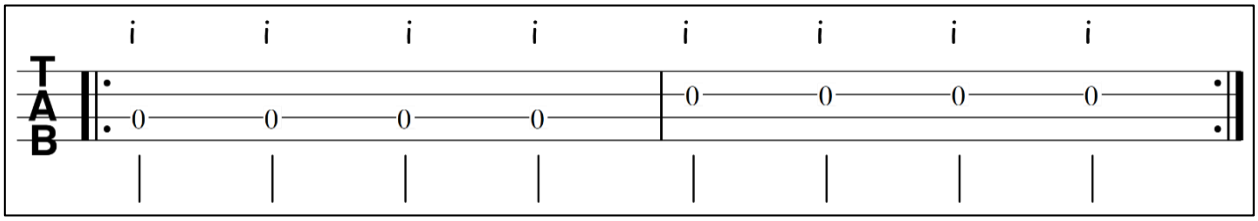
Exercise 3:



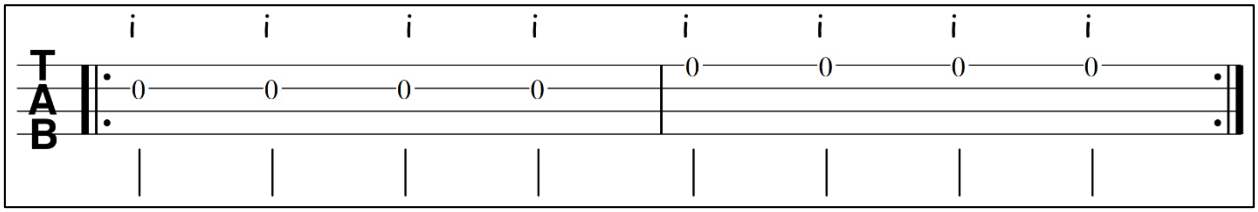
The last exercise presents a technical problem: Because there is no string under the A string, the index finger can't stop its movement on a string. Nevertheless, you should fully complete the strum. You can stop your fingernail on the ukulele belly. Most Clawhammer players do it like that. Additionally, this results in a nice percussive effect.

Tip: The right hand's movement should not simply be top to bottom. The strumming hand should also move towards the ukulele belly. Imagine strumming into the ukulele, not parallel to it. Knock on the ukulele belly, just like on a door!

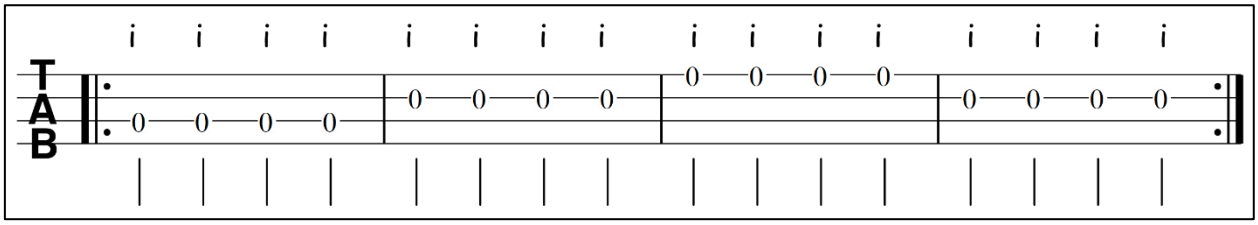
Exercise 4:



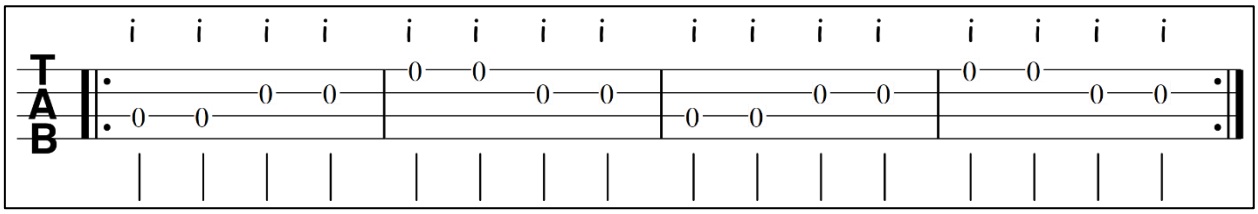
Exercise 5:



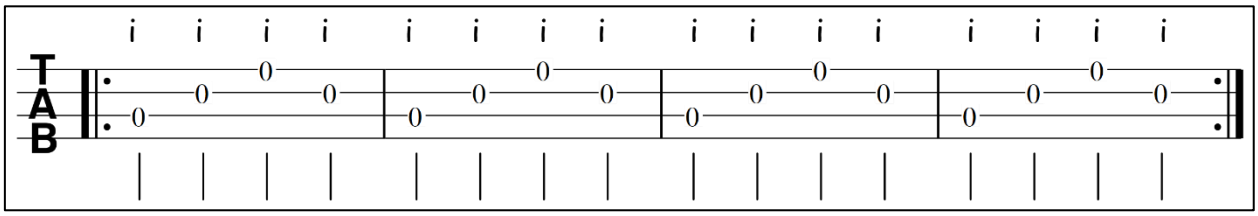
Exercise 6:



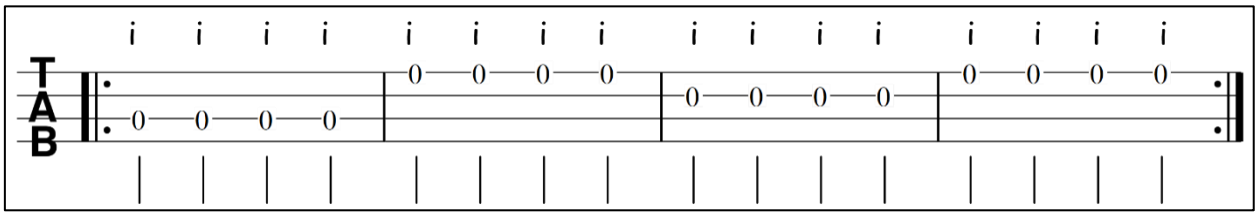
Exercise 7:



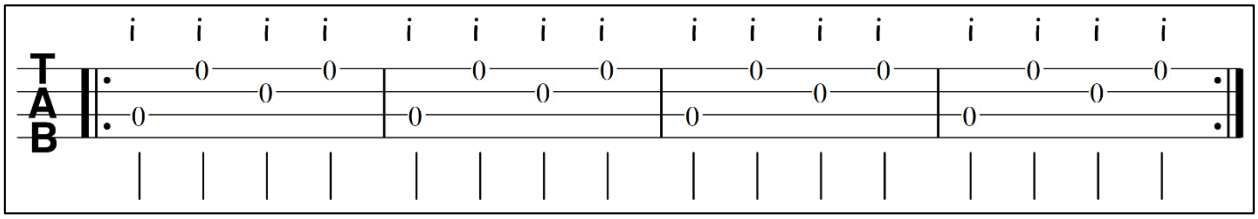
Exercise 8:



Exercise 9:



Exercise 10:



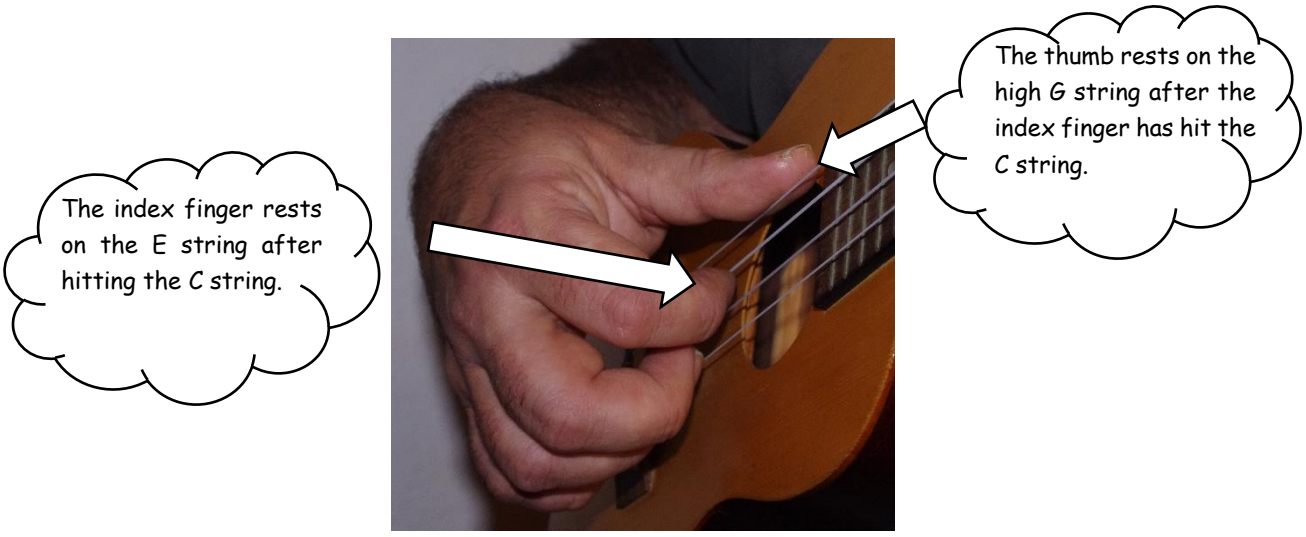
Are you comfortable with the „Bum"? I think so. Since it should be clear by now that the „Bum" is produced with the index finger, in the future, I will abandon the "i" above of the notation.

Some artists (e.g. Richard Hefner) use the middle finger for this movement. Try it! If this feels better to you than the index finger, there's nothing speaking against that. Use the finger that feels best to you!

What is the thumb doing in the meantime?

This question is really essential! I've already hinted at the thumb frequently playing the high G string. In order for this to happen smoothly and with no unnecessary movements, the thumb has to be as close as possible to the G string at all times.

In practice, we achieve that by letting the thumb come to a rest on the high G string whenever the index finger picks a string. At the end of the „Bum", both the index finger and the thumb come to a short rest on their respective strings. This moment can be seen here:



Sounds easy, but in practice it is a little tricky. That's why I'd recommend the following: Have another go at exercise 1 on page 6. This time, focus on resting your thumb on the high G string every time your index finger hits a string. You'll need some patience, but you'll get there! When you're comfortable playing exercise 1 – 10 at 80 bpm, you can continue with exercise 11.