

TECHNIQUE ZONE

BETTER BARRE CHORDS

WITH MATT WARNES



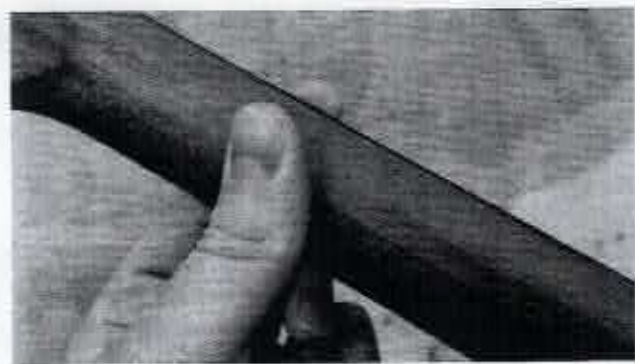
A barre chord generally involves placing the index finger across all four strings at once and they're a problem for lots of players. New starters and UKE Magazine editors can find them tricky, so here's a series of tips to help you (literally) get to grips with them.

PRACTICE

Right, so we're starting with the obvious. People who struggle with barre chords can easily write them off and say, 'oh I can't do those'. But as with anything, you can improve simply by repetition and experimentation. Not dodging those barre chords is a start – avoid the workarounds and alternatives. Actively trying them out is even better. If you do them regularly you can't fail to get stronger fingers at the very least, which is going to help.

THUMB PLACEMENT

In order to get a good barre chord your thumb is key to creating enough leverage to push down the strings. Your thumb should be placed near to the middle of the back of the neck, allowing your index finger to make the reach across all of the strings.



You might think the most pressure can be applied by lining up your thumb with your index finger, but in fact, if you have your thumb placed slightly nearer to the body of your ukulele than your index finger, say, in line with your middle finger, you create a sort of twisting motion which brings your wrist and forearm muscles into play, rather than just the muscles in your

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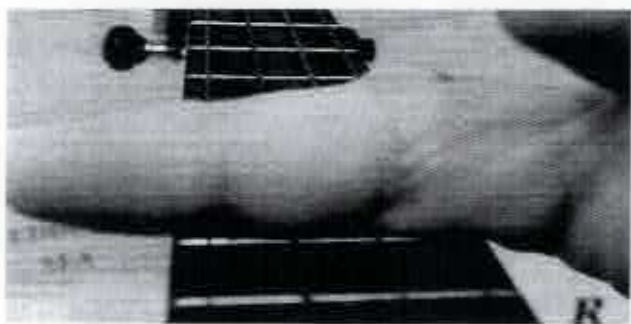
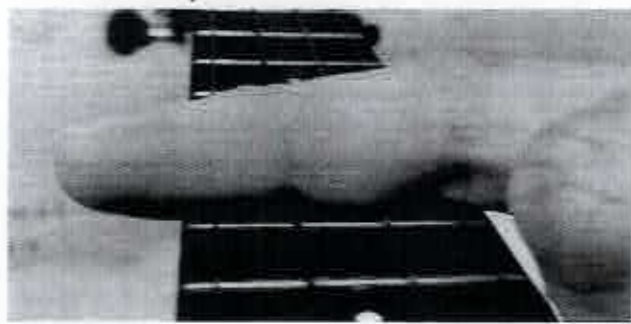


Employing this slightly twisted movement alleviates the need to simply 'pinch really hard' with your thumb and index finger and this allows the bigger muscles to help the action.

FINGER PLACEMENT

The fleshy part of your finger has creases in it where your joints are. These creases have a habit of being in the place where your strings are. When you're trying to push them down, a string being in line with one of these grooves can lead to the contact between strings and fret not being clean.

You can try a couple of things here if this happens to you. It might be that if you move your finger up or down, you can get your strings aligned with the firmer parts of the fleshy portion of your finger. If you have a look at the following images, you can see how the creases can be moved so they're not in line with the strings.



Also, you can try and twist your finger so the strings make contact with the bony side of your finger, rather than the fleshy part. If you feel the side of your finger and contrast it to the fleshy portion, you will note that it is harder, and therefore more likely to create a good, clean and firm contact. If you get your thumb position right, where that slightly twisting motion occurs, this naturally encourages your forefinger to twist too - slightly towards the nut - utilising the bony section more.



GET CLOSE TO THE FRETS

Placing your finger as close as possible to the fretwire requires less pressure to push the strings down than having that finger in the middle of the fret. This applies to everything, not just barre chords, so it's good to make sure you get your finger close to the fret in every circumstance.



GET THE PRESSURE RIGHT

It's natural when you're learning a skill to feel a bit tense, and with barre chords in particular it is easy to think, 'I'm getting a buzz so I just need to grip harder'. A firm grip is important but you don't want to have to hang on for dear life and risk straining your hand. Maybe you're already quite good at barre chords but you might still be pushing down more than you need to. Employing the other techniques we've discussed, try experimenting with more or less pressure to see at what point a cleanly strummed barre chord starts to buzz. You might find you need a bit less than the 'death grip' you've been employing. If you can get the pressure just right, and not too hard, it'll certainly help when you have to move from one chord to another.

PICK TO CHECK

When you strum, if you're getting a clean contact with most, but not all of the strings, especially if you're strumming rapidly, it might be hard to hear that one of the strings isn't sounding out correctly. When you're experimenting with technique, try picking the strings one by one in your barre chord to make sure they're all sounding out cleanly.

IS YOUR UKE HELPING?

There's a saying that a bad workman blames his tools, but it is possible that your uke isn't helping matters. If the action, the height of the strings above the fingerboard, is very high, then you have further to push down to make a barre chord. Have a look at yours and compare it with others, perhaps in your group, or measure the distance at the 12th fret between the top of the fret and the bottom of the string and see if it is 3mm or lower. If higher, you might want to see if you can lower it, by following a guide on YouTube or taking to a music shop.

START WITH JUST THE BARRE

If you want to try these positions, it is handy not to have to think about any finger positions other than your index to begin with. Getting the barre right is the aim in this article, and we can worry about other fingers to the chord later, once that's correct. But it's not much fun to practise without being able to play something.

You could try open C tuning here. All you do is tune your A string down to a G. (So, if you're playing a high G ukulele, tune the A string so it sounds exactly the same as your G string - which takes seconds.) So as you strum down each string, you get G, C, E, G. This means if you strum with no fingers fretting anywhere, you're playing a C chord (as all of those notes are in a C chord).

This is fun when you put your barre chords into practice with only the index finger as each position on the fingerboard you barre is a major chord. The chord you're playing is determined by the C string, so if you look at a fingerboard chart (or know your fingerboard), the note you play on the C string is the same as the chord you'll play. If you play a barre chord in open C tuning at the 5th fret, for example, you're playing an F chord. If you play at the 7th fret, it's a G chord. So you can play your C, G and G in this tuning by playing open strings, then barring the 5th, then barring the 7th, employing no other fingers than your index. It might just allow you to make a bit of music when you are practising and encourage you to stick with it.

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