Pick it like Maybelle!: Carter style solos for ukulele

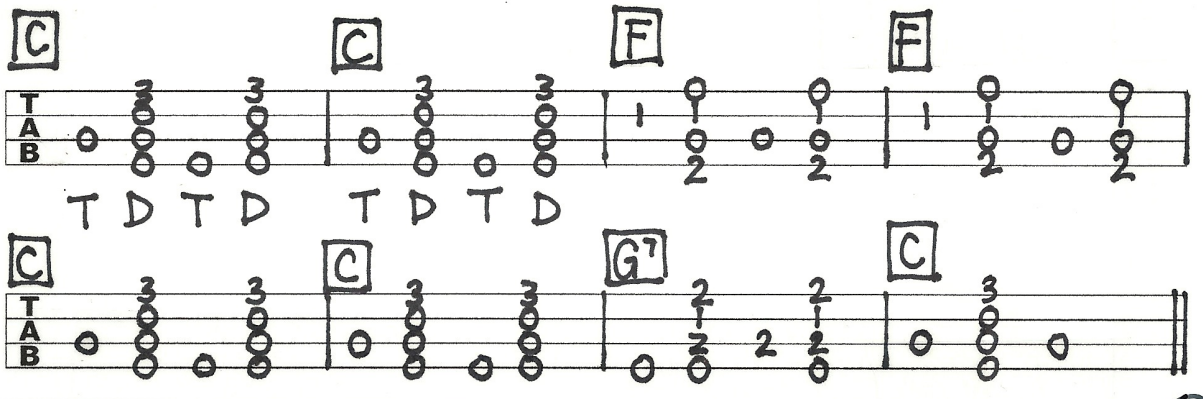
By: Aaron Keim

Watch Aaron teach this lesson at: http://tinyurl.com/carteruke

Maybelle Carter (1909-1978) had a long career in country music with the original Carter Family and later with her daughters and Johnny Cash. She was one of country music's first stars and an innovative guitarist, helping to push the acoustic guitar from rhythm to lead. Her style, often nicknamed the "Carter Scratch", is effective because it produces the melody and the rhythmic accompaniment with one instrument. Luckily, it also sounds great on the ukulele!

This technique is not only suited for playing melodies and solos, but is also wonderful for playing rhythm while singing. Let us start there before we get too fancy. The basic idea is this: first you pluck a single note with your right hand thumb (marked "T" in the notation). Then you down strum a chord with your first finger (marked "D"). Let's try this "thumb-strum-thumb-strum" rhythm with a simple chord pattern.

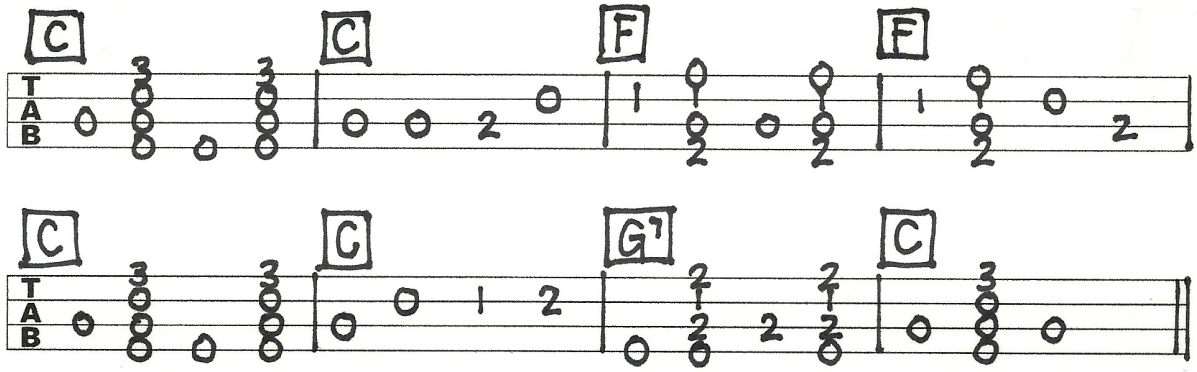
EX.1



Notice that the single note you play with your thumb often alternates between two different strings. This gives the rhythm a nice bounce that suits the ukulele well! It may feel strange to use your thumb and your finger, but it allows for greater speed and makes it easier to embellish the style the same way Maybelle did. Right now, the single notes you pluck with your thumb belong to the chord symbols listed above the staff. Later the single notes will stray away from the notes commonly fretted for these chords, but you should still use the chord symbol as a guide.

Next we will use the same chord progression but play more single notes with our thumb to guide us from chord to chord. It sounds like you are playing little bass lines with your thumb.

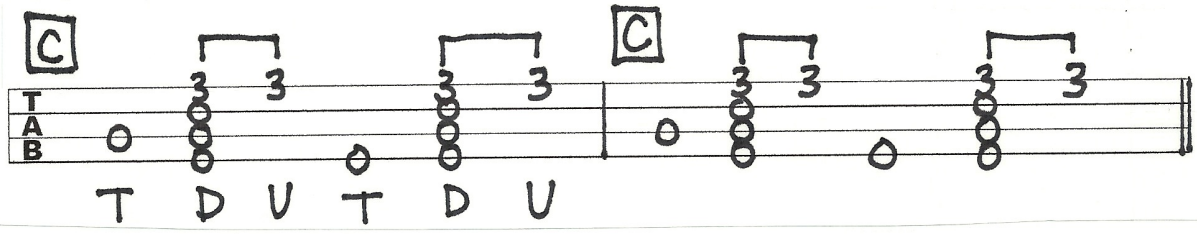
Ex. 2



Notice how it makes the chord progression sound a little more sophisticated? This example also gets us closer to picking a melody instead of just the accompaniment!

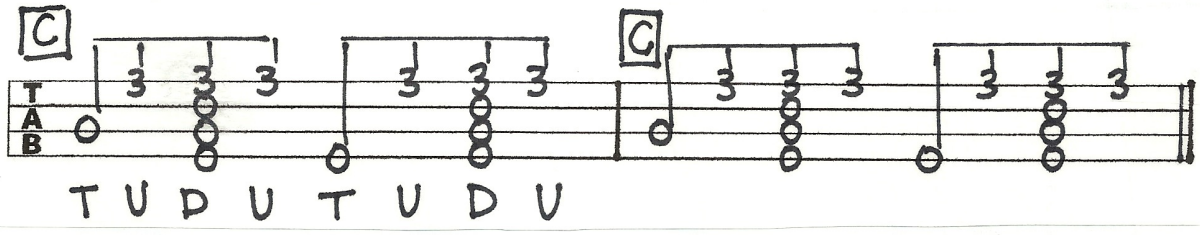
Now we can learn a bit about how Maybelle embellished the basic stroke to make it more rhythmically interesting. First try to fit in a little "up pick" with your finger right after the down stroke (marked "U"). Notice that it doesn't touch all the strings, just the first.

EX. 3



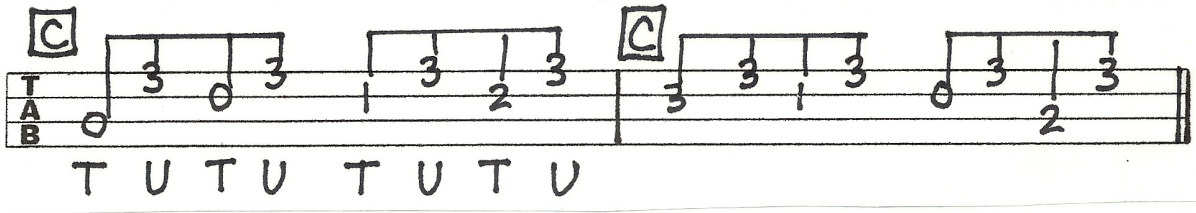
Sometimes, Maybelle picked up with her finger before the down strum as well. This really fills in the sound and gives a nice rhythmic drive.

EX. 4



Lastly, Maybelle sometimes played four melody notes with her thumb in one measure, each followed by an up pick on the first string.

EX. 5



Ready to apply it to a song? All we have to do is pick a simple melody and fill in the gaps in the tune with strums and up picks that correspond to the chords. "Banks of the Ohio" is a traditional murder ballad with simple words and chords, perfect for the "Carter scratch". The arrangement on the following page is an example of how Maybelle might have picked a Melody/solo for the song. While singing, she would have played a simpler part based on the chords, much like example 1. In our version, watch out for some fancy embellishments on measures 5, 8 and 15. Also notice the song starts with three pickup notes to kick things off. Here are the lyrics in case you want to sing along!

BANKS OF THE OHIO

V.1 I asked my love to take a walk
Just a little ways with me
As we walked, we would talk
All about our wedding day

CHORUS Darling say that you'll be mine
In our home we'll happy be
Down beside where the waters flow
On the banks of the Ohio

V.2 I took her by her little hand
Led her down that bank of sand
There I plunged her in to drown
I watched her as she floated down

CHORUS

V.3 I started home 'tween 12 and 1
Crying Lord what a deed I've done
I killed the girl I love you see
Because she would not marry me

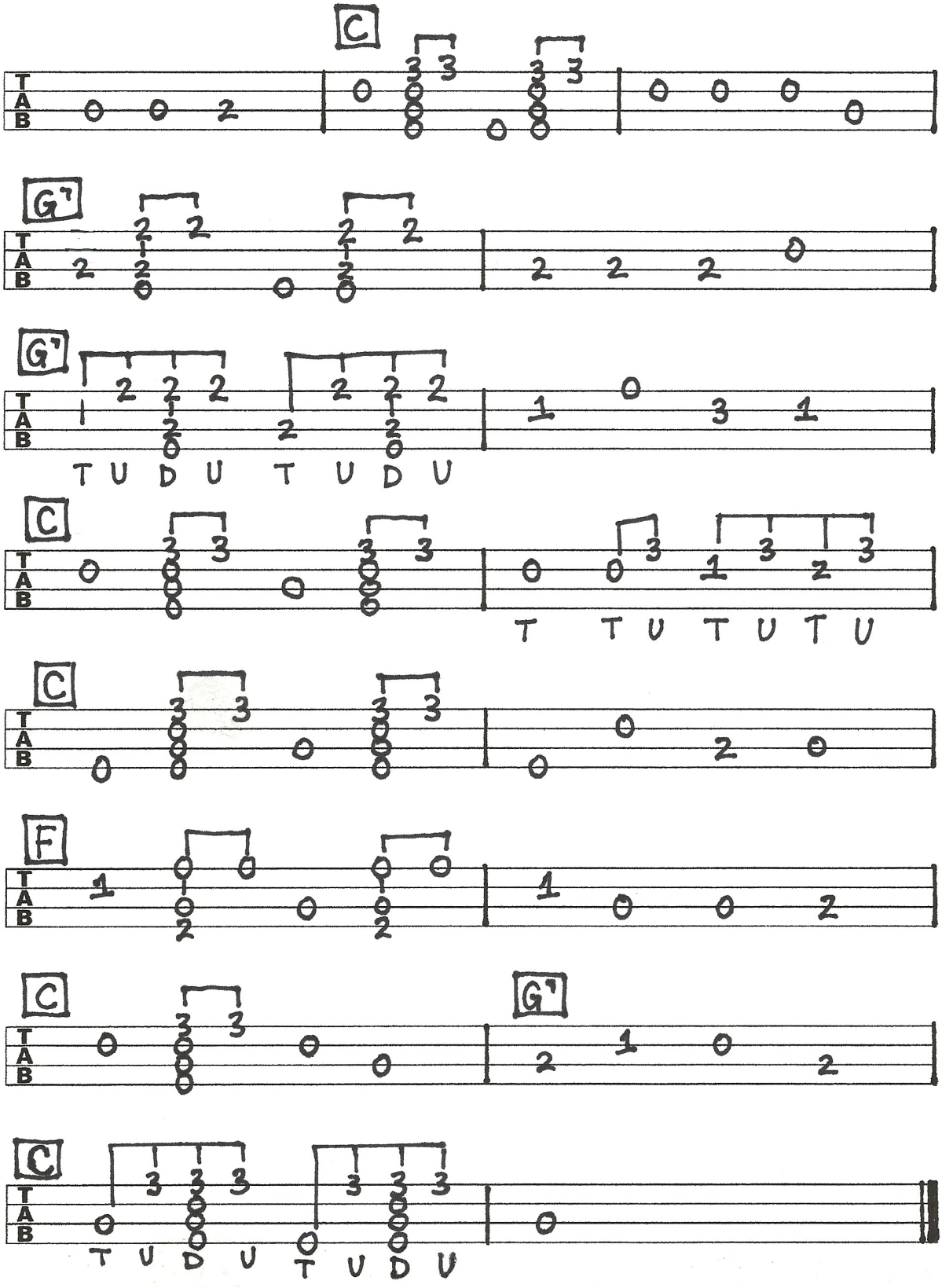
CHORUS

V.4 The very next day
was half past four
The sheriff man knocked on my door
Said young man don't try to run
You must pay for this crime
you done

CHORUS

BANKS OF THE OHIO

TRADITIONAL
ARR. AARON KEIM



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