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# Syncopation Basics

## Exploring interchangeable rhythmic patterns with “The Fox”

BY HOLLY RUDIN-BRASCHI

**S**yncopation has been a fundamental element of music since the Middle Ages. It puts the soul in soul and the oomph in almost every musical style, from classical to jazz to progressive metal. When most people hear syncopation, they don’t know exactly why they’re hooked, but they love the catchy, hypnotic beat. If you analyze it technically, syncopation is a sudden, unexpected rhythm that emphasizes a beat that is *not* usually accented, or strong.

To understand this, let’s first look at standard rhythmic patterns. Much popular syncopated music for the ukulele is in common or 4/4 time (the top number means four beats to a measure of music; the bottom means a quarter note gets one beat). As shown in **Example 1**, the strong beat (indicated with the accent mark >) usually falls on beats 1 and 3, while 2 and 4 are the weak beats (aka the backbeats).

There are two basic types of syncopation commonly found in 4/4, each stressing different beats and creating different rhythmic patterns. In the first, the even-numbered beats are strong. To recognize this rhythm, listen to your favorite reggae song. While looking at **Example 2**, count out loud and clap on beats 2 and 4,

which are usually emphasized by the bass.

When counting all eighth notes, we say the beat number followed by “and” (notated here with the “&”). In off-beat syncopation, the emphasis falls on notes not on main beats—i.e., those “ands,” as shown in **Example 3**. Be aware that off-beat syncopation has many possible permutations, and this rhythm is one of the easiest to understand.

Syncopated accompaniments are a great choice for supporting a song’s words and melody line, and the options are as numerous as your musical imagination and skill. You can 1) play a single fingerpicking or strumming pattern throughout the piece, 2) choose different patterns for each verse, 3) combine several patterns in a single verse to complement specific song lyrics, and 4) intersperse individual melody notes into your pattern when the spirit moves you. Adding dynamics and tempo changes also enhances your interpretation of lyrics.

We will focus on off-beat syncopated patterns because they make for interesting listening, can be combined for lyric interpretation, and are fun to play once mastered. For starters, I offer three syncopated patterns to practice with “The Fox,” a

traditional English story-song dating back to the 15th century. Rediscovered during the 1960s folk revival, “The Fox” was recorded by many singers of the day, including Harry Belafonte; Pete Seeger; Burl Ives; Peter, Paul and Mary; and Odetta. Contemporary artists like Nickel Creek, Garrison Keillor, and the Petersens continue to put their own spin on it.

But first, let’s explore those interchangeable rhythmic patterns you will use on “The Fox”—or really any song in 4/4. To easily switch between fingerpicking, strumming, and finger rolls, I suggest learning my floating arm technique. Start by securing your right forearm on the bottom of the soundboard in front of the lower ukulele bout. The exact placement of your arm depends on arm length and the size of your instrument, as well as the tone you want. For a brighter sound, position your hand over the soundhole; for a mellower, more vibrant effect, position your hand in the sweet spot where the neck meets the body. Avoid anchoring your entire forearm on the soundboard, which will dull the sound by inhibiting the resonance of the wood. And resist the temptation to plant your right-hand fingers on the soundboard because this slows your reaction time.

**Example 1**

**Example 2**

**Example 3**

1 2 3 4      1 2 3 4      1 & 2 & 3 & 4

Example 4

Example 5

Example 6

\*p = thumb; i = index; m = middle; a = ring    \*\* □ = strum down; V = strum up

Example 7: "The Fox"

**Example 4** is a fingerpicking pattern that combines a double-stop (two fingers picking two strings simultaneously), followed by single fingers sounding individual strings—the thumb (p), index (i), middle (m), and ring (a) fingers on strings 4, 3, 2, and 1, respectively. Note that I prefer to play this and the following examples in low-G tuning, which lends depth and harmonic support, but reentrant tuning will also work.

Next is a strumming pattern (**Example 5**), which I suggest learning with your thumb—as your strongest finger, it gives more control for dynamics. In addition, strumming with your thumb frees the remaining fingers so you can easily alternate between all three patterns.

**Example 6** is identical to the previous pattern, but adds a down-finger roll on beat 2. To learn this strumming technique, first practice against your thigh, articulating

each finger to a metronome. Hold the tip of each fingernail in place with your thumb. Then forcefully shoot or flick each finger out in this order: pinky, ring, middle, index. Start slowly, then speed up as you become more proficient. Next, face the palm of your strumming hand over the strings, holding your fingers in place with your thumb. Flick out each finger, making sure the top of each fingernail plays all four strings in an even rhythm. As you master this technique, your fingers strengthen and the movement becomes internalized, so you will no longer need to hold your fingertips with your thumb.

Now plug these three accompaniment patterns into my arrangement of "The Fox" (**Example 7**), which has just three chords, G, C, and D7. I have notated this using the melody to the first verse only, with additional lyrics shown for a couple of other verses. Do

a Google search for other lyrics (or for inspiration for your own.) Try playing each of the three patterns on its own, the whole way through the verse, and then experiment with mixing and matching them.

After that, try playing around with these syncopated accompaniment patterns on some of your favorite songs in 4/4 time.

On the video, I demonstrate how to do so on excerpts from the calypso standard "Yellow Bird" and the traditional Hawaiian song "Henehene Kou 'Aka." Whatever you play, always remember that the main purpose of the patterns is to support the all-important melody and lyrics.

*This lesson is adapted from Holly Rudin-Braschi's Ukulele Method Fingerpicking Workshop. [hollyukulele.com](http://hollyukulele.com)*



9 **D7** 2030

prayed to the moon for to give him light, for he'd

13 **G** 0132 **C** 0003

man - y a mile to go that night be -

17 **G** 0132 **D7** 2030 **G** 0132

fore he reached that town o.

21 **D7** 2030 **G** 0132

Town o, town o. He'd

25 **C** 0003 **G** 0132

man - y a mile to go that night be -

29 **D7** 2030 **G** 0132

fore he reached that town o.

2. **G**  
He ran till he came to a great big bin  
**D7**  
The ducks and the geese were kept therein  
**G** **C**  
Said a couple of you will grease my chin  
**G** **D7** **G**  
Before I leave this town-o  
**D7** **G**  
Town-o, town-o  
**C** **G**  
A couple of you will grease my chin  
**D7** **G**  
Before I leave this town-o

3. **G**  
The fox and his wife without any strife  
**D7**  
Cut up the goose with their fork and knife  
**G** **C**  
They never had such a supper in their life  
**G** **D7** **G**  
And the little ones chewed on the bones-o  
**D7** **G**  
Bones-o, bones-o  
**C** **G**  
They never had such a supper in their life  
**D7** **G**  
And the little ones chewed on the bones-o