

## **The Open C Major Chord**

by Matt Rosenberg

“To my left,” I said, “stands a very small man with a very large guitar. I, on the other hand, have nothing to overcompensate for.”

It was a cheap shot, and not even an original joke. Also, it was just plain mean. But it landed. The audience loved it, and I won the bout of between-song-banter.

The insult was not unprovoked. The lead guitar player had just made a dig at my choice of instrument and by extension, my musical ability.

The humorous friction that exists between us, on and off stage, is evident in the picture that we present simply by performing together. He is, indeed, a very small man, not much more than five feet tall, and he does wield an enormous guitar. I am much taller, broader, even a little chubby. I play the electric ukulele. Visually, we are a study in contrasts, just like the instruments that we play.

When I tell acquaintances that I play the electric ukulele in a rock ‘n’ roll band, I elicit a wide variety of reactions. Some people weigh the information, along with my age and rumpled-though-presentable appearance and contrive to intuit my entire life and personality. They make snap assumptions based on underinformed conjecture. Their preconceived notions about me are shallow and unfair. They are also frequently accurate.

I fit neatly into a kind of middle-aged music geek stereotype. I was a suburban teenager in the nineteen nineties. Through radio and MTV, I observed a rock ‘n’ roll renaissance that began in 1992, when Nirvana’s “Nevermind” supplanted Michael Jackson’s “Dangerous” at the top of the Billboard Albums Chart.

Like so many others in my age demographic, I picked up an instrument and tried to play along. First it was the harmonica, then the guitar, then briefly the bass. I joined a band. Then I quit and joined another, and then another. Some of these groups found small, receptive audiences. We played gigs in our friends’ backyards and garages;

sometimes we'd get a show at the local community center. Most bands fell apart quickly, having never emerged from the drummer's basement.

This is how I spent my teen years and now that I am an adult, I still play in bands. Rock n rollers in my age bracket are, as the old saying goes, legion. We grew up, got jobs, had families, but we still do our best to make whatever noise we can. So, in the final analysis, perhaps a little bit of assumption is appropriate when categorizing my identity.

The ukulele, though, there is the rub. I play the ukulele.

Many assume that a rock 'n' roll ukulele player is too lazy or too inept to figure out what to do with six strings. It is true that the ukulele is an empirically simpler instrument than the guitar. Have you ever seen someone play an open C Major chord on the ukulele? All that is required is to press down on the third fret of the A string with the index finger of one hand and to strum all the strings with the index finger of the other. I have taught both of my children how to play an open C Major chord on the ukulele with no trouble at all. The same chord on the guitar, however, is burning, aching torture for someone who has never played the instrument before. I must have chosen the ukulele, it may be assumed, based on an intolerance for that ache and burn.

Other people might view my ukulele playing in the context of my generation and formulate a more academic hypothesis. The nineties was a time of musical diversity, and it was also a time of rock 'n' roll iconoclasm. The status of the guitar as the genre's primary instrument was being challenged in certain quarters. One only needs to listen to the recordings from the era of bands like Primus or Morphine to hear other instruments taking a lead role. Any self-styled music historian might assume that I had grown to question the primacy of the guitar and had sought to find my muse in the tones of another instrument.

The truth is that I came to the ukulele by accident. I had been a very average guitar player for years before considering the instrument switch. I annoyed friends and significant others with original songs from my guitar since my early teens. I performed solo and in bands in front of mostly polite, sometimes enthusiastic, other times irritated audiences. I was never the standout talent in any bar or nightclub's roster of acts.

In fact, I never found the optimal target demographic for my brand of musicianship until I took a job as an assistant preschool teacher for the Jewish Community Center in Northfield, Illinois.

It had not been my first choice of jobs. I had recently completed my master's degree in literature at the University of New Hampshire and moved to Chicago to be with a young woman with whom I believed myself to be in love. Though I had not secured, nor really tried to secure, any gainful employment before leaving for the Windy City, I had believed that my academic credentials would act as a ticket to financial solvency. After all, I had just completed an exhaustively researched and beautifully written thesis on a thing called *The Theater of the Absurd*. Potential employers would certainly line up to knock down my door.

They did not.

Shortly after moving, I got a Chicago Public Library card. I began spending hours each day in the Periodicals Room, hunting down the Help Wanted section in every local newspaper I could find. This was before the days of Indeed, and applying for work was more complicated. At least, it was more complicated for me.

When a listing in the *Tribune* or the *Chicago Sun Times* caught my eye, I would run up the library stairs from periodicals to the Computer Room and sign out a terminal. Then I would tweak my resume and cover letter to approximate the specifications for the position. After printing out the edited documents and addressing one of the envelopes that I kept with me in a folder with postage stamps and pens, I would run outside to a nearby mailbox.

At first, I was selective about the jobs I applied for. I wanted something bookish, something academic. Perhaps I could even find work in this library that I had come to know so well. Before long, I broadened my net, applying for food service jobs, janitorial work, mail room positions. For weeks, I received no response.

Finally, after having resigned myself to the possibility of spending the rest of my life hiding out in the bowels of the Chicago Public Library, I got a phone call. Would I come into the Jewish Community Center for an interview and discuss my experience working with young children? I certainly would.

I had no experience working with young children. My potential employers did not know that. I had padded this version of my cover letter with implications of babysitting and volunteer work. I was not an educator by any stretch of the imagination, but I was a fair storyteller and embellisher.

Nor did I have any real understanding my Jewish heritage. The job listing had mentioned that some knowledge of Judaica might be an asset for potential candidates, and I am certain that my last name, Rosenberg, played no small part in the consideration of my application. However, the hours that I had spent in a synagogue up to that point might easily have been counted on one hand.

I was not deterred. I was desperate for work, so I went about fashioning myself as Talmudic scholar. I utilized the library once again and took out a few books about Jewish religion and culture, along with a copy of *The Chosen*, to study for the interview. I developed the habit of incorporating the handful of Yiddish words into everyday conversation; my girlfriend was tolerant when I *spritzed* the kitchen table that we shared with four other semi-transients in order to clean off the *schmutz*.

In the end, my efforts yielded results. I was offered the job. My cover was certainly blown when my new bosses took me out for a celebratory lunch and I ordered a ham sandwich, but I had already signed a contract. It was too late to back out.

My first day as an early childhood educator was confusing. I could not understand why some children were moved to tears at the prospect of being left in the care of a man that they had never met before. I was further befuddled by the fact I was unable to comfort these children with my booming voice and gesticular manner. It never occurred to me that the size differential that existed between me and these children, combined with my frenetic personality, might prove intimidating.

There were other children who found my naturally silly manner engaging. I employed funny voices and goofy body movements to entertain them. Many followed suit with voices and movements of their own. This was gratifying, and I believed myself to be making progress in my efforts to establish a rapport with this community of young learners.

I was having fun, and even some of the more reticent children began to warm up as I engaged in the action of the classroom. I participated in a spontaneous tower building

competition, using wooden blocks. I won. In another part of the classroom, a group of children were playing “family,” and I was invited to be the baby. I happily obliged. It is true that, at times, I forgot that I was one of the adults in the room, but I heard no complaints.

Then nine o’clock rolled around. Snack Time.

The childcare was located on the premises of a conservative temple. All teachers and children were expected to don Yakamas and say a blessing before eating. It was intended to be a moment of peaceful reflection and gratitude. I was mortified to hear the goofy voices that the children employed as they recited the *Motzi*, and the giggles that ensued. I knew that I was the cause of the impropriety.

I watched the expression on the center director’s face become hard and troubled as she led the blessing. She flashed me a look that expressed volumes about my skills as an early childhood professional. Though I had a talent for inspiring silliness and mirth in the classroom, though I could incite joyful anarchy at a moment’s notice, I was helpless to restore anything like decorum when the children were expected to be calm. I was certain that I would be back at the library, updating my resume before the week was over.

It is true that I was woefully inexperienced, but at least I had an instrument. My lack of knowledge regarding effective childcare was obscured, at least temporarily, by an immediate rock star status that I attained by carrying around a beaten-up guitar case. The children were eager for me to play, and I learned quickly that the very young are frequently less critical of musical prowess than adults.

My ego was fed to corpulence by the esteem in which many of my students held the songs that I performed, no matter how shoddily I performed them. This sentiment radiated to the children’s parents who were grateful that their children were being exposed to live music. For the time being, I was redeemed in my boss’s eyes.

Though the Jewish Sabbath does not begin until sundown on Friday night, the children and teachers at my center would celebrate on Friday afternoons. On these days, we were permitted to venture down the hall from our classrooms and enter the Temple sanctuary. There, we would climb up onto the *bimah*, sit in a circle in front of the arc where the Torah was kept, and conduct our little Shabbat.

I have never been religious, but there was something consistently soothing about the click and swoosh of doors that opened from the temple foyer into this large, quiet room. The warm darkness of the space had a calming effect on the children that amazed me. The resonance affected by the wood-paneled walls of the space made it so that no teacher had to speak above a whisper.

We recited the *Hadlakat Nerot* as the director lit the sabbath candles, and even our most rambunctious students were reverent and serene. We passed out pieces of *Challah* bread for the children to dip into purple grape juice, a flavor combination that seemed strange to me until I tried it. Then we sang songs.

They were simple, Jewish children's songs like "Shabbot Shalom," "David Melech Yisrael," and "The Eensy Weensy Akkabish." I was thrilled to learn that they each had a simple chord structure easy to learn on the guitar. I was soon expected to play for the children as part of this weekly celebration. It was something I looked forward to.

As the year progressed and different Jewish holidays came and went, I tried my hand at composing original, seasonal songs for Friday afternoons on the *bimah*.

Haman was kind of evil,  
Wiped his nose upon his sleeve,  
Ill-mannered from his toes up to his head,

Hat shaped like a hamantaschen,  
Everyone says, "Oh my gosh,"  
Whenever Haman's Wicked name is said.

The children appreciated these songs. Sometimes they would ask me to sing them in the classroom on Monday or Tuesday, not just Friday. I was surprised when they learned the words and started to join in at the chorus.

Boo Haman, Boo Haman,  
Everybody say Boo Haman,  
Stomp your feet and shout it loud,

Can you hear the gregors talking now?

Boo Hamen, Boo Haman,  
The party ended when he came in  
Haman was a wicked man.

That was the first time that I ever fell in love with a job.

I had originally planned to work with preschoolers only until something better came along. This was certainly not the career that I had envisioned when I was sending resumes out from the Chicago Public Library. However, singing and playing with the children at the JCC made me begin to reconsider this attitude. It seemed to me that the experience simply could not be duplicated in any other profession. A career had found me.

Years later, I was teaching at a childcare center in Londonderry, New Hampshire. Though music instruction was not the primary focus of my job, I would visit different classrooms for an hour each week with my guitar. I enjoyed playing songs and teaching basic musical concepts, and the center families seemed to appreciate it. Once again, I reveled in a quasi-rock star status at work.

At around the same time, I connected with the small in stature lead guitar player. We had gone to high-school together and, though we had never been close, we had friends in common. We each had an interest in music, so a chance meeting in adulthood led to the formation of a two-man band.

It was a quirky project. We performed in bars and clubs around New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Each of us had written a large number of snarky, wise-Alec songs, so on stage we swapped back and forth between guitar and bass, alternately performing lead and backup roles.

I began to discover that the tricks I had figured out while playing for children could be equally effective when performing for a roomful of drunken twenty-somethings. That little bit of eye contact, just enough to let a toddler feel seen without feeling singled out, could be used as the basis of a conspiratorial language between myself and the late-night

audience member who was just a little more into the music than their friends. The intentionally forgotten lyric, meant to encourage a roomful of preschoolers to sing along with a well-known song could be used to call the attention of a tipsy crowd to the obvious end rhyme of an original lyric.

Sometimes even the same exact song, when placed strategically within the context of the day's or night's performance, could have the same effect on these two distinct demographics. Imagine playing "You Are My Sunshine" to a barroom full of after-hours belligerents. The reaction can be a beautifully dissonant sing-along, not unlike what one may hear in a preschool classroom. Also, the rarely sung second verse frequently resonates more powerfully with a more world-weary audience.

The other night, dear,  
As I lay sleeping,  
I dreamt I held you in my arms,  
When I awoke dear,  
I was mistaken,  
And I hung my head and cried

My one abiding rule of onstage conduct, no matter the age of my audience, was to be silly without reaching a level of silliness that might cause a group of Jewish children to giggle during the *Motzi*.

It was not long before the power struggle between the guitar player and me emerged. We were each in love with our own songs. Each of us wanted more centerstage exposure than the other. Each of us dealt with this desire by ridiculing the other's, musicianship, lyrics, personal appearance, and intelligence.

We were not a band. We were two cats in a burlap bag, each struggling to keep the other from getting out. Audiences loved it.

It was an interesting dichotomy. At work, I was happy to let children sing along with me or sing without my support. Sometimes I would hand my guitar to a child and let them scrape the strings while composing their own spontaneous lyrics. In bars, I only wanted to hear my own voice and my own playing.

One morning, after a weeknight gig, I came into work and met a family that was new to the childcare center. They had come in with their little boy for a tour. The child seemed curious about the guitar case that I was carrying, so I laid it down on the floor in between us. He took a couple steps toward it. When I very slowly undid the latches that held the case shut, he stepped even closer. I opened the case just as slowly, and the boy peered inside.

The moment he saw my guitar he burst into tears and ran back to his parents.

I soon learned that there had been a man with a guitar at this child's previous childcare center. He was a big, tall, loud man who moved around a lot and sang with his face inches away from those of the children. I do not believe that this man intended to intimidate the boy, but the damage was done. This child was deathly afraid of guitars.

The story made me angry; I have always found solace in music, and the idea of a child being made to fear it struck deep into my heart. But I also understood. I remembered my first days at the Jewish Community Center. I was loud. I made big movements with my clumsy, unpredictable arms and legs. I was entirely too enthusiastic. Perhaps the other guitar man would learn, as I eventually did, the value of a quiet voice and soft fingerpicking.

For now, however, I had a problem. I would be visiting this child's classroom in a couple of weeks. I did not want to further traumatize him with my guitar.

I had kept a ukulele in my house for years. It was far from my primary instrument at the time, but I was comfortable enough with it to perform my standard set of children's songs. Perhaps if this boy saw me enter his classroom with a smaller instrument, indeed an instrument that was significantly smaller than he was, his reaction would not be so negative.

With this plan in mind, I began to practice with my ukulele, trying to play in the least confrontational manner possible. I must have driven my wife crazy with endless repetition of my unassuming "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star."

I had never been so nervous in the moments leading up to a gig. I was shaking just a little as I walked to the adult-sized chair in the corner of the classroom, bracing myself against a possible outburst from the boy. I concentrated on making my movements

slow, quiet, and predictable. The other children did not seem to notice my anxiety. They followed me, as they always did, and sat in a circle around me on the floor.

The boy did not follow. He sat at a table at the other end of the classroom, coloring. He was not engaged with the music, but he was not crying. It was a small victory.

As I played, the children participated, singing along and performing finger plays as they always had. Every now and then, the boy would look up and watch for a moment before returning to his artwork. Then I played a song he seemed to recognize. He put down his crayon and, without actually singing along, began to lip sync.

I was so happy.

I started to employ my ukulele more and more in my work with children. Weeks passed and the boy eventually joined my circle on the floor. I was gratified by his developing level of ease. But something else also began to happen.

There were other children in the group. They had not been frightened by my guitar but had been less eager to sing and dance than most of the kids. Suddenly those quiet observers were participating more, singing along and moving their bodies. Perhaps I should have been thinking more about those children all along. Perhaps the guitar man from my young friend's previous center was not the only one who had lessons to learn.

I made more discoveries as I spent time with my ukulele. I had always been an adequate if not exemplary guitarist. My skills translated to a slightly more impressive command of the uke. A shorter neck meant that my clumsy fingers had easier access to all corners of the fretboard. I could solo with greater ease. Also, the nylon strings allowed me to bend notes and manipulate sounds with little effort.

By this time, the two-man band had morphed into a quartet. The other members were not overly troubled when my ukulele began to make more frequent appearances at practices. The lead guitar player may have even been happy about the change in my musical direction. He might have believed that I was willfully taking on a more subordinate position in the band.

He was wrong.

It is true that my ukulele allowed me to offer children a more subtle, less imposing presentation. On stage in front of a roomful of tipsy bar patrons, however, it had the opposite effect on my performance style. Ukuleles are light, much lighter than the electric

acoustic Fender guitar that I had been lugging around since my days at the Jewish Community Center. I could toss it around. I could jump up and down. I could fall to my knees, lean back so that my head touched the floor, and play a screeching solo on my tiny fretboard. I could relate to the audience more easily without the hindrance of a larger instrument.

I am now a changed musician, leading a double life. By day, I am a calm and peaceful songster, sharing quiet melodies with young children. By night, I battle for control of a barroom stage. My ukulele serves the needs of both identities. I do not know if I every would have become comfortable interacting with children or with late-night bar crowds if I did not have music to help me communicate. Words are limiting, and verbal conversations can be misunderstood. My ukulele helps me to say what is on my mind.



**Matt Rosenberg** lives with his wife, two children, and crazy dog in Manchester, New Hampshire. He teaches at a Montessori School where he works with children from four to thirteen years of age. He plays the electric ukulele in a rock 'n' roll band. Matt enjoys whittling, playing basketball with his younger son, losing philosophical debates to his older son, and being happily exhausted at the end of the day with his wife.