

## Installing Clear Pickguards

By  
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Many ukulele players are interested in having a clear pickguard installed on their instruments. Although we don't usually use picks to play ukes, fingernails can do a lot of damage to the top finish on a nice uke for those players that drag their nails or rest their fingers on the top while playing. I personally do not think that thin pickguards have a negative effect on the sound of an instrument. Builders have different opinions on that.

Installation is fairly easy. The key is having the right material, and a flat surface on the top. If there are dips in the top, the pickguard will span those, creating visible pockets. However, the more the instrument is played and the pickguard is scuffed, the less those spaces will be noticeable. The 3 mil. self adhesive sheets that are sold at Office Max, etc. are very thin and difficult to work with. I have a stock of 5 mil material that I used to be able to buy locally before the big box stores came along. I've not seen that available lately. A good source is Stewart-MacDonald, who sells a clear Mylar pickguard material in their catalog. It is thick enough to be effective and it is easy to use.

In the photo examples, I'm using a guitar as a demo. A uke would be no different. If at all possible, try out this procedure on a sample finished surface before trying it on your own beautiful uke! Begin by making a template of a shape you like. Do not get right up to the soundhole edge, or the outside shaped edge of the instrument. You don't want an edge that can catch and lift. I generally stay at least 3-4 mm away from edges. Use the template to mark out the pickguard on the back of the clear material you will be using. Remember that you are working backwards when drawing on the back of the pickguard. I've cut a few the wrong way in my time! The Mylar and backing cuts easily with sharp scissors. After you've done all the cutting and dirty work, clean your work area and wash your hands. The worst thing is to install the guard and then see a speck of dirt under it. If that happens, don't try to get the guard off. Chances are good that you'll ruin the finish. Finally, thoroughly clean the area that will receive the pickguard with a mild soap and water solution to remove any dirt or oils present.

Many builders install the pickguard by simply peeling the backing off, and keeping the plastic flexed by it's edges. They then

carefully stick it down, starting from one corner. You can't let your fingers touch the adhesive side or your fingerprints will show under the guard. It is a risky procedure. I prefer using a "wet method" process. A wetting solution is prepared using a teaspoon of dish soap or Windex in a quart of water. Normally I use dish soap, but I have been curious about the use of Windex. I tried the Windex on this guitar, and I think I'll stick to soap for now. The possible negative effects of Windex to various finishes is also an unknown to me at this point, and that is good reason to use soap and water. The wet application process gives you a quick few seconds to slightly move the pickguard once you have set it down. Laying it down lightly will give you the greatest chance to move it around.



Sponging the solution onto the top



Peeling off the backing and wetting the glue surface of the guard.





Setting the guard in place.





Once you have the pickguard where you want it, begin to squeegee the wetting solution out from under it. I use a stiff piece of cardstock as the squeegee. Plastic credit cards are too stiff and can scratch the guard. Wipe all the excess water off the instrument top and continue to squeegee the plastic for several minutes. There will usually be a few spots of water left under the guard. Just keep rubbing the guard with a soft cotton cloth occasionally for the next few days, and the water spots should disappear. I'm not sure where that water goes, through the finish or out from under the edges of the guard, but it does go away.





When you have completed the process, you can begin to breathe again! It is challenging, but interesting, part of our building lives. Enjoy your work!