SOFTWARE & TECH

Hal Leonard Ultimate Fake Book

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Introduction: The Essential Companion for Every Musician

For musicians who love to jam, improvise, or perform on the fly, the concept of a "**fake book**" is both a lifeline and a creative springboard. Among the vast array of fake books available today, one title consistently stands out: the **Hal Leonard Ultimate Fake Book**. This enormous collection has become the gold standard for cover bands, jazz combos, solo pianists, and hobbyists alike. Whether you're navigating a wedding gig, a casual open mic, or a late-night session at a local lounge, having this single volume in your music stand can mean the difference between fumbling through a tune and playing it with confidence. In this article, we will explore why the Hal Leonard Ultimate Fake Book is so revered, what it contains, who it is for, and how to make the most of its wealth of songs. We'll also discuss some practical tips for using it as a practice tool and repertoire builder.

What Is a Fake Book?

Before diving into the specifics of the Hal Leonard edition, it helps to understand what a fake book is and how it is used. A **fake book** is a collection of songs presented in a simplified format. Instead of note-for-note transcriptions, each tune typically appears as a single melody line (lead sheet) with chord symbols above the staff. The melody often includes the lyrics underneath, and the chords are written using standard jazz/pop notation (e.g., C, Am7, G7). The idea is that the performer "fakes" the arrangement by using the chords to create an accompaniment (on piano, guitar, or other chordal instrument) while the melody is played or sung. Fake books are immensely popular among working musicians because they allow you to quickly learn and perform hundreds of songs without learning full sheet music.

An Overview of the Hal Leonard Ultimate Fake Book

The **Hal Leonard Ultimate Fake Book** is a massive tome that has been updated and expanded over the years. The most current version, **the Fifth Edition**, contains over **1,200 songs** spanning a wide range of genres, including jazz, pop, rock, blues, country, folk, Broadway, and standards. The book is spiral-bound (for easy page turns) and printed on sturdy paper to withstand heavy use. It measures roughly 9 by 12 inches, making it a substantial volume that can sit comfortably on a piano or music stand. Many musicians affectionately call it the "brick" because of its size and weight, but it is almost universally respected for its accuracy, clarity, and comprehensiveness.

One key selling point is the quality of the lead sheets. Each song is carefully engraved and transposed into a comfortable key. The chord symbols are accurate and reflect common jazz harmony. The melody lines are clean and easy to read. Unlike some older fake books that used hastily handwritten or photocopied sheets, the Hal Leonard edition is professionally typeset, which reduces eyestrain and errors. The book also includes a comprehensive index of songs by title and by artist, making it quick to find the tune you need.

What Genres Does It Cover?

The Hal Leonard Ultimate Fake Book is remarkably diverse. You will find classic jazz standards from the Great American Songbook (e.g., "Misty," "Summertime," "All of Me"), timeless pop hits (e.g., "Billie Jean," "Hey Jude," "What a Wonderful World"), rock anthems ("Brown Eyed Girl," "Piano Man"), blues numbers ("The Thrill Is Gone"), country classics ("Crazy," "Jambalaya (On the Bayou)"), Broadway showstoppers ("Memory," "Defying Gravity"), and even a few Latin and gospel tunes. There is also a generous selection of Disney songs, movie themes, and seasonal favorites. This variety makes it an ideal resource for wedding bands, party bands, and educators who need to be prepared for any request.

Key Features That Set It Apart

Several features make the **Hal Leonard Ultimate Fake Book** stand out from other fake books on the market:

- Comprehensive Song Selection: With over 1,200 tunes, you will rarely find yourself in a situation where you lack a requested song. The editors have carefully chosen songs that are frequently played in real-world gigs.
- Professional Engraving: The music is printed in a clear, standard notation with well-spaced chord symbols. Each song is one to four pages in length—no cramped arrangements that require a magnifying glass.
- Lyrics Included: Most songs include full lyrics under the melody, which is invaluable for vocalists and for singers who also play an instrument.
- Spiral Binding: This is a practical feature. The book lies flat on a piano or music stand without needing a clamp or book holder.
- Durable Cover and Paper: The cover is thick and coated to resist spills, and the paper is bright white with a slight sheen that resists tearing.
- Transposition-Friendly Charts: The chord symbols are written with standard guitar chord names, but they also include extensions (e.g., Cmaj9, D7#9) that allow pianists and arrangers to add more color.

Who Is the Hal Leonard Ultimate Fake Book For?

This book is not limited to professional musicians. It is equally useful for:

- Gigging Musicians: Cover bands, wedding bands, piano bar entertainers, and lounge singers rely on it to fill gaps in their repertoire.
- Teachers and Students: Music educators use it to introduce jazz harmony, improvisation, and song structure. Students find it an excellent tool for learning to read chord symbols and develop ear training.
- Home Hobbyists: If you play piano, guitar, or sing at home and want to play a wide variety of songs without buying dozens of separate sheet music books, this is a cost-effective solution.
- Composers and Arrangers: The clean lead sheets can serve as a starting point for creating more elaborate arrangements or for analyzing the harmony of classic songs.

Comparing the Hal Leonard Ultimate Fake Book to Other Fake Books

There are other popular fake books, such as *The Real Book* (originally a jazz fake book published by Hal Leonard as legal editions), *The New Real Book*, and various genre-specific collections. How does the Ultimate Fake Book compare?

- Breadth vs. Depth: The Real Book volumes (especially Volume 1, 2, and 3) focus heavily on jazz standards, some bebop, and modern jazz. The Ultimate Fake Book, on the other hand, is much broader—it sacrifices some obscure jazz tunes in favor of pop, rock, and Broadway hits that audiences actually request. If you need one book for a wide variety of gigs, the Ultimate is superior. If you are a dedicated jazz musician, you may still want a separate jazz fake book.
- Accuracy: Hal Leonard holds the copyright licenses for these songs, so the chord voicings and melodies are legal and generally more reliable than some older, illegally copied fake books. The chord choices are also more "modern" in many cases, reflecting current performance practice.
- Ease of Use: The spiral binding and clear engraving of the Ultimate Fake Book give it a usability edge over

many other collections that are saddle-stitched or glued.

Practical Tips for Using the Hal Leonard Ultimate Fake Book

To get the most out of this massive collection, consider the following tips:

- Learn Basic Chord Theory: The book gives you chord symbols, but you need to know how to play those chords on your instrument (e.g., root position inversions, voicings for guitar). Invest time in learning common chord progressions and voicing techniques.
- Use It for Improvisation Practice: The melody is only a guide. Try playing the chords in your left hand (on piano) and improvise a new melody with your right hand. On guitar, play the chord shapes while singing or humming new lines over top.
- Create Set Lists: Because the book is organized alphabetically by song title, it is not ideal for jumping around in a live situation. Create custom set lists on a separate sheet or use sticky tabs to mark frequent favorites.
- Transpose When Needed: If you are a singer, you may find some tunes are in uncomfortable keys. Use the chord symbols to transpose the entire song to a better key for your voice. This is great ear training.
- Supplement with Recordings: The lead sheets give you the bare bones. To truly capture the feel of a song, listen to the original recording (or a definitive cover) and add stylistic rhythm, dynamics, and embellishments.
- Practice Reading Ahead: In a gig, you will often have to play a song you have never seen before. Practice by opening the book to a random page, scanning the melody and chords, and trying to play it in real time. This builds reading skills.

Common Challenges and How to Overcome Them

Some musicians find the sheer size of the Ultimate Fake Book intimidating. It is heavy to carry, and the small print in some songs (though still legible) may require a good light source. Here are a few solutions:

- Use a Music Stand Light: In dimly lit venues, a clip-on LED light will help you read the smaller chord symbols.
- Photocopy Selected Pages: For a specific gig, photocopy the 10–20 songs you plan to play and use those instead of hauling the full book. Just be sure to comply with copyright law (photocopying for personal use in performance is a gray area, so consider purchasing a second copy if you need to tear pages out).
- Consider the eBook Version: Hal Leonard also offers a digital version of the Ultimate Fake Book for tablets. This allows you to search songs instantly, transpose with certain apps, and reduce physical bulk. However, many musicians still prefer the tangible book for its reliability (no batteries needed).

Pros and Cons of the Hal Leonard Ultimate Fake Book

No product is perfect, and it is helpful to weigh the strengths and weaknesses.

Pros

- Massive, curated song list covering decades of music.
- Accurate, professional engraving with easy-to-read chord symbols.
- Spiral binding lies flat.
- Includes lyrics and melody for nearly all songs.
- Excellent value for the price (costs less than buying individual sheet music for 1,200 songs).
- Legal and licensed edition—supports the songwriters.
- Great for both instrumentalists and vocalists.

Cons

- Very heavy and bulky to carry (around 5–6 pounds).
- Some songs are in keys that are not ideal for all singers; but you can transpose.
- Songs are arranged alphabetically, not by style or difficulty—this makes building a set list less intuitive.

- Not every song you want will be included (no single fake book can cover everything).
- Chord voicings are left to the performer—beginners may need extra education on how to interpret the chord symbols.
- Occasional errors in chord notation have been reported by advanced users, though these are rare.

Conclusion

The **Hal Leonard Ultimate Fake Book** is more than just a book—it is a musical toolkit that empowers performers to expand their repertoire and play confidently in any setting. With over 1,200 songs spanning genres from jazz to pop, Broadway to country, it delivers incredible value for a one-time investment. Its professional engraving, spiral binding, and comprehensive index make it easy to use, while the inclusion of lyrics and accurate chord symbols makes it suitable for vocalists and instrumentalists alike. Whether you are a seasoned gigging musician or a beginner looking to learn a broad range of tunes, this fake book deserves a permanent spot on your music stand. Pair it with a good understanding of chord theory and a willingness to improvise, and you will have the tools to handle almost any musical request that comes your way. In the world of fake books, the Hal Leonard Ultimate Fake Book remains, quite simply, the ultimate choice.

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