

# Four-string folks

Increasing popularity and respect for the instrument brings a ukulele circle to South Surrey



Gary Cyr (left) and Braden Deans of the South Surrey White Rock Ukulele Circle, which gathers on the last Saturday of each month at Semiahmoo House.

BOAZ JOSEPH PHOTOS / THE LEADER

by Boaz Joseph

While getting his portrait taken, musician Gary Cyr is asked by a photographer to make a small adjustment to the position of his guitar.

"The what?" he asks, with no hint of irony.

There may be a bit of noise in the room, but he's certainly heard the request.

Cyr has made his point: Give the ukulele the respect it deserves.

Time was that the little acoustic four-string don't-call-it-a-guitar was dismissed as a kitschy musical novelty worthy of little more than Hawaiian nostalgia, a vaudevillian stage act or a Tiny-Timesque falsetto rendition of Tiptoe Through the Tulips.

Times – and attitudes – are changing.

In June, for example, 40 people showed up at the third and most recent gathering of the South Surrey / White Rock Ukulele Circle.

It was founded in April by alumni from the Vancouver Ukulele Circle, which was set up by Ralph Shaw in 2000.

The format is the same as in the founding group: Visitors, regardless of their level of skill, strum and sing along as a group to familiar folk, pop and rock tunes.

Novices need not be afraid, as chords are displayed

next to the lyrics in the 150-page song book.

"Playing ukulele has a way of bringing people together," says Cyr, who lives in North Delta and also teaches ukulele at the Kennedy Seniors Centre. "It's a social thing, like nothing else."

Venturesome participants are also given the opportunity to play solo in front of the crowd – with a standing ovation for first-timers. "People are just feeling so good and having such a wonderful time."

Like the Vancouver Ukulele Circle, the South Surrey group is growing, and the clientele is getting less grey over time.

Some of the younger visitors are players from the Langley Ukulele Ensemble, a respected pool of talent.

"Langley seems to be the home of Canadian ukulele," says Newton's Braden Deans, an organizer of the Surrey circle.

Deans, who has played the uke for four years, credits much of the new interest in the instrument, especially among the younger crowd, to YouTube.

"I got into the ukulele because I heard Amanda Palmer play Radiohead's 'Creep' on it."

While some musicians and the public may scoff at the ukulele as being an illegitimate instrument or a toy, there's a growing online following of the likes of James Hill, Julia Nunes, Molly Lewis and virtuoso Jake Shimabukuro, who has taken the ukulele (in his case, a tenor) to new heights with

his renditions of George Harrison's While My Guitar Gently Weeps and Queen's Bohemian Rhapsody.

Of course, novices start at the beginning, but the learning is easy.

It's possible to spend about \$60 for a decent starter ukulele – anything cheaper (new) is barely playable.

"I can teach you a handful of chords in just a few minutes and you'll be off and playing," says Cyr. "From that point, the sky's the limit."

"I think it's not as intimidating as a guitar or a piano," Deans explains. "People can just pick it up – and realize it's a serious instrument."

There's a folksy dynamic to the shoulder-to-shoulder huddling of ukulele players that doesn't happen with larger instruments, says Cyr, who adds that recent ukulele circles included accompaniments by acoustic bass, mandolin and banjo ukulele players.

"It's so fun and easy to get involved."

*The South Surrey / White Rock Ukulele Circle meets on the last Saturday of each month from 2-4 p.m. at Semiahmoo House Society, 15306 24 Ave. Visitors can come and just listen or sing without instruments or just play. For more information, email Braden Deans at [bdeans@gmail.com](mailto:bdeans@gmail.com)*

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An easy G-chord.

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