

## Ukulele Circle strikes chord with beginners and pros

Friendly atmosphere meets cheap, easy, portable instrument

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Ralph Shaw, right at home with his ukuleles. Shaw is the co-founder of the Vancouver Ukulele Circle which began in 2000. Photo by Rebecca Blissett

Are we ready to have fun?"

Standing on the stage of St. James Hall in Kitsilano, trademark bow tie around his neck and performance-worn ukulele in hand, Ralph Shaw surveys a packed room. More than 140 people, ranging from kids to grannies, from mustachioed hipsters to suburban soccer moms, lift their ukuleles and get ready to strum.

Shaw counts them in, and they begin to play and sing the song that traditionally leads off the monthly gathering of the Vancouver Ukulele Circle: "Singin' in the Rain."

The song is dead simple. Just two chords — F and C7 — that are two of the easiest chords to finger. The room fills with the lilting strum of scores of ukuleles played in unison, and a chorus of enthusiastic voices.

From there, the singalong portion is an hour-long odyssey of songs drawn from every genre of music. The club's 244-page songbook includes everything from folk ("Leaving on a Jet Plane") to punk ("Should I Stay or Should I Go"), from country ("Walking After Midnight") to rock ("Lola"), from show tunes ("Puttin' on the Ritz") to children's songs ("Six

Little Ducks”), from disco (“I Will Survive”) to reggae (“Redemption Song”), and from John Lennon classics (“Imagine”) to songs reminiscent of the instrument’s island roots (“Blue Hawaii”).

Traditionally, the singalong wraps up with a Monty Python classic that’s guaranteed to put smiles on faces: “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life.”

Then the open mic portion of the evening begins. Equally eclectic, it features everyone from professional musicians to first-time performers.

If it’s your first time on stage, you always get a standing ovation, no matter how well (or poorly) you play.

“The ukulele brings people together,” said Anne Marie Konas, who discovered the ukulele three years ago while vacationing in Hawaii. “It doesn’t matter if you’re young or old, beginner or expert. People [at the Vancouver Ukulele Circle] are just really open to helping and sharing.”

“The ukulele is a happy little instrument,” added her friend Cynthia Miller-Campbell, who’s been attending Vancouver Ukulele Circle for about a year. “You just smile, and laugh. No one plays the ukulele upset.”

Miki Yoshida and Brian Gleeson were at the January Vancouver Ukulele Circle, despite the due date for their first child being only four days away. Yoshida strummed away, joking that her baby’s first exposure to music would be the six simple chords she’s learned how to play so far.

“I never played a musical instrument before,” said Yoshida, who began learning the instrument after her husband bought her a ukulele for Christmas and who has learned to play by attending Vancouver Ukulele Circle. “It’s a really nice place to learn. It’s really easy to pick up things like strumming patterns while you’re chatting with people.”

Gleeson contrasted learning the ukulele with his high school experience of learning the clarinet. “It was always a chore, and I never wanted to practice. The ukulele is fun. It’s challenging — but it’s a surmountable challenge.”

“The ukulele is a low-pressure instrument,” added Yoshida. “I don’t think there’s any shame in playing a ukulele poorly.”

Many of those at the Vancouver Ukulele Circle are raw beginners, playing with intense concentration and a simple one-two-three-four strum, referring constantly to the chords and tabs in the songbook — and sometimes skipping over part of a song, and not strumming, if the chords are those they haven’t yet learned. Others have been playing for years, strum and pick with an almost professional flourish.

Then there is Ralph Shaw, who has been playing professionally for decades.

For Shaw, the ukulele was initially just another prop to get a laugh with. In the early 1990s, he was performing as a clown. One of his gags involved opening up a big guitar case — and pulling out a tiny ukulele.

“In those days, the ukulele was a joke,” said Shaw. “Just walk on stage with the instrument, and people would laugh. They didn’t know what it was.”

Shaw didn’t gain an appreciation for the instrument until he picked up a Kamaka six-string ukulele from Hawaii.

“It has a great, great sound,” said Shaw. “I just about melted when I heard it. From then on, I realized the ukulele wasn’t just a novelty instrument.”

Shaw rebranded himself as a ukulele performer. His first album was *King of the Ukulele*, and four more CDs followed. He’s also released four instructional DVDs that teach the instrument, as well as a book. A second book, also based on his Vancouver Ukulele Circle blogs, is in the works.

Shaw has worked hard, over the decades, to bring to the ukulele the respect it deserves. When he first started performing, people in England would think of George Formby, a comedy singer who was a household name in England in the 1930s and '40s — while North Americans associated the instrument with novelty act Tiny Tim and his signature ukulele song “Tiptoe Through the Tulips.”

Shaw says the “turning point” came in the 1990s, when Hawaiian Brother Iz (Israel Ka'ano'i Kamakawiwo'ole) released an album. His medley of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” and “What a Wonderful World” started cropping up everywhere, and the ukulele entered the public consciousness as a serious instrument.

“You had this mind shift of what the ukulele is,” said Shaw.

Other virtuosos include Jake Shimabukuro, known for performing a technically challenging cover of Queen's “Bohemian Rhapsody,” and Canada's James Hill, whose YouTube clip of Michael Jackson's “Billie Jean” features Hill performing the bass line, percussion and piano melodies of the song single-handed on his ukulele.

Performers George Harrison of the Beatles, Eddie Vedder of Pearl Jam, and Pat Monahan of Train have also helped give the ukulele much-needed street cred over the years.

Shaw co-founded Vancouver Ukulele Circle in 2000. He got the idea from a similar group he attended during a return visit to his native England: the Yorkshire Ukulele Circle.

“It was just so great,” said Shaw. “They all played banjo ukuleles. Everyone was smiling, and it was so loud — it was just this wonderful din.”

The first meeting of the Vancouver Ukulele Circle, in the common room of Shaw's downtown co-op, drew nine people.

Slowly, the numbers grew — only to explode, in the last couple of years, to about 140 people. The Christmas 2013 ukulele circle drew 211 people who packed St. James Hall, including its balcony.

Vancouver Ukulele Circle, says Shaw, fulfils a need in people. “It's a human desire to socialize and play music,” says Shaw. “It's in our genes.”

Shaw credits the group with inspiring its members to also play music in their homes.

“People go off in their own little groups and have their own little ukulele circles,” said Shaw. “People are playing music again. You'd think, with all this technology, they'd be sitting in front of screens. But they're not. They're connecting through music again.”

Jeff Dyck, who's been attending Vancouver Ukulele Circle for about a year, agrees. A guitar player, he still “thinks” in guitar, and has to translate the chords he already knows to the unique G-C-E-A tuning of the ukulele. He bought a tenor ukulele as a “souvenir” during a trip to Hawaii about a year ago, and loves the atmosphere at Vancouver Ukulele Circle.

“I think the biggest difference [between guitar players and ukulele players] is the culture,” Dyck said. “The ukulele is a very communal, very ‘everybody can participate,’ very ‘don't take yourself too seriously’ culture. It's awfully hard to look cool while playing the ukulele, and so you just have fun.”

Ukuleles come in four sizes. Soprano ukuleles are the smallest and cheapest, starting at about \$40. Concert ukuleles have a slightly bigger body and longer neck, and tenor ukes are bigger still. The baritone ukulele is the largest, has the same strings as the bottom four strings of a guitar, and is tuned to D-G-B-E.

There's a ukulele for every taste, acoustic or electric. The body can be of wood, or metal — or have a skin like a

banjo. There's every colour, from hot pink to red to purple to green to royal blue. Some have a V shape and look like miniature electric guitars. Others are printed with peace signs, bright yellow happy faces, or skulls.

There's even an oval shaped uke, printed with a pattern to make it look like a sliced pineapple.

It's possible to spend up to \$1,000 on a ukulele. But you don't need to. A very mellow sounding concert ukulele is in the \$100 to \$150 price range.

Increased interest in the ukulele has prompted schools like Ruby's Ukes to spring up in Vancouver. It was founded by Daphne Roubini ("Ruby") in 2009, after Roubini was unable to find a group ukulele class in the city. She hired instructor Guido Heistek, and learned to strum along with the other students.

She soon realized that the school was continuing the healing work she'd begun years before, when she worked as a reflexologist and energy healer.

"My intention is that people will be healed by their interaction with music," said Roubini. When playing ukulele, she said, people can forget about the stressors in their lives, be they relationships, finances, work — or the isolation of living in a big city and not having a community.

To that end, every class at Ruby's Ukes includes a tea break, where students can get to know one another.

Roubini, a professional jazz singer, feels that anyone can be musical.

"There was a time when everyone played [music] together... then it became something people consumed. They listened, but they didn't play any more. The ukulele completely eradicates that. You don't have to be good to play the ukulele, you can just play and enjoy it."

Roubini sees a "revolution" in the making, with the ukulele — once the domain of "hipsters and grannies" — becoming mainstream. She lists the reasons for the instrument's appeal: the ukulele is unassuming, can be played in private, either quietly or loud, and is both inexpensive and portable.

"It's versatile," said Roubini. "You can play anything — and you're allowed to play anything on it. Although there are virtuosos, [most ukulele players] don't take themselves too seriously."

Classes at Ruby's Ukes cover a wide range of musical styles, from folk songs to opera, from blues to classical, from surf music like "Wipeout" to rock songs by Pink Floyd.

Roubini was drawn to the instrument after hearing the Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain perform in her native London, England. She bought a ukulele for her nephew, taught herself to play "Happy Birthday" on it — and decided she needed a ukulele of her own. She since incorporated the ukulele into her band Black Gardenia.

The 10-week classes at Ruby's Ukes range from Absolute Beginners — tailored for people who haven't even held a ukulele before — to Advanced. Students, who range from 12 to 92 years of age, learn to strum, pick, play melodies, sing, and read tabs.

"That's what the school is about," said Roubini. "People who don't think they could play, do."

Roubini describes the ukulele as "life changing," an instrument that brings people into the present moment.

"The ukulele is unassuming, it's quirky, it's fun," said Roubini. "There's this glee when people are playing and singing and laughing. It's just pure joy. There are not many things that we have in life that give us that, really."

*Vancouver Ukulele Circle meets on the third Tuesday of the month at St. James Hall, at 3214 West 10th Ave. in*

*Kitsilano. Admission is \$8. Doors open at 6:30 p.m., and the singing gets underway at 7:30 p.m., followed by open mic performances.*

*The Vancouver Ukulele Festival, organized by Ruby's Ukes, runs March 8 to 9 at St. James Hall, and offers workshops in strumming, songwriting, voice, rhythm, and styles like Hapa Hoale. Cost is \$167. There's also a 7 p.m. concert on March 8. Admission is \$35. Performers include Danielle Ate the Sandwich, Ralph Shaw, Aaron Keim, Don Kellett, Guido Heistek, and Daphne Roubini and her husband and fellow Black Gardenia band member Andrew Smith.*

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